

Université de Montréal

Rationality in Adorno's Aesthetics

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## Summary—Résumé

I propose to examine Theodor Adorno's concept of a developing aesthetic rationality in light of his distinction between a universalizing bourgeois rationality and a dialectical rationality that strives to maintain the preponderance of the object by challenging its categories with the experience of their object. I will first explore Adorno's distinction between two rationalities, tracing the historical genesis and growth of bourgeois reason in Western philosophy. I will account for how Adorno's criticisms of Hegel and Lukács influence his reading of the Marxist traditions of ideology critique and political economy. I will show how Adorno's criticism of bourgeois rationality differs from irrationality in its attempt to offer an immanent critique of Enlightenment rather than in attempting to position itself outside of Enlightenment. I will then turn to Adorno's aesthetics, showing how aesthetic rationality progresses in lockstep with Enlightened rationality and how artworks dominate experiential materials through the determining mediation of form. I will highlight two aspects of aesthetic rationality, a constructive aspect and a critical aspect, and I will show how aesthetic rationality uses both to overturn the existing concept of art in order to redefine what counts as art. By exploring the categories of natural beauty, art beauty, and ugliness, I will show how aesthetic rationality establishes itself only to put itself in question through the dissonance of modern art. I will then show how modern art itself falls victim to the very homogenizing rationality it protests, before concluding with a discussion of how Samuel Beckett's theatre embodies Adorno's call for an art that critically positions itself against society as well as the pre-existing concept of art.

**Key words: aesthetics, Marxism, dialectics, rationality, modern art**

Nous proposons d'examiner le concept adornien de la rationalité esthétique en vue de sa distinction entre une raison bourgeoise universalisante et une raison dialectique qui maintient la prédominance de l'objet par une opération d'autocritique intellectuelle selon laquelle les catégories sont évaluées en vue des objets qu'elles décrivent pour identifier leurs insuffisances conceptuelles. Nous explorons la distinction qu'établit Adorno entre deux rationalités en traçant la genèse historique de la raison bourgeoise dans la philosophie occidentale. Nous démontrons comment les critiques lancées par Adorno contre Hegel et Lukács influencent sa lecture de la tradition marxiste de la critique de l'idéologie et de l'économie politique. Nous illustrons la différence entre la critique de la rationalité bourgeois et l'irrationalisme propre en démontrant qu'Adorno offre une critique rationnelle de la raison qui ne se positionne pas en dehors de la raison. Ayant construit cette fondation conceptuelle, nous tournons vers l'esthétique d'Adorno. Nous démontrons que la raison esthétique se déroule en parallèle avec la raison bourgeoise, et que la raison esthétique participe à la domination de la nature exercée par la raison par la médiation de la forme des œuvres d'art. Nous soulignons deux aspects de la raison esthétique, l'aspect constructif et l'aspect critique, et nous démontrons comment la raison esthétique utilise ces deux aspects pour remplacer le concept de l'art déjà établie afin d'ouvrir des nouvelles possibilités pour l'art. En explorant les catégories de la beauté naturelle, la beauté de l'art, et du laid, nous démontrons comment la raison esthétique se constitue avant de se mettre en question soi-même par le moyen de la dissonance de l'art moderne. Finalement, nous démontrons la manière dont l'art moderne risque de devenir neutralisé par la raison homogénéisante qu'il proteste, et nous concluons en considérant la pertinence à la question de la normativité esthétique de la lecture adornienne de Samuel Beckett, dont le théâtre pose un challenge critique à la société de l'après-guerre en même temps qu'il met en question le concept de l'art existant. **Mots-clés : esthétique, marxisme, dialectique, raison, art moderne**

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## **Abbreviations—Abréviations**

*Negative Dialectics : ND*  
*Aesthetic Thoery : AT*  
*Dialectic of Enlightenment : DE*  
*Minima Moralia : MM*  
*Introduction to Dialectics : ID*  
*Sound Figures : SF*  
*Phenomenology of Spirit : PS*

## Introduction

“But we shall live to see the day, I trust,” went on the artist, “when no man shall build his house for posterity. Why should he? He might just as reasonably order a durable suit of clothes,—leather, or guttapercha, or whatever else lasts longest,—so that his great-grandchildren should have the benefit of them, and cut precisely the same figure in the world that he himself does. If each generation were allowed and expected to build its own houses, that single change, comparatively unimportant in itself, would imply almost every reform which society is now suffering for. I doubt whether even our public edifices—our capitols, state-houses, court-houses, city-hall, and churches,—ought to be built of such permanent materials as stone or brick. It were better that they should crumble to ruin once in twenty years, or thereabouts, as a hint to the people to examine into and reform the institutions which they symbolize.”

“How you hate everything old!” said Phœbe in dismay. “It makes me dizzy to think of such a shifting world!”

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851)

Theodor Adorno’s philosophical corpus presents a wide-ranging critique of the philosophical, social, and artistic consequences of Enlightenment rationality’s inability to live up to its own promise. He offers an analysis whereby the conceptual operation of rendering what is heterogenous equivalent through mediation carries a tendency to assume unproblematic identity of concepts with the objects of experience they describe. While correspondence between thought and reality is an epistemically worthy goal, Adorno sees a risk in the tendency of such a mode of thinking to refuse to allow its categories to be transformed by the experience of difference and non-identity. This results in the calcification or reification of certain notions, which in turn obstructs the historically contingent nature of a given social situation.

One way out of this problem can be found in art. Aesthetic rationality develops in parallel with Enlightened, scientific rationality, but distinguishes itself from the latter by the critical stance it takes towards the world at large. Aesthetic rationality constructs its own worlds through the unifying element of form, thus establishing an autonomy that gives artworks freedom from previous religious or educational use-values, as well as the distance from society needed to imagine a better future. However, in order for successful artworks to do this, they must not only take an oppositional stance towards society, but must also overturn the concept or definition of art that had been established by those works that come before. Thus, art must not only oppose society; it must oppose art as well.

However, art in its attempt to maintain its autonomy runs into certain pitfalls. Art can be reduced to the status of offering consolation after a hard day, thus reinforcing social relations. It

can fall into repetition of previous forms or technical procedures, thus preventing it from adequately challenging existing concepts of art. Finally, it can find itself commodified and transformed into a systematic, homogenized, and conceptually limited form of entertainment in the form of what Horkheimer and Adorno call the culture industry. Thus, for art to fill its own promise, it must consciously overturn itself, its categories, and its established practices, or find itself reinforcing the society against whose irrationality it protests.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno present a post-mortem analysis of how the horrors of Nazism arose from the shortcomings of Enlightenment rationality. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno traces out the rise of the bourgeois *ratio* and its insufficiency in light of the crises of the twentieth century. In *Aesthetic Theory* he shows how the progress of aesthetic rationality comes to a new juncture with modern art, in which its own categories and assumptions are overturned.

This dissertation will show the inextricable nature of the arguments presented in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*: both are guided by a dialectical concept of rationality that overcomes the rigidity of classical definitions of reason while negating the absolutizing tendency of the Hegelian dialectic by accentuating the negative, critical element in dialectic. In philosophy this takes the form of Adorno's negative dialectic; in aesthetics this takes the form of modernism's refutation of previous aesthetic categories. I will trace out a distinction he draws between two different forms of rationality, one bourgeois and homogenizing, the other negative and dialectical. I will then show how this distinction informs analysis of the historical rise of aesthetic rationality and its climax in modern art's turn towards dissonance and the ugly. Finally, I will show how Adorno's criteria for successful artworks navigate the tension between modern art and the culture industry, which both arise from the same historical process. I will conclude by showing how Samuel Beckett's disjointed plays embody the negative stance towards the social status quo that Adorno calls on modern art to practice. I will show how, for Adorno, though art cannot concretely change the world, its autonomy gives it the ability to reflect on the world in such a way as to gesture negatively towards a utopic alternative, and how this critical stance derives from and contributes to Adorno's immanent critique of Enlightenment rationality.

## Part One: Adorno's Two Rationalities

This section will introduce Adorno's two rationalities and why it poses both a conceptual and social problem for him. I will trace the relationship of this distinction to the concept of reification and Marxist ideology critique, before outlining Adorno's concerns about a purely quantitative rationality that does not do justice to its objects and the effects of a social world that reduces subjects to objects.

### 1.1 Bourgeois Reason and Dialectical Reason

In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno deploys a subtle distinction between two rationalities. He writes, "Dialectical reason is, when set against the dominant mode of reason, unreason: only in encompassing and cancelling this mode does it become itself reasonable" (*MM* 72-3). He opposes dialectical reason to conventional reason, arguing that while the "dominant mode" denounces dialectical thinking as unreason, the inability of conventional rationality to question the root causes of the social crises of the twentieth centuries suggests the opposite. For Adorno, the discrepancy between the concepts posited by conventional reason and the material reality they strive but fail to describe, and the apparent inability of conventional reason to grapple with the problem posed by this non-identity of concept and object, causes conventional reason to fall into irrationality; dialectical reason, with emphasis placed on the moment of negation, offers an opportunity to overcome the conceptual limits imposed by conventional reason and to open space for the conceptualization and eventual realization through socially conscious action of transformative possibilities for the overcoming of a status quo riven with contradictions and crises.

This distinction arises in aphorism 45, which opposes dialectical thinking to reification. The critique of bourgeois rationality is not a rejection of the ideal of rationality itself, but rather the critique of a historically specific instantiation of Enlightenment reason that corresponds with the rise of capitalist economic relations and the advance of political liberalism against decaying monarchies. Bourgeois reason is a historically determined form of reason incentivized by its larger social situation to conceive the world in a manner that obscures the possibility of social change while defending the interests of a definite social class. Though this may sound



conspiratorial, for Adorno the concept of reification is key to how this intellectual obstruction operates.

Though the term “reification” comes from Lukács, its roots trace back to Marx’s ideology critique as laid out in works such as *The German Ideology* and *Capital*. For Adorno’s purposes, Marx’s the key insight here consists in ideology’s attempt to make that which is historical, contingent, and subject to change appear natural, necessary, and static. As Lydia Goehr puts it, “He writes repeatedly of how concepts and categories become naturalized, self-evident, or commonplace so that their historicity or social meaning and construction is sublimated in the name of Being, product, or essence” (Goehr, *Elective Affinities* 98). To shed light on this concept, we can look at the opening pages of Marx’s unfinished notebooks collected in the *Grundrisse*.

Marx responds to the mythologization of the Natural Individual in early English political economy, contrasting Smith’s and Ricardo’s theoretical points of departure—the lone hunter or fisher—to his own conceptual launching point, “individuals producing in society—hence socially determined individual production” (*Grundrisse*, 83). Marx accuses Smith and Ricardo, along with Rousseau, of reading human history through a purely speculative Adamic myth of pre-formed autonomous subjects entering contracts and exchanges from the position of wholly individual productive efforts. For Marx, production in a meaningful sense can only occur within a social framework, and so-called primitive societies would have been by necessity highly collaborative simply in virtue of the hostility of the natural environment. Marx writes,

The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole: in a still quite natural way in the family and in the family expanded into the clan [*Stamm*]; then later in the various forms of communal society arising out of the antitheses and fusions of the clans. Only in the eighteenth century, in ‘civil society’, do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations. The human being is in the most literal sense a ζῷον πολιτικόν, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society. Production by an isolated individual outside society—a rare exception which may well occur when a civilized person in whom the social forces are already dynamically present is cast by accident into the wilderness—is as much of an absurdity as the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other. (84)

For Marx, the necessity of socially organized production historically precedes the preeminence of individual interest in social relationships. Here he accuses state of nature theories of conceptually imposing eighteenth century social relations backwards onto history through detached conjecture. The Robinsonian myth ignores the social nature of individuation and the historical necessity of collaboration in the face of nature. Thus, conjectural attempts to conceive a state of nature inadvertently sneak in contemporary assumptions (83). Such a launching point for social theory can only provide a mystified account unable to take in the complexities of historical contingency in relation to the natural and geopolitical environment. Thus, the promise of Marx's historical materialism is a more rigorous method which can reconstruct the tense interplay of concrete social relationships and their material productive underpinnings to understand the motor of historical change in increasingly complex societies.

The above example gives us a sense of what Marx means by ideology: a historically contingent phenomenon—here, autonomous entrepreneurial subjects within civil society producing and engaging in contracts—is made to appear natural and therefore immutable. This has a double-edged effect: first, it imposes a limit on how far thought can go in understanding the world, and second, it hinders social change by making the status quo seem natural and necessary. Politically it is easy to see the problems the naturalization of historically contingent phenomena can pose. We can imagine hearing the following sentences: “It is natural that there should be rich and poor!” “It is natural that the climate should change every so often!” “It is natural that certain peoples should be held subordinate!” In a word, reification describes this process of making dynamic historical phenomena appear static and natural: social dynamics are mistaken for things or immutable reality. For Marx and Adorno, reification represents not merely a theoretical problem producing false understandings of history and society, but also a real obstacle to social change. As Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, “On its subjective side, dialectics amounts to thinking so that the thought form will no longer turn its objects into immutable ones, into objects that remain the same. Experience shows that they do not remain the same” (*ND* 154).

Another example comes from Adorno himself, in which he contrasts the formal concept of freedom to the lived individual experience of freedom:

The concept of freedom lags behind itself as soon as we apply it empirically. It is not what it says, then. But because it must always be the concept of what it covers, it is to be confronted with what it covers. Such confrontation forces it to contradict itself....At the same time, the contradiction between the concept of freedom and its realization remains the insufficiency of the concept. The

potential of freedom calls for criticizing what an inevitable formalization has made of the potential. (ND 151)

The phrase “insufficiency of the concept” is instructive and will prove relevant in our discussion of Adorno’s aesthetics, where artworks respond to insufficiencies in the existing concept of art. The contradiction between the formal concept and the concrete reality offers insight into the shortcomings of the concept, indicating directions for further investigation so that the concept may be transformed. Ideology critique consists not merely in showing the mutability of social contradictions but also in evaluating a given society’s promises—its concept—against its concrete reality.

Though Adorno’s use of Marxian categories is, for Gillian Rose, “selective,” he nonetheless makes the link between Marxian ideology critique and his own philosophical project clear in a section on the dialectic of essence and appearance (Rose, *The Melancholy Science* 61). Building from this basis, he redefines essence not as “pure, spiritual being-in-itself,” but as what “passes into that which lies concealed beneath the façade of immediacy, of supposed facts, and which makes the facts what they are;” he adds that it is the “fatal mischief of a world arranged so as to degrade men to means of their *sese conservare*” (ND 167). For Adorno, the concept of essence *qua* pure being-in-itself, which unifies particulars under a given category, is a smokescreen for that which in bourgeois society replaces the philosophical ideal of the good life with a conception of simple biological self-sustenance as the highest good; it is that constricts our conceptual horizon of possibilities as to believe that the present appearance of the world is natural and necessary.

Essence is “totally alien to the consciousness that grasps it” because essence is the glue of combination that holds together the appearance of a social world in which anyone who works hard enough can get along just fine. Appearance is the promise of the bourgeois social world: its houses, its cars, its mortgages, its consumer products, and its promise of formal liberty and equality. Essence, by contrast, is the law of value identified by Marx which reduces human beings to commodities on the labour market and the substantial (rather than formal) inequality that this process creates. Thus, ideology critique speaks to a fundamental philosophical concern: for Adorno, by contrast to idealist antecedents, what has historically been a metaphysical question, the dialectic of essence and appearance, is for him a social one: behind the apparent promises of bourgeois society lies an essential core of domination, exploitation, and inequality.

Ideology critique as philosophical method produces new and productive social knowledge when it identifies those points of contradiction between the promise of bourgeois society and its reality. Thus, any philosophy which removes the concept of essence in favour of appearance makes a moral decision to accept the social world as is (*ND* 170). As Lydia Goehr observes, “To assume a naturalized appearance is tantamount to following enlightenment’s move into unfreedom” (Goehr 99).

## 1.2 Reification and the Bourgeois *Ratio*

Though ideology critique finds its origins in Marx, the move from ideology to reification happens with the centrepiece of *History and Class Consciousness*, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.” As Susan Buck-Morss recounts, Adorno came across Lukács through his friendship with Max Horkheimer and his encounters with Walter Benjamin circle in Berlin (*The Origin of Negative Dialectics* 20-1). Lukács had offered a materialist rereading of the Hegelian dialectic which posited the proletariat as the subject-object of history capable of redirecting the course of society if and only if it becomes conscious of its own world-historical situation; in Hegelian terms, it must be a class for itself as well as in itself (25). Adorno always remained skeptical of this grander claim but found value in Lukács’ form of ideology critique (26). Lukács dialectically evaluated superstructure and base against each other as mutually constitutive poles of a shifting totality, rather than reducing the ideational aspect to an epiphenomenon of material life. He argued that the commodity form not only organized economic production but had become interwoven with bourgeois thought and culture as well. Reification relates to the fetishization of commodities identified by Marx:

Just as commodities in the realm of production took on a reified form, became ‘fetishes’ which appeared cut off from the social process of their production, so bourgeois theory’s reified conception of the ‘object’ as an immutable ‘given’ obscured the sociohistorical process through which it had come to be....even the best bourgeois thinkers, in their most honest intellectual efforts, were not able to resolve contradictions in their theories because the latter were based on a reality which was itself contradictory. (26)

Reification, for Lukács, is the process through which the historically constituted structure of society is taken as given and the contingent categories of bourgeois society are taken to be natural kinds. Bourgeois philosophy, even in its strongest and most earnest articulations, could

never escape contradiction because it had no answer to the contradictions within society; its antinomies were not simply antinomies of pure reason, but antinomies between reason's self-conception and the reality from which it derived its premises. Bourgeois philosophy, due to its social standpoint, is incapable of overcoming this impasse: only proletarian consciousness can resolve it by clearly seeing the contradictions of society and acting to transform them through political practice (27). As we shall see, Lukács' claim that the commodity form leaves its mark in philosophy as well as material life proved deeply influential to Adorno's thought. Even as he sharply distinguishes himself from other aspects of Lukács' work, the concept of reification reappears throughout all periods of his own.

Yet Adorno eventually arrives at a critique of Lukács, laid out in a section from *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno observes that a politics which selects as its goal the realization of the working class's consciousness of itself as such does little to threaten established power relations without concrete political action to back this consciousness up (*ND*, 189-90). A politics of class consciousness is fundamentally idealist in that it puts the conceptual cart before the material horse of social change, observing that "centering theory around reification, a form of consciousness, makes the critical theory idealistically acceptable to the reigning consciousness and to the collective unconscious" (*ND* 190). By framing critical theory exclusively in terms of the critique of reification, dialectical thinking loses its radically critical potential, instead becoming just another philosophical school. Reification is not the problem so much as the objectively broken social world that has produced it as its subjective reflection; critical theory critiques reification not for its own sake but to unmask the broken reality behind it.

Despite this later critique, his uptake and reworking of this Lukácsian concept remains key to his argument for dialectical thinking as a corrective against reificatory conceptual structures. Dialectical thinking "opposes reification in the further sense that it refuses to affirm individual things in their isolation and separateness: it designates isolation as precisely a product of the universal" (*MM* 71). Dialectical thinking interests itself as much in the relations between objects as in the objects themselves, as well as the changes in these relations which unfold in response to tensions among them, in the hopes that the movement of these tensions can offer insights into the larger system in which they unfold. This means that dialectical thinking does not, as Adorno accuses the English Hegelians of doing, give things "a sense of proportion, a way of putting things in their correct perspective" as in an ideal system of categories in which each

object is neatly placed in its proper spot. Such a categorization falls victim to what Adorno calls identity thinking, the supposition that thought's *terminus ad quem* is identity with its object. We shall return to this concept shortly.

Adorno contrasts the “common sense” of English Hegelians and pragmatists with dialectical thinking: while both strive to free themselves from predetermined dogmas, common sense, “the worldly eye schooled by the market,” lacks the “passionate commitment” that Adorno sees in dialectical thinking. More perniciously, common sense, in limiting itself to ordering static objects under categories, ultimately reinforces the social relations that condition and form it, falsely naturalizing them as a necessary framework without seeing a possibility for change:

The sense of proportion entails a total obligation to think in terms of the established measures and values. One need only have once heard a die-hard representative of a ruling clique say: ‘That is of no consequence’, or note at what times the bourgeois talk of exaggeration, hysteria, folly, to know that the appeal to reason invariably occurs most promptly in apologies for unreason. (*MM* 72)

For Adorno, watching from exile as his home country descended deeper into dictatorship and war, the bourgeois call for reasonable governance, fiscal discipline, and social order prove to be, under the strains of economic depression, inter-imperialist warfare, and racial hatred, utterly irrational in their attempt to maintain an impossible status quo. This interplay between two rationalities, one deficient and characterized by reification, and one dialectical and characterized by ceaseless evaluation of concept against object, will inform his philosophical concerns throughout his career. In *Minima Moralia* these two rationalities are presented as a passing comment in an aphorism on reification, but they relate to themes he explores more fully in the later *Negative Dialectics*. There he strives to account for the historical genesis and philosophical impact of the deficient form of reason, the bourgeois *ratio*, identifying its rise as a conceptual point of correspondence to the growth of bourgeois social relations in western Europe.

Adorno identifies the bourgeois *ratio* with a sort of epistemological imperialism in which purely quantitative methodologies are imposed upon thinking in a manner that hinders its ability to tolerate difference (*ND* 43). Differentiation can only be comprehended qualitatively, for a thing can only be different to another qualitatively. By contrast, as per Marx’s analysis of the commodity, the mediation of the commodity form reduces diverse objects to a state of quantitative identity in exchange. The subordination of the object to quantitative analysis in bourgeois reason represents a subjective, conceptual correspondence to the equivocation of

commodities through exchange value in bourgeois economy. He emphasizes that the quantitative approach is not inherent to rationality proper; because it is a defect of bourgeois reason specifically, its development in philosophy corresponds with the growth of bourgeois society, though prefigurative moments exist in earlier eras, and indeed the fundamental cognitive operation of identity thinking, which bourgeois rationality takes to an extreme, traces back to the very earliest moments of human subjectivity.

The mere delimiting of quantifiable categories requires a qualitative moment of the differentiation of one from another; every quantitative moment in thinking depends upon a constitutive qualitative moment (*ND* 43-4). The suppression of difference in philosophy in favour of quantity obscures the qualitative grounding of quantitative categories, thus preventing truly insightful synthetic work. Once the *ratio* loses sight of quality and non-identity, it slips into the irrationality that, in its most degraded state, makes possible the explosion of unreason embodied in the crises of the twentieth century.

Now that we have seen how Adorno's criticisms of reification and mediating abstraction inform his philosophical concerns, we must clarify the role played by the concept of identity thinking.

### **1.3 Pitfalls of Identity Thinking: Criticism of System-Building Philosophy**

Adorno's concerns about identity thinking focus on "the regressive tendency of concepts entirely to subsume particulars such as works of art, as a totalitarian society subsumes its individuals, thereby denying to both the works and individuals their freedom of movement" (Goehr 81). What is at issue here is not the cognitive operation itself but its unchecked tendencies. Identity thinking is a natural and inevitable conceptual move; anytime subjectivity classifies a particular object according to a category, identity thinking is occurring (Rose 57). The problem is not identity thinking *per se*, but rather the tendency for an unreflective identity thinking to produce reified categories—that is, categories that are calcified in a way that prevents them from being transformed by the experience of their confrontation with the objects they describe. Thus, what is at issue for Adorno is how bourgeois rationality tendentially flattens out difference in favour of reified, naturalized categories. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno traces the

progression of this regressive tendency in the historical genesis of bourgeois reason in philosophy:

In the philosophy of history, the systems of the seventeenth century especially served a compensatory purpose. The *ratio* which in accordance with bourgeois class interests had smashed the feudal order and scholastic ontology, the form of the intellectual reflection of that order—this same *ratio* no sooner faced the ruins, its own handiwork, than it would be struck by fear of chaos.... This fear shaped the beginnings of a mode of conduct constitutive for bourgeois existence as a whole: of the neutralization, by confirming the existent order, of every emancipatory step.

(ND 21)

The system builders of early modern philosophy reflect in the tight and all-encompassing structures of their thought the feudal hierarchies whose gradual unravelling they witnessed. Following from the Marxist critique of bourgeois liberalism according to which the liberation represented by the transition to the capitalist mode of production is incomplete and accessible only to those in a certain social position, it became necessary, once the old ideas had faded, for the newly empowered bourgeois class to ascribe to its own thought the fixity and naturalness that had previously been ascribed to feudalism, so as to defend its own concrete, particular interests in the name of the universal. The contradiction of bourgeois philosophy's inability to make its social reality line up with its lofty promise of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" for the vast majority of people results in conceptual structures that try to neutralize the tension through the derivation of a holistic system that explains away particularities. Systematicity became the means by which philosophy tried to control heterogeneity:

To prevail as a system, the *ratio* eliminated virtually all qualitative definitions it referred to, thus coming into an irreconcilable conflict with the objectivity it violated by pretending to grasp it. The *ratio* came to be removed from objectivity—the farther removed, the more completely objectivity was subjected to its axioms, and finally to the one axiom of identity. (ND 21)

For Adorno, universalizing systematicity is the intellectual operation of a subject which seeks to devour its object by eliminating any non-identity between the object and the concepts representing it. It is a means of expressing ideational control over a material world which renders the philosopher powerless: "According to Nietzsche's critique, systems no longer document anything but the finickiness of scholars compensating themselves for political impotence by conceptually construing their, so to speak, administrative authority over things in being" (ND 20). Systematicity gives the philosopher the power to manipulate the objects of the world and place them under conceptual categories to compensate for their real inability to change the world



in any substantial manner. Systematicity falsely understands its objects by placing them in a pre-appointed place whereby their distinctiveness simply becomes another fold in the wrinkles of a carefully constructed ideational mass, what Adorno calls “conceptual poetry.”

Adorno compares a systematizing philosopher’s interest in their objects to a hunter chasing prey, deploying language of violence that will recur elsewhere in his work, such as in his description of aesthetic rationality’s mastery over the sensory elements that form the material of artworks (*ND* 22). He describes bourgeois reason as a consumptive process of assimilating objects into a conceptual schema: any remainder which does not fit becomes the hated enemy. This derives from an intolerance for difference or otherness that cannot be readily categorized, for fear that any unaccounted for remainder might prove a refutation of the concept. He adds that this cognitive consumptiveness corresponds to bourgeois society’s tendency to “constantly expand, progress, advance its frontiers, not respect any limit, not remain the same” for fear that should it cease to do so, “then its own concept would force its self-liquidation” (26). Just as for Marx, a capitalist economy that does not expand runs into a profitability crisis, for Adorno, bourgeois philosophy must constantly expand its reach to dominate anything heterogenous to its concept.

Bourgeois reason’s ideological assumption of its own superiority over nature is reflective of its desire to subsume all that differs from it into its own schemata (*ND* 22-3). Thus, philosophical idealism, per Adorno’s historical account, represents an attempt to subsume all that is under the rubric of a manipulable category with no remainder left to question the absoluteness of the system: “The system, the form of presenting a totality to which nothing remains extraneous, absolutizes the thought against each of its contents and evaporates the content in thoughts” (*ND* 24). Objects thusly subsumed are stripped of their qualitative aspect and rendered contentless and indistinct from other objects similarly devoured. This allows the subject to bat them around to any preferred position in the system as a cat plays with its prey to induce physical trauma: the removal of the qualitative aspect from the perspective of systematicity renders concepts pure quantity, and therefore exchangeable one for another.

As we saw above, for Adorno, quantitative categories are qualitatively grounded; a thinking rendered purely quantitative is therefore sharply limited in its capacity to understand reality and let its categories be challenged by experience. This consumptive defect of reason is not merely a conceptual problem but also a social and political one, for it corresponds to an

authoritarian impulse (*ND* 48). The bourgeois *ratio*'s systematizing consumption of its objects is the conceptual analogue to real sociopolitical domination for the end of the exploitation of nature. Contradiction with assumed categories becomes, for reified bourgeois reason, conceptually unthinkable, and therefore a threat to its conceptual empire. The airtight philosophical system in which every contingency is accounted for represents a conceptualization of a social order in which every individual has their predetermined role, nonconformity to which is not tolerated: in other words, the fascist fantasy of a disciplined organic nation. Indeed, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno will argue that anti-Semitism and other forms of prejudice relate to bourgeois rationality's fear of the remainder (*DE* 137-8).

#### 1.4 Identity and Bourgeois Subjectivity

Now that we have introduced Adorno's concept of identity, we can clarify it further by exploring its relationship to ideology and subjectivity. This problem of identity relates closely to his uptake of ideology critique as well as to his view of subjectivity:

Identity is the primal form of ideology. We relish it as adequacy to the thing it supposes; adequacy has always been subjection to dominant purposes and, in that sense, its own contradiction. After the unspeakable effort it must have cost our species to produce the primacy of identity even against itself, man rejoices and basks in his conquest by turning it into the definition of the conquered thing: what has happened to it must be presented, by the thing, as its "in-itself". (*ND* 148)

Underlying ideology is identity thinking, the tendency of consciousness to assume unreflectively the identity of its concepts with the things that they describe, without reevaluating concepts against objects. Identity thinking's regressive tendency results from a failure to let the object transform the categories through it is thought. It is a conquest that inflates one's sense of egoic pride and strength, even as it conceals real subjective impotence before a world that treats human subjectivity as an object.

One thing to note in the above passage is that, though identity thinking is linked to bourgeois *ratio*, the cognitive operations on which the *ratio* is grounded precede the historical development of bourgeois society by millennia. Adorno traces it as far back as the origins of the ego, human self-conception, and self-identification, a process which he describes as a "conquest" over bodily nature. The original trauma of this conquest is then repeated on external things,

which are delimited and classified conceptually so that they may be exploited and consumed concretely.

Thus, because identity thinking relates to the possibility of subjectivity itself, it is a necessarily unavoidable component of human experience, and will participate even in the dialectical rationality Adorno proposes against bourgeois rationality: “We can see through the identity principle, but we cannot think without identifying. Any definition is identification” (*ND* 149). However, it becomes a problem when the critical, negative moment which evaluates a concept against its object falls away in favour of the project of deriving all qualitative difference from quantitative unity. At this point, identity thinking, rather than playing its proper role in delimiting categories that are then to be problematized, becomes like a runaway freight train trying to subsume everything under its categories and growing enraged when something does not quite fit in. Adorno hopes to offer dialectical thinking as a corrective to this tendency.

However, corresponding to the rise of the bourgeois *ratio*, there arises a bourgeois conception of the rational subject as an atomized pure conceiver stripped of anything contingent or particular, “a purely logical universal without qualities” (*ND* 44). This conceptual reduction of the subject to pure quantity ideationally reflects the restrictions imposed upon the concrete subject by the division of labour, causing the labouring subject to approach objects as quantifiable manipulable things just as the market reduces labour to a quantifiable manipulable thing. Adorno argues that the consequence of this reduction of subjectivity is that the conceptual capacity of discrimination, the ability to grasp what within an object escapes the concept imposed upon it by the subject, becomes distorted such that its mimetic component, that is, the process by which the subject strives to experience the object in order to know it, becomes compromised (*ND* 45). Thus, the transcendental subject free of qualities proves to be a flattened subject whose conceptual horizons are limited by the struggle to make ends meet.

To illustrate Adorno’s account of how bourgeois subjectivity is at once hollowly universal and concretely restricted, we can turn to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*’s famous reading of the story of Odysseus fleeing from the Sirens as a parable about the rational constitution of the self-identical ego against a conquered bodily nature, in which they posit Odysseus as a sort of proto-bourgeois subject (*DE* 25-7). The allure of the Sirens represents the call of the pre-rational past and the dissolution of the boundary between the ego and what is external to it, which the Enlightened sovereign ego must rigorously delimit and exclude through self-inflicted repression

(*DE* 26). Bourgeois reason's founding moment is the very constitution of the sovereign subject against the natural environment of the body and its social and physical surroundings. The ego's instinct is to police its boundaries by repressing its own desire to escape them, by repressing the non-identical within itself and by dominating what is exterior to itself, whether through conceptual means or through brute force.

Odysseus's sovereignty over himself is fundamentally bourgeois because of the nature of his relationship to the crew of his ship. His workers must fill their own ears with wax, but Odysseus, who has them tie him to a mast, can enjoy the song of the Sirens as art; "the fettered man listens to a concert, as immobilized audiences later, and his enthusiastic call for liberation goes unheard as applause" (*DE* 27). Odysseus' mastery over nature is impossible without his mastery over human labour: without his workers to restrain him, he is equally unable to resist the call of nature, but once constituted as a sovereign subject through his sovereignty over others, the non-identical instinct survives within him in a form transformed by repression: the aesthetic impulse. This aesthetic connection will become key in the following chapters of this thesis. The sovereign subject can only tame the non-identical within itself; the insufficiencies of its discipline only feed its paranoia of the non-identical, increasing the urgency of its expanding dominion over nature.

Though there are questions to be raised from a Marxian perspective about the accuracy of applying the category of "bourgeois" to a moment so far back in history, what is key for us here is the way in which the reading of the *Odyssey* illustrates that the empowerment of bourgeois subjectivity rests on the repression of the pre-rational otherness that is internal to subjectivity itself, the longing for reconciliation that the Siren's call represents. However, bourgeois subjectivity only accomplishes this self-mastery through mastery over others; without labour operating under a socially organized, directed framework, subjective mastery over nature never gets farther than the picking of a few fruits off a tree. Meanwhile, those who are dominated are expected to forgo even the ideational pleasure of hearing the Siren's song in order to continue working undistracted, while Odysseus is allowed to enjoy it as though it were a private concert, even as he must be physically restrained to keep himself from giving in.

This illustrates how in bourgeois society subjective consciousness experiences itself not as sovereign, as Odysseus felt himself to be, but restrained, as Odysseus's body was: "The superiority of objectification in the subjects not only keeps them from becoming subjects; it

equally prevents a cognition of objectivity” (ND 171). The objective world’s reduction of subject to object through a labour market structured by commodification not only mangles their sense of what is good in life but constricts their ability to see beyond appearance into the essence (170). Bourgeois rationality betrays its promise of universal Enlightenment by mutilating the rational faculties of the great majority of the population to disincentivize them from pushing back against a social order that structurally prevents them from flourishing in the Aristotelean sense. Indeed, scholar Martin Jay observes that for Adorno, “it could only be ideological in the present circumstances to pretend that fully integrated, mature egos might be achieved despite the irrationality of the social whole” (Jay, *Adorno* 90).

Now that we have shed light on the motivations for Adorno’s critique of the bourgeois *ratio*, let us now turn our attention to his notion of dialectical reason as an alternative rationality that overcomes the deficiencies of the former.

### **1.5 Dialectical Reason as the Antidote to Bourgeois Reason**

We can, from what has been said above, offer a summary definition of bourgeois reason: for Adorno, bourgeois reason is a mode of thinking which strives to assimilate the non-identical into itself by reducing qualitative difference to quantitative identity. This effort inevitably runs up against the limits of assimilability of the non-identical, to which frustration bourgeois reason tends to respond not by allowing its categories to be revised in light of this new information, but by doubling down and using ever more force to squeeze the non-identical square peg into its own round conceptual hole. This tendency is taken to its most extreme in those political regimes which strive to manage their populations by imposing homogeneity and standardization, whether through the brutal methods of fascism, the bureaucratic merger of civil society and the state of Soviet Communism, or the aesthetically hollow corporate hedonism of the homogenizing American culture industry. Thus, the antidote to bourgeois reason is a form of reason which gives the non-identical its due, which pays respect to difference without atomizing its objects. Adorno posits dialectical thinking in its materialist, negative form as the mode of thinking which can best overcome the limits of identity thinking.

To return to our initial discussion of the aphorism in *Minima Moralia*, dialectical reason, by contrast to bourgeois reason, challenges the status quo with

the obstinacy of the peasant who has learned over the centuries to endure the hunts and ground-rent of the mighty feudal lord. It is the concern of dialectics to cock a snook at the sound views held by later powers-that-be on the immutability of the course of the world, and to decipher in their 'proportions' the faithful and reduced mirror-image of inordinately enlarged disproportions. Dialectical reason is, when set against the dominant mode of reason, unreason: only in encompassing and cancelling this mode does it become itself reasonable. (*MM* 72-3)

This passage identifies dialectical thinking with opposition to established power relations and the endurance of the critical spirit in the face of oppressive social conditions. Dialectical reason operates as a sort of mirror to bourgeois reason, demonstrating the relational disproportions, such as that between labour and employer, which are conceptually transformed and concealed by the neatly arranged proportions of its metaphysics. For Adorno, dialectical reason becomes rational through its immanent evaluation and supersession of the assumptions of conventional reason: dialectical reason must ceaselessly evaluate the claims of conventional reason against the objects it describes (*MM* 73).

Thus, dialectical reason as a critical response to bourgeois reason consists in the evaluation of the postulates of generally accepted reason against the evidence offered by the object itself in a manner that allows its conceptual framework to be transformed by its encounter with the object through an honest confrontation with rather than suppression of new insights presented by the persistence of non-identity between object and thought; dialectical reason, in order to avoid the pitfalls of unchecked identity thinking, must open itself so completely to its objects as to allow its own categories to be transformed through experience of the object. As he writes elsewhere, "As thinking, dialectical logic respects that which is to be thought—the object—even where the object does not heed the rules of thinking....without abandoning it, we can think against our thought, and if it were possible to define dialectics, this would be a definition worth suggesting" (*ND* 141).

Bourgeois reason, by Adorno's account, seeks to adapt new and contrary evidence, the persistence of non-identity, to a preexisting conceptual structure that conceals the non-identical in a manner that makes a historically contingent state of affairs appear natural and necessary. For example, we might imagine a political philosopher (or a Republican Congressman) who avoids the question of material inequality by pointing to formal equality before the law and suggesting that material inequality is the product of individual choices and transactions enacted on a

generally even playing field, without consideration to structural incentives, impediments, or even simple material questions like the kind of education one's family can afford.

Dialectical thinking, therefore, functions as a highly developed form of ideology critique uncovering through the conceptual and rhetorical analysis of the claims of bourgeois reason the inability of bourgeois society to live up to its own promise of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" for all. Where Adorno's dialectical thinking differs from Marx's early articulation of ideology critique is in the former's inclusion of the moment of *Aufhebung*, the positive next step set in motion by a contradiction between idea and reality which results in the transformation and refinement of the idea into something new. Dialectical thinking is not merely a negative critical project, but one which wields negation and critique to open a space from which transformative possibilities can be perceived and conceived.

In the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno describes dialectics as the understanding "that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy" (*ND* 5). Anytime a category is applied to an object of experience, some remainder fails to be captured; the conceptual contradictions indicated by these remainders prove in dialectical thinking not aporetic but productive, in that the tension between a conceptual lens and its object reveals flaws and oversights in the conceptual lens itself which can then be changed to accommodate the new information presented by the contradiction.

Thus, contradiction is not an aporia but an opportunity for insight into the insufficiencies of the concept in question (*ND* 5). For Adorno, "contradictoriness is a category of reflection, the cogitative confrontation of concept and thing;" thus, "to proceed dialectically means to think in contradictions, for the sake of contradiction once experienced in the thing, and against that contradiction" (*ND* 145). Contradiction is philosophically productive in that it shows where our concepts fail to capture their objects, thus allowing the conceptual flexibility to modify assumptions and return to the object ready for another experience of contradiction and reconceptualization. For Adorno, this process is a necessary antidote to the tendency of thought to assume the identity of concept and object: "the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify" (*ND* 5). For this reason the investigation of contradiction is philosophically fruitful rather than a dead-end: "Contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the

thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity” (*ND* 5). This moment of non-identity becomes the impetus for productive reflection insofar as insights about the gaps in the established conceptualization are integrated into its development. This operation in turn reminds the thinker of the impossibility and undesirability of perfect identity between thought and objects, even as it is performed in part to improve the descriptive power of categories.

For a more foundational treatment of dialectical thinking, we can turn to Adorno’s lecture series *Introduction to Dialectics*, delivered during the Summer semester of 1958. In the first lecture, Adorno distinguishes dialectics as he understands it from Plato’s methodology. For Plato, dialectics is an investigative method which allows one to take up the premises of sophistic discourses in order to unravel them and demonstrate their inadequacy (*ID* 1). According to Adorno, “Platonic dialectic is a doctrine which enables us to order our concepts correctly, to ascend from the concrete to the level of the highest and most universal” (*ID* 1-2). Classical dialectic concerns the logical formation of concepts and their aptness as classifiers for the things of the world; Adorno illustrates this function by comparing it to Linnaeus’ classification of plants.

However, this operation raises the question of the correspondence of the conceptual order we impose upon things with the things themselves. For Plato and Aristotle, these concepts must be framed in accordance with nature, but Adorno questions how we can know anything about the non-conceptual being of things beyond the concepts we use to order and make sense of our world; in other words, how can we formulate concepts based on nature when our own conceptualizing nature pre-imposes a conceptual structure on experience? This problem leads Adorno to conclude that “the fundamental experience of dialectic” consists in “the way our concepts are driven on in the encounter with what they express” (*ID* 2). The expression “driven on” is key, referring to Hegel’s description of the “movement of the Concept” (*ID* 4). In dialectical thinking, concepts are not immutable and unchanging, but are continuously reevaluated against their object, revealing productive contradictions that allow the concept to be transformed in light of new experience.

For Adorno, this “moment of opposition” is the “vital nerve” in dialectical thinking: the dialectician “undertakes to correct the conceptual order by reference to the being of the objects themselves” in “the attempt to overcome all merely conceptual manipulation, to sustain at every level the tension between thought and what it would comprehend” (*ID* 2). This tension, for



Adorno, is productive of new conceptual insights; evaluation of a concept against its object reveals inconsistencies open to further investigation, resulting in the enriched rethinking of the concept itself; in its new form, the concept can again be evaluated against the object (which itself has undergone a transformation through its relationship to the subject), revealing new tensions as possibilities for further insight.

Dialectic therefore presents itself as a form of immanent critique of categories (*ID* 8). Immanent critique refers to a form of critique which, rather than positioning itself exterior to or above its object, begins from the premises of what it critiques in order to show the non-identity of its concept with the reality it describes. For example, an immanent critique of political liberalism would take the promise of liberty as a premise and follow out its implications until moments of contradiction are found between the promise and reality. Dialectics presents itself as a form of immanent critique in that it critiques a concept by assuming its premises, following them out to their fullest extent, and investigating the degree to which the concept corresponds with its object.

Later Adorno uses immanent critique to distinguish his understanding of dialectics from the “debased and pre-philosophical concept...for which dialectic just amounts to saying something like ‘Well, whatever one person may claim, one can somehow also say the opposite’” (*ID* 30). Adorno dismisses the common thesis-antithesis-synthesis caricature of dialectics as “popular relativistic wisdom” that fails to realize that in dialectical thinking “the opposing claim or proposition must always be derived immanently from the initial claim or proposition itself.” The method of refutation proper to dialectical thinking “is to drive thought to the point where it comes to recognize its own finitude, its own falsehood, and is thereby also driven on beyond itself.” The means of critique that dialectics offers does not consist in the confrontation of one concept with an opposing external concept, but rather in the fullest evaluation of a given concept against what it describes. Dialectics critiques not by taking sides in a polarized debate but by evaluating concepts against their own claims; dialectical negation is “the development of the initial thought, and thus the remedying of its defective character” (*ID* 32).

To summarize, Adorno offers dialectical thinking to remind philosophy that,

First, any adequate theory of knowledge must recognize the impossibility of finding concepts perfectly congruous with the objects they attempt to describe....Second, rather than proceed deductively from a series of carefully demarcated premises, philosophy must begin *in medias res* with the imperfect material presented by our contemporary historical situation. (Jay 60)

For Adorno, dialectical thinking allows philosophy not to take its own categories for granted but to examine whether categories really do carve the world at its joints. Furthermore, dialectical thinking reminds philosophy that being cannot be derived from a singular first principle but rather must be studied from a position of immersion within. Now that we have introduced dialectical thinking in general terms, we must make the concept more concrete by exploring the distinction between idealist and materialist dialectic.

### 1.6 Idealist Dialectic and Materialist Dialectic: Critique of Hegel

Adorno distinguishes between idealist and materialist dialectics, identifying Hegel as the chief practitioner of the former. Hegel describes the negative moment Adorno emphasizes, thus acknowledging the non-identity of thought and its object, but maintains that dialectical thinking reaches a moment of totality in which all previous moments of non-identity are integrated [sublated, *aufgehoben*] as particular determinations within a robust and cohesive whole (*ID* 6). For Adorno, this amounts to the claim that thought is necessarily identical to its object: once thought, according to Hegel, has progressed through its curriculum of non-identity, the totality of the non-identical moments and the sequence and way in which they developed out of the productive tensions of each moment forms a cohesive whole.

In such a view identity becomes an emergent property of the totality of non-identical moments held together in an airtight structure. Since, for Adorno, the moment of non-identity is the “vital nerve” in dialectical thinking, Hegel’s termination of the dialectical process in identity represents not merely an arbitrary declaration of “Mission Accomplished,” but also an act of treason against the critical power of the dialectic. Adorno responds to Hegel’s “The true is the whole” with “the whole is the false” (*PS* 11; *MM* 50). For Adorno, Hegel’s idealistic dialectic falls into the same trap that philosophy from the beginning has been susceptible too: “A basic philosophy, πρώτη φιλοσοφία, necessarily carries with it the primacy of the concept; whatever withholds itself from the concept is departing from the form of allegedly basic philosophizing” (*ND* 136). Adorno, not unlike Derrida (though based on different premises), takes aim at the notion of “first philosophy,” the attempt to ground knowledge on some first principle or another. Indeed, for Gillian Rose,

Adorno was concerned to show, too, that fresh attempts to ground philosophy and sociology on indubitable first principles which had occurred since Nietzsche and Lukács wrote were just as illegitimate as the classical ones. (Rose 29)

Such a philosophical move falls into the worst excesses of identity thinking, positioning conceptuality in a dualistic hierarchy above the world and chastising the object of investigation should it fail to live up to the concept imposed on it: “Wherever a doctrine of some absolute ‘first’ is taught there will be talk of something inferior to it, of something absolutely heterogenous to it, as its logical correlate” (*ND* 138).

Adorno’s negative dialectic tries to avoid this problem by taking as its methodological starting point the indissoluble “something,” the “utmost abstraction of the subject-matter that is not identical with thinking” (*ND* 135). The concept of “something” universally applies to entities even as it indicates something specific: “something” is at the crossroads of the universal and particular, abstract and concrete. It is therefore a uniquely valuable methodological launching point for dialectical thinking, which always strives to maintain the analytically productive tension between universal and particular:

Reciprocal criticism of the universal and of the particular; identifying acts of judgment whether the concept does justice to what it covers, and whether the particular fulfills its concept—these constitute the medium of thinking about the nonidentity of particular and concept. (*ND* 146)

Dialectics operates in the reciprocal criticism subject and object levy against each other in the experience of cognition; each aspect of the relation must operate on the other and neither side can be subordinated in a manner that elevates it to the level of reified concept. This reciprocal interpolation between the two elements of the subject-object relation means that the chief danger for dialectical thinking is the elevation of this or any concept to the level of first principle in the way that ontology elevates Being as pure abstraction *par excellence*, because, for Adorno, first philosophy, in addition to failing to comprehend the non-identity of its object, carries with it the risk of authoritarian degeneration, as we have seen. Because, per Adorno’s critique, first philosophy strives to derive all reality from an immutable first principle, it conceptually renders all that exists necessary in the specific form in which it has unfolded, thus denying the contingent and historically conditioned nature of our social world and creating conceptual obstacles to social transformation (*ID* 15-6).

As for the applicability of this critique to Hegel, for Adorno, though Hegel’s methodology offers a powerful critique of philosophies of first principle, Hegel himself

“identifies the full development and articulation of the movement of the concept with such a first principle” (*ID* 16-7). This “full development and articulation” is the Hegelian system, “the entire and developed range of all the relations between subject and object, and the antagonistic relations between subjects and object which are unfolded on their various levels;” Hegel’s notion of the Absolute consists in the attainment of a complete system in which each particular determination is accounted for, meaning that “the system of philosophy is, in the highest sense, actually identical with being” (*ID* 21). Hegelian philosophy strives to use conceptual thinking to, once and for all, express with maximal coherence what exactly being is. Such an extravagant notion of the Absolute as the totality of moments of non-identity ultimately falls back upon the view that subject coincides with object after all, that thought and reality are indeed identical once one has attained the perspective of the completed system. Adorno rejects this idealist claim, seeing the non-identity of subject and object as the key productive moment in dialectical thinking. The sublation of non-identity in the whole suggests that, despite Hegel’s initial insight about the negative moment in thought, in the finished form of his philosophy non-identity is “not taken with complete seriousness after all” (*ID* 84).

By contrast, the central claim of the materialist dialectic is that the Hegelian system, the sublation of previous moments of non-identity in a whole in which each determination contributes its negative moment to the overall unfolding of the whole, is created not through the progressive evaluation of concepts but through the concrete action of human beings striving to establish a social reality free of contradictions (*ID* 85). Materialist dialectic aspires to resolve the non-identity of thought and reality by transforming reality from the basis of the structural contradictions existing in present social life: the materialist dialectic sees in the central contradiction of capitalism, the wage relation between labour and capital as governed by the law of value, a structural tension carrying within it liberatory seeds of a transformative future which can only be actualized by conscious organized action on the part of the proletariat.

This materialization of the dialectic through praxis raises a problem Adorno acknowledges but leaves unanswered: such a concept of dialectic clearly departs from merely theoretical methodology, and as such runs the risk of ossification and reification. He observes that the solution to this problem lies in the intricacies of the relationship between theory and practice (86). The materialist dialectic posits itself not merely as a theory or an explanation but as a transformational methodology that brings conceptual knowledge to bear in the intentional

and deliberate transformation of society. As Ellen Meiksins Wood describes the Marxist promise of the social function of historical materialism in her book *Democracy Against Capitalism*, “Marxism sought a particular kind of knowledge, uniquely capable of illuminating the principles of historical movement, and at least implicitly, the points at which political action could most effectively intervene” (Wood 19). The theoretical tools of the materialist dialectic aspire to offer liberatory social forces the opportunity to understand their own situation within the context of a historically conditioned social state of affairs and identify structural nodes of contradiction within the social form which carry seeds that can be actualized in a transformative project.

Despite his materialist critique of Hegel’s notion of the whole, Adorno nonetheless identifies the moment of truth contained within the concept that materialist dialectic inherits: that “truth does not consist in defining some concept in isolation...but rather by taking it in relation to the totality in which it stands” (*ID* 23). Dialectics, whether idealist or materialist, does not divide its objects into static facts that can be isolated, categorized, and plugged into statements; in other words, materialist dialectics is not simple empiricism. Instead, dialectics seeks to comprehend the overarching context of a given phenomenon, not in the sense of a background but in the sense of the historical processes which gave rise to the phenomenon. Dialectics must not merely contextualize objects by placing them within an explanatory framework; dialectics “must concretely attempt to reveal the historical meanings of the objects which it addresses” (*ID* 12). To reveal the historical meaning of a given phenomenon is not merely to explain its empirical origin, but to comprehend the significance of the process of its origin as a manifestation of a contradiction of social forces within a given society and on a global stage, as well as to comprehend the function that it plays in driving the social whole forward into new developments.

Thus, dialectics does not merely historicize its object but strives to uncover the role its object plays in history in addition to the context of its development from a contradiction within the social whole. Thus, dialectics rejects any notion of truth as eternal and immutable in favour of “a concept of truth which has taken historical determinations up into itself” (*ID* 13). Dialectics does not simply place an object under an overarching historical-analytical framework, thereby neutralizing its non-identity through a false reconciliation with the concepts describing it, but rather shows the living history of the object in its own dignity as well as in its interconnectedness with other objects as it contributes to the overall motion of historical change.

Thus, for Adorno, if Hegel's notion of the whole is to be saved, then it must give the objective aspect of the dialectical relation its due, rather than holding the subject as primary as Hegel does (*ND* 7). Idealism ultimately subsumes non-identity to identity by proclaiming the identity of mind and reality. Material particularity, for idealism, is only conceivable to the mind because the essential character of an object is not to be found in the object itself but rather in the mind that relates to it, otherwise the mind would be incapable of relating to it. Per Adorno's reading of Hegel, this idealization of the object grounds the possibility of substantive philosophical knowledge; thus, the identity of object and concept is "foundation and result" of Hegel's philosophy in that he begins from this assumption of "identity of identity and non-identity" only to return to it with his notion of Absolute Spirit: "This leads to a peculiar duplicity to his logical categories. They are structures that have originated, structures that have voided themselves, and at the same time they are a priori, invariant structures" (*ND* 38). Adorno accuses Hegel of proposing an absolute that is both a preordained result and the finished product of a determinate historical process.

This forms the basis of his rejection of Hegel's absolute as a conceptually arbitrary restraint on the radically critical power of dialectical reason. He responds to Hegel's whole with a negative dialectic that accentuates the critical power Hegel restrained (*ND* 10). The contradiction with which dialectics interests itself occurs not merely between the subject and the object, but indeed within the object of experience itself. The object itself is wrong, not merely our perspective on it; our erroneous perspectives are merely the result of what the wrong object gives us to know.

Thus, the failure of classical metaphysics and the rejection of idealism necessitates a turn in philosophy towards social theory in order to understand the mind not as an overarching ontological glue but as operating within a social-historical framework and field. This comprises Adorno's response both to Kant and Hegel: "Adorno himself clearly stands in the tradition that runs from Marx to Lukács insofar as society reveals itself as the true transcendental subject" (Früchtl, "The Struggle of the Self Against the Self" 143). Antinomies of reason reveal themselves to be social contradictions: the subject's erroneous conceptualization of the world, therefore, cannot be dismissed as pure error, but rather, put under the right interpretive lens, can tell us something about the subject's position within their specific social formation as mediated by the commodity form. Thus, when dialectical thinking forces a change in conceptualization,

this subjective change corresponds with a change in the object of experience itself. In Adorno's reply to Hegel, absolute spirit gives way to society and the universality of Spirit to the particularity of bourgeois class interest (*ND* 10).

As elsewhere Adorno draws upon Marx's categories of use value and exchange value. Indeed, for Martin Jay, "the importance of the exchange principle for Adorno's negative dialectics would be difficult to exaggerate" (*Adorno* 66). His invocation of this terminology hinges upon Marx's account of these concepts in the beginning of *Capital*: exchange value is a quantitative and therefore interchangeable attribute of a commodity, while use value is qualitative and therefore unique (i.e. non-identical) to a given set of identical commodities (*Capital* 125-31). The universal mediation of the law of value proves to be the essential core hidden behind the Hegelian appearance of absolute spirit: value as the universal medium of exchange holds together the social system as spirit holds together Hegel's system (*ND* 11).

Later in the book, Adorno makes the link between identity and exchange clearer. He explicitly describes commodity exchange as the social-material correspondent to the principle of identity in the bourgeois *ratio*:

The exchange principle, the reduction of human labour to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Barter is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no barter; it is through barter that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. (*ND* 146; translation modified)

The commodification of human labour in the market renders any one individual identical to another insofar as their concrete efforts can be quantified and abstracted into value. This quantification subordinates the qualitative aspect of labour: from the perspective of capital skills and training become quantitative traits attached to a resume, countable and evaluable according to a set standard.

Here Adorno distinguishes between the theoretical reconstruction of society from what one hopes is a bird's eye view and the subjective experience of immersion in daily life in bourgeois society. When I purchase a bag of coffee beans for twenty dollars, I am unconsciously positing conceptual identity between the coffee beans, the piece of green plastic I offer the barista, as well as any other object I can buy with twenty dollars. By contrast, the remainder in the moment of exchange, that which cannot be rendered identical through equivocation with other commodities, is not the change I get back from my twenty, but instead the use value,

which, though excluded from exchange, nonetheless grounds the possibility of exchange, for if there were no use value to coffee beans (such as aiding the writing of a dissertation), then I would not have bought them. However, implicated in the social relationship between myself and the person from whom I purchase the beans is the process of production and distribution by which the beans and the bag they come in end up in my hands: this complicated globally networked system of production, consumption, distribution, and exchange by which the physical world and all its sidewalks, streets, skyscrapers, and subway trains are constituted is the ‘ether’-like backdrop of subjective experience that Hegel calls ‘spirit’: absolute spirit, for Adorno, turns out to be nothing more than the globally integrated market economy, and contradictions are not conceptual roadblocks but real tensions between definite social interests within it.

Yet, what distinguishes the world market from Hegel’s notion of absolute spirit is the constitution of the world market on the basis of particular interests of given social groups and the persistence of a moment of non-identity in the use value of commodities. Therefore, since for Adorno “a philosophical critique of identity transcends philosophy,” the subsumption of particularity in Hegel’s absolute spirit proves to be a conceptual obscuration of the material persistence of, on a sociological level, particular social interests in positions of power and wealth, and, on a philosophical level, the inevitability of non-identity between concept and object. Now that we have explored Adorno’s critique of Hegelian dialectics, we can explore how Adorno accentuates the negative moment.

### **1.7 After Hegel: Negative Dialectic**

A third type of dialectic, related to but distinct from the materialist dialectic, is the central topic of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*. This type of dialectic, which accentuates the moment of negation that Adorno celebrates but Hegel neutralizes, is born from the doubt cast on the Hegelian claim of identity. Adorno hopes to rescue the negative moment that he accuses Hegel of burying within an airtight system in which every element has its preordained place.

In a section entitled “Disenchantment of the Concept,” Adorno offers a preliminary definition of negative dialectics. He first responds to a critique of philosophy, the notion that all philosophy necessarily collapses into idealism because it takes as its primary objects concepts rather than concrete realities, by observing that philosophers use concepts to try to, however incompletely, refer to and conceptualize concrete things in the world (*ND* 11). He accuses this



vulgar materialist critique of philosophy of equal naïveté to out and out idealism. No concept does not in some way or another relate to something material, in much the same way that no empirical fact can be translated directly and immediately into a concept, for such a brute fact would merely be a thing or sensation not yet conceptualized. No concept arises without some concrete need to create it, most often in the context of the everyday struggle to survive and thrive. Later in the book Adorno will remind us that “All mental things are modified physical impulses, and such modification is their qualitative recoil into what not merely ‘is’” (*ND* 202). Even the most abstract conceivable concept has some relationship to the material, simply in virtue of being thought in a body implicated in a broader social and physical world; yet, no concept is completely reducible to a physical impulse, because conceptualizations, in virtue of their qualitative otherness to the conceived object itself, necessarily depart from (“their qualitative recoil”) the mere “is” that they account for—in other words, the non-identity of thought and object.

Thus, philosophy can no more reduce itself to the purely empirical—that is, to sensation and thingness without conceptualization—than it can elevate pure conceptuality to beatific status. Against these two approaches to philosophy, Adorno calls for “a philosophy that lets us know this, that extinguishes the autarky of the concept, strips the blindfold from our eyes.” To this end he offers a cursory definition of negative dialectics:

To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn toward non-identity, is the hinge of negative dialectics. Insight into the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reification. Reflection upon its own meaning is the way out of the concept’s seeming being-in-itself as a unit of meaning. (*ND* 12)

The mandate Adorno gives to philosophy is to reduce the concept to but one term in a dialectical relationship rather than taking it as primary and immutable. Classically, conceptualization was believed to have rescued the meaningful core of a sensation or thing “from the noumenal” by subdividing and subsuming the noumena into manipulable categories that can be worked with by a domineering consciousness.

As an alternative Adorno presents negative dialectics as reversing the direction of abstraction by evaluating concepts against their objects by doing justice to the non-identity between a concept and what it captures. By giving the “constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept” its due, that is, by bringing the conceptual down to earth by tracing its derivation from the nonconceptual rather than by imposing it upon the nonconceptual

as a structuring or categorizing force, Adorno believes that philosophy can free thinking from authoritarian conceptualizations like the absolute, like the bourgeois law of value, or like scientific or Soviet vulgar materialisms. By doing justice to the non-identical, philosophy can open an opportunity for conceiving—and indeed acting upon—a radically different relationship with the object. Once the non-identity of the object is no longer something to be feared, eliminated, or controlled, new horizons of possibility in relation to nature and human freedom can be envisioned, provided that action is infused with the insight of this approach.

However, though negative dialectics strives to undo the homogenizing effect of identitarian thinking, since it remains, as we have seen, a form of immanent critique, it must take the categories it criticizes as its point of departure: “Totality is to be opposed by convicting it of nonidentity with itself—of the nonidentity it denies, according to its own concept. Negative dialectics is thus tied to the supreme categories of identitarian philosophy as its point of departure” (*ND* 147). Totality *qua* philosophical system asserts its own identity with the reality it describes; negative dialectics, if it is to undo totality, must evaluate totality against this promise, just as ideology critique evaluates the promise of bourgeois liberty against the concrete life in bourgeois society. Negative dialectics therefore takes as its launching point the categories of previous philosophy in order to evaluate them, nuance them, and show whatever inadequacies they contain in relation to their purported content. As immanent critique, it begins from the premises it opposes in order to highlight inadequacies in the derivation that follows from these premises.

Thus, the point of entry from which other relating elements are found is an operation of thinking whose reification to the level of first principle leads to the philosophically incorrect and socially insidious assumption of unproblematic identity between thinking and its object; negative dialectics, by contrast, offers thinking a way to embrace the same point of entry while correcting itself against its own assumptions of identity, thereby offering superior philosophical knowledge while and because it does justice to the objects of its inquiry.

For this reason, Adorno states that “carried through, the critique of identity is a groping for the preponderance of the object” (*ND* 183). Identity thinking is “subjectivistic” because its assumption of identity between thought and object assumes a domination of the object by the subject, reflected on a social level through humanity’s supposed mastery over nature. Adorno adds that “an object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains something other than

the subject, whereas a subject by its very nature is from the outset an object as well.” The nature of the subject-object relationship precludes the consumptive dominance identity thinking promises to subjects, simply because a real concrete object can never be reduced to the subjective impressions produced in response to it. Thus, thinking’s central operation ought not to be classification but a form of investigation that lives with the object by taking into account the object’s movement, life, and action, that respects its integrity and acknowledges its non-identity with the concepts we craft to describe them, even as we modify those concepts to approximate the object as closely as possible (*ID* 47).

Adorno’s call for a negative dialectic is a call for a thinking that gives objects their due rather than trying to slot them into conceptual schemata derivable from a unitary category. It is a thinking that calls for the acknowledgement of difference and non-identity, while still preserving an analysis of the social rather than ontological whole. Adorno hopes to present his negative dialectic as an antidote to the defects of bourgeois reason that have produced the twentieth century crisis of bourgeois society. In order to complete our account of Adorno’s dialectic and its relationship to his concept of rationality, we must now bring precision to the conceptual links and distinctions between rationality, bourgeois rationality, and irrationality.

### **1.8 Adorno on Irrationality: Dialectic of Reason and Myth**

Here it is important to take a moment to clarify the difference between the negative dialectical critique of bourgeois reason and irrationality proper. As we saw above, Adorno distinguishes the bourgeois *ratio* as a historically specific form of reason associated with a certain social order that, through its over-extension of its own premises, ends up falling into unreason. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as *Negative Dialectics* offer themselves as a sort of post-mortem of bourgeois reason’s collapse into the crises of the twentieth century, striving to comprehend rationally a historical moment of irrationality. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it, “He seems to have felt the need to demonstrate that the irrational could be rationally understood” (*The Origin of Negative Dialectics* 17).

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno describes the process through which reason collapses into its contrary. Reason becomes irrational when it “hypostatiz[es] its products,” that is, when it takes its own abstract categories to be identical to the objects they encompass, when it tries to ground the objects of experience in its own abstract categories rather than allow its categories to

be transformed and challenged by a bidirectional relationship between thought and object (*ND* 34). Irrationality Adorno here defines as “the autarky of thought,” the notion that thinking dominates material reality, that thought’s categories can be derived independently of any connection to anything concrete, historical, or social; or, alternatively, that thought can grasp its object without remainder. Such an autarky of thought, such a faith in the universal domination of thought over nature, reduces thought to pure abstraction devoid of any meaningful content.

Far from the completion of rationality, this autarky is empty and ineffectual before the world it has built. By contrast, dialectical thinking works from the given categories of identity thinking and extends them to their limit, evaluating them against what they describe, while conventional rationality, when it “unconsciously” follows its own tendencies to their limit, flattens out the subjective, determinate substrate that underlies abstraction—the determinate abstraction “something” over the purely formal “being” (*ND* 149). Rationality collapses into irrationality when its quantifying, homogenizing tendency reaches a point where reason can no longer self-critique in such a way as to become aware of the structures of its own internal “law of motion” which produce the imposition of identity in the first place; in other words, when we can no longer “see through the identity principle.” Identity thinking is not inherently a moral evil, since it is a necessary cognitive operation in all thinking, but rather becomes unhinged and dangerous at precisely the moment that thought can no longer apply a critical lens to its own categories in the manner that Adorno’s project of a negative dialectic promises. He seeks not to overthrow the *ratio* but to save it from collapsing into its contrary by marshalling its critical faculties to put the fundamental categories of thought under examination in such a way that prevents the arbitrary and authoritarian assumption of their identity with reality.

To this end, he highlights a dialectical tension between reason and myth, which he explores more fully from exile in collaboration with Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Enlightenment promised “the disenchantment of the world,” “to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge” (*DE* 1). It shakes off tradition and superstition with the aim of mastering nature through systematic knowledge of it. Enlightenment imagines itself to be limitless in that it is above political control but universally accessible to those who aspire to control nature as well as endlessly refinable in its techniques of domination (*DE* 2).

But implicit within the domination of nature is power over other human beings; for, in order to act upon nature in a significant scale beyond the mere shuffling of pebbles or picking of

flowers, human effort must be coordinated socially around a task, that is to say, rationalized towards a specific end, whether the chopping of trees, the mining of metals, or the manufacturing of finished products (*DE* 16). Power over nature is thus also social power in virtue of the necessity of a division of labour to extract from nature on a meaningful scale. In this account, the categorization of concepts corresponds historically to the concrete division of human beings into social roles within a larger system of production and reproduction. This division is not arbitrary or emergent but rather the result of conscious exercises of social power; it is not the negotiated result of a social contract but the exercise of organizational methods upon individuals. Necessarily these methods of organization tend towards results that affirm the interests of the dominators. Enlightenment refines these methods such as to apply them on a larger scale, and in doing so becomes larger than those who wield its mechanisms; this creates the conditions in which reason collapses into unreason.

Key to this tension is Enlightenment's inextricable and mutually constitutive relationship with myth. Myth tries to exercise control over nature through magical practices, in which words are given power through an ascription of subjectivity to the things of nature (animism and anthropomorphic polytheism); "according to enlightened thinking, the multiplicity of mythical figures can be reduced to a single common denominator, the subject," because "only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent or an event; its ideal is the system from which everything and anything follows" (*DE* 4). *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* description hits upon the same themes as *Negative Dialectics'* critique of the bourgeois *ratio*: subjectivity as a manipulable medium of universal equivalence between the objects of nature, whose internal conceptual tendency gradually moves towards a monotheistic derivation of nature.

Rationalization and categorization arise in response to the epistemic inadequacy of myth. Adorno sees in the move from the pre-Socratics to Plato a description of this process: "The categories by which Western philosophy defined its timeless order of nature marked out the positions which had once been occupied by Ocnus and Persephone, Ariadne and Nereus," while the "moist, the undivided, the air and fire which [pre-Socratic cosmologies] take to be the primal stuff of nature are early rationalizations precipitated from the mythical vision," until with Plato, "even the patriarchal gods of Olympus were finally assimilated by the philosophical *logos* as the Platonic forms" (*DE* 3).

Enlightenment, sniffing out the mythical core in Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, shakes off the notion of pure and ontologically substantial categories in favour of a rationality for which “anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion” (*DE* 3). Enlightenment only concerns itself with knowledge that can be quantified, for only such knowledge can be reduced to a first principle at the core of the neatly derived system; Adorno adds that “the same equations govern bourgeois justice and commodity exchange,” emphasizing that the rise of Enlightenment *qua* bourgeois reason is not a purely conceptual problem but deeply implicated in the material constitution of bourgeois society through the law of value and the division of subjects into citizen and non-citizen of this or that bourgeois state (*DE* 4). Reflecting comments from *Negative Dialectics*, Horkheimer and Adorno write of bourgeois society that “it makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities,” while “anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry” (*DE* 4-5). As we saw in *Negative Dialectics*, Enlightenment strives for the rational categorization of everything, with anything non-identical compartmentalized or neutralized as art.

We have seen how the text describes Enlightenment’s emergence out of myth’s attempt “to report, to name, to tell of origins” and to systematize itself through recording and ritual, but *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also describes how Enlightenment can collapse back into myth (5, 8). Despite its structural similarity to myth, Enlightenment breaks from it in its rejection of multiplicity in favour of a first principle: “Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings” by “transforming itself into a pure truth underlying the world which it enslaves” (*DE* 6). The magician, whose subjectivity changes which each mask he puts on to confront the multiplicity of demons to be placated, does not rationally reconstruct the world as a whole pointing back to a singular principle through a chain of categorical derivations in which all things are classified under a given form, but rather approaches specific elements and spirits for specific ends (*DE* 6-7). But the more Enlightenment dispels the illusion of magic, the more Enlightenment progresses in lockstep with myth; the patriarchal myth of the central solar deity, monotheism, functions conceptually exactly like the first principles of rationalistic philosophies from which the entire system is derived (*DE* 7-8).

Enlightenment’s classification and codification of laws, its aspiration to repeatability and universal validity, prove to be the continuation of the mimetic repetition characteristic of magic

ritual (DE 8). The effort to uncover the underlying essence of concrete things continues myth's inherent tendency of abstracting from things towards essential concepts embodied in deities. Enlightenment, by shaking off the supernatural, perfects these techniques of collective manipulation and applies them to human social relationships through its material-social instantiation in the law of value (DE 9).

Reason's confidence in the results of these techniques leads to an absolute confidence in and fetishization of the techniques themselves, independent from any ethical or philosophical reflection; this becomes a kind of irrational faith in its own universal mastery over nature and society through these techniques. Horkheimer and Adorno write, "The paradox of faith degenerates finally into fraud, the myth of the twentieth century and faith's irrationality into rational organization in the hands of the utterly enlightened as they steer society toward barbarism" (DE 15). The techniques deployed by rationality for control over nature are rendered irrational when applied to irrational ends. Under the Nazi regime, techniques of rational organization were deployed to brutalize nations and exterminate millions of human beings for no reason other than the religion or ethnic group that they happened to be born into. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the Nazi regime was not a deviation from Enlightenment but rather an extreme expression of its tendency to fetishize the techniques of domination over nature and the body at the expense of living up to the content of its own promise of liberty and universal rational maturity. It is through the universal expansion of its own techniques of domination that reason collapses into myth, the myth of its own identity with reality and the myth of the necessity to use force to render reality correspondent with itself through the elimination of all that is non-identical (DE 31).

While here Horkheimer and Adorno critique the manner in which reason can collapse into unreason, elsewhere he offers a nuanced reading of the role of irrationality in the history of philosophy. In *Introduction to Dialectics*, Adorno offers comments on irrationality in the context of establishing a distinction between dialectics and traditional philosophical rationalism. Dialectics acknowledges the non-identity of thought and object through attention to the non-identical remainder, that is, the contradictions that arise when the concept we form of an object is imposed upon the object itself; per Adorno's critique, rationalism, by contrast, derives its objects within a system, assuming that nothing can be left uncategorized, and that no element is irreducible to thinking (ID 38-9). Though dialectics cares little for opacity, it does not pretend

that it can categorize its way to perfect comprehensibility; the world cannot be perfectly comprehensible because the world is not conceptual but riddled with complex particularity. This is not to deny that the world can be understood, but to acknowledge that any conceptual apparatus for understanding the world is necessarily non-identical to the world itself and must include ways of thinking that evaluate its own claims and assumptions against reality as to tease out and let speak the non-identical.

Thus, “to think dialectically is not somehow to think in a non-logical way....Rather, to think dialectically is to allow particular determinations to point beyond themselves whenever they come into contradiction with themselves, is thus to render them ‘fluid’ through the application of logical categories” (*ID* 40). Dialectical thinking is not the annihilation of logic but the breaking down of the assumed static quality of objects and the concepts that correspond to them. Determinations “point beyond themselves” when confronted against their own ideas, allowing deeper insights into the “fluid” nature of objects and the web of relationships in which they exist. And yet, though dialectical thinking is not irrationalist, Adorno observes that even irrationality has a moment of truth,

For it is a repeated attempt to bring home to thought precisely what has been excised by thought itself, what has been lost to actual experience through a form of reason which dominates nature and itself alike. It is an attempt to do justice within philosophy to all that has been sacrificed to the process of enlightenment. (*ID* 44)

Irrationalism arises in response to Enlightenment as a sort of mourning for the loss of what must be sacrificed to Enlightenment. It is no accident that Romantic poetry often takes an interest in mythology and nature, though as we shall see in the next chapter this answer is far from sufficient. To “escape the blind compulsion of nature” entails a great sacrifice, the suppression of drive, the renunciation of myth, and the compulsion to labour.

Adorno distinguishes irrationality from reification, which as we have seen forms a key operation of the bourgeois *ratio*. Irrationality’s answer to reification is to try and rediscover a lost immediacy which removes the weight of subjectivity and the alienness of the world to the subject in bourgeois society; by contrast, the bourgeois *ratio* proposes immediate identity between its own categories and those of the world it describes (*ID* 44). This restorationist project, however, cannot succeed, and indeed when acted upon concretely can lead in the dangerous direction of using the very tools of mechanistic rationality to try and force a restorationist concept onto society through the immediacy of brute irrational violence; yet,



Adorno lays at the feet of dialectics the challenge of integrating irrationality's moment of truth into its own immanent critique of rationality.

This is because, for Adorno, irrationality is not some separate worldview that can be sharply distinguished from the *ratio*; rather, Enlightenment rationality and its irrationalist contrary are mutually implicated (*ID* 41). Even the irrational is subject to rationalization, its borders delimited and segregated out as a sort of reserve and placed "under conceptual bureaucratic categories" so as not to pose any meaningful threat to the dominance of the *ratio*. Thinking in response must, rather than defining and segregating the irrational, acknowledge the immanence of irrationality to rationality in a dialectical relationship of mutual constitution and implication; should it fail to do so, rationality runs the risk of collapsing into irrationality by assuming its own immediacy and triumph.

Without an acknowledgement of irrationality *qua* immanent critique of reason's non-identity with its object prevents reason from being able to evaluate its own claims in a manner that acknowledges its own fallibility; without such a critical awareness of its own contradictions it cannot pay proper respects to its objects, but rather falls into the unreason of assuming its own autarky and completeness (*ID* 41). Thus, while philosophies grounded in irrationalism can lead in dangerous direction, a philosophy that fails to confront honestly the moment of truth in irrationality runs the risk of falling into unreason through its own unwillingness to perform the immanent critique which allows thinking to become aware of its own necessary incompleteness; Adorno writes, in response to the later Lukács' derision of Nietzsche and Freud as irrationalists, that "a dialectic that does not also effectively incorporate the moment which is opposed to the cognitive *ratio* essentially forfeits its own character and reverts precisely to the kind of mechanistic thought which the great pioneers of dialectical philosophy had so emphatically repudiated in the first place" (*ID* 42). Bourgeois reason triumphantly assumes that it has dispensed with irrationality by dispelling it from thinking and by putting it in its place as a sort of Saturday afternoon entertainment, and in doing so falls into the unreason of the assumption of its own completeness as a system; dialectical reason, by contrast, integrates the irrational as an immanent critique of reason itself, not for the purpose of reveling in prelapsarian irrationality but for the purpose of imbuing subjective rationality with a mutually enriching relationship with its objects so that it may be challenged by the experience of contradiction between its own assumptions and that which they strive to describe. Now that we have seen how Adorno defines

rationality, irrationality, and dialectical thinking in relation to and in distinction from each other, we can turn our attention to the deployment of these concepts in his analysis of a specifically aesthetic rationality and his defense of art's capacity to criticize rationality even as it necessarily participates in rationality.

## Part Two: The Dual Character of Aesthetic Rationality in Art History

In this chapter I will show that Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* recapitulates the same problems as *Negative Dialectics* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by tracing the development of an aesthetic rationality that gives artworks autonomy by restructuring empirically derived materials through an immanent and rationally constructed law of form. Due to the socially embedded nature of the artistic subject and the materials drawn upon, this rationally constructed form, the internal logic of the artwork, bears the stamp of society's contradictions in the tensions of its own formal construction: "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form" (*AT* 6). However, artworks, being merely artworks, are impotent to change anything about society; this problem leaves autonomous art with the risk that it will collapse into a form of temporary consolation against the woes of workaday life. The impasse art has reached requires a philosophical intervention: this is the task Adorno sets for himself in *Aesthetic Theory*.

This chapter will trace the historical progression of aesthetic rationality in order to show that artworks participate in bourgeois rationality even as they offer an immanent critique of its homogenizing, abstracting tendencies. To do this, I will explore how Adorno describes aesthetic rationality's double character as construction and critique: how, on the one hand, it repeats the domination of nature highlighted in Adorno's other writings, and how, on the other, it gives artworks the autonomy and imagination necessary to conceive utopic alternatives by saying more than they appear to, even if their secession from material life renders them unable to actualize those possibilities on their own: "The spell with which art through its unity encompasses the *membra disjecta* of reality is borrowed from reality and transforms art into the negative appearance of utopia" (*AT* 130).

I will show that aesthetic rationality is not only constructive in the way it imbues works with governing form, but is also critical in its stance towards the insufficiencies of previous artworks. Artworks rationally respond to previous artworks by building on the basis of their

premises even as they criticize their shortcomings; insufficiencies in an existing work provide the impetus for new ones. Thus, artworks as an alternative rationality offer an immanent critique of the bourgeois rationality in which they participate, even as they render themselves powerless to change the world their autonomy: “Despite art’s illusory character, art can testify for the possibility of the possible” (Zuidervaart 212). Art does not offer the vision of an aestheticized society, but rather a society in which the kind of rationality of which art is an example does not face scorn over its socio-economic impracticality. This critical aspect of art shall form the core of Adorno’s defense of modernism, the subject of the chapter following this one.

## 2.1 Aesthetic Rationality and the Concept of Art

In a passage from *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno comments on the relationship between art and rationality:

Art is rationality that criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it; art is not something prerational or irrational, which would peremptorily condemn it as untruth in the face of the entanglement of all human activity in the social totality. Rational and irrational theories of art are therefore equally faulty. (*AT* 55)

Theories of art history that base themselves on taxonomizing schools rather than questioning the concept of art and its historical genesis as a separate sphere will fail to account fully for their subject matter. Instead, aesthetics must be understood as an investigation into art’s concept and how it came to construct its own autonomy. There is a specifically aesthetic rationality through whose means artworks construct an internal unity as and against the empirical world from which they draw their materials: “Rationality in the artwork is the unity-founding, organizing element, not unrelated to the rationality that governs externally, but it does not reflect its categorizing order” (*AT* 55). Even as art has a rational core, it wields this rationality in opposition to bourgeois rationality through an immanent critique of rationality that plays itself out on the level of art’s formal construction, hence its rejection of the “categorizing order” of conventional rationality. Art is thus neither irrational nor conventionally rational; rather, artworks can be called rational to the extent that they can be seen as justified in relation to the previous artistic practices and forms they push back against.

The nature of art's rationality relates to what Adorno will call the concept of art and determines what is or is not admitted under that concept's label, whether a practice or technique is rendered aesthetically productive, or whether a given work counts as art. As Lydia Goehr notes,

He increasingly distinguishes the concept of *art* from that of a *work* of art to show how the former moves toward its demise the more it gives itself over to what the concept of a work wants most: to preserve as fixed the labor, preparation, and articulation that individuates it. (Goehr 101)

The concept of art consists in the criteria according to which artworks are judged to be art or not; these criteria are in turn refuted by new works that burst open its boundaries and explore new possibilities previously unavailable to art. This concept of art is not inherent to artistic practices, for specific arts had existed in other milieus before it had come into being. Rather, art as a unitary category is the product of a historical process: "Art did not become a unified whole until a very late stage" (*AT* 326). The unification of art as a category occurs with the Enlightenment, before which the various arts had medium-specific and often cultic use values from which they were gradually separated: "What are taken to be the purest forms (e.g. traditional musical forms) can be traced back even in the smallest idiomatic detail to content such as dance. In many instances ornaments in the visual arts were once primarily cultic symbols" (*AT* 5). For this reason, it is impossible to define art's concept with reference to its origins, cultic or otherwise: "Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form" (*AT* 3).

Art as a concept does not have "some transhistorical function...that could be captured in an essential and universal 'definition'" but is historically situated and exists "under the specific social, political, and economic conditions of an ineluctably 'advancing' modernity" (Walker, "Adorno and Heidegger on the Question of Art" 97). This concept must be understood in light of the historical process through which it was constituted; furthermore, each new work must be understood in relation to those that came before it, for the insufficiencies and aporias of previous works and aesthetic categories in relation to their respective historical moments can only be understood retrospectively through the ways in which future works spring from, answer to, and criticize those insufficiencies: "Art is in each case outlined by what art once was, but is legitimated only by what art became in its openness to what it wants to, and perhaps can, become" (*AT* 3). Each artwork says more than it seems to, in part because of the condensed indeterminacy of its conceptual language (which indeterminacy, as we shall see, art learns from

nature), and in part because of the way in which every genuinely new work transforms the concept of art by breaching some new expressive or constructive possibility previously unavailable to art but whose necessity can be understood retrospectively in light of shortcomings in the older concept of art (*AT* 78).

Art's concept is constituted thus not by its origins but by the process through which it departed from its roots and coalesced as an autonomous social phenomenon within a capitalist world that distrusts anything impractical. What is at issue in how Adorno defines the concept of art is not a transhistorical theory of the human aesthetic impulse but an account of how art, in its increasing autonomy, saw a number of diverse practices come to be unified under the rubric of aesthetic categories through the accentuation of the process of subjective rational construction at the expense of the collaborative, tradition-bound, and often cultic approaches that characterized medieval artistic practices such as icon painting or choral music. This gives way to an art history structured by refutation, whereby new artworks spring out of insufficiencies in previous ones:

As everywhere in society, artistic rationalization, the planned control of means, implies their increasing unification, their growing resemblance within each sphere of art, as well as of the different arts to one another. (*SF* 107)

The different arts come to be unified in two ways, namely, in subjective and objective terms. Subjectively, art comes to be seen more and more as the project of an aesthetic subject placing their stamp on the world through composition and expression, while objectively the process by which the various arts develop independence from their previous cultic or festive use-values gives them an autonomy *qua* works of art from the social worlds they come out of, even as this autonomy itself is socially and historically constituted and contingent. Thus, Adorno's account of art history does not offer a typical story of individuals and schools, but rather plays itself out at a level of abstraction in which the concept of art as a reflection of a social position it rebels against progressively acquires its autonomy only to lose its self-evidence in the face of the political and philosophical crises of the twentieth century: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist" (*AT* 1). This concept of art must be overturned by successive generations of artists who broach previously unconceivable possibilities in order to inaugurate a new concept which itself must once again be overturned, just as Adorno calls for the endless evaluation of philosophical categories against the reality they describe. The humanistic promise of art's autonomy came in contradiction with an ever more inhuman social world, resulting in art itself being subjected to

the process of rationalization it protests through the culture industry. We can now turn our attention to the historical process through which this autonomy is constituted.

## 2.2 Art's Separation from Myth

Though art's concept is not defined by its origins, as we have seen the historical process through which it acquires its concept nonetheless needs to be conceptualized. A key point in the origin of aesthetic rationality comes with art's separation from myth and magic. On this point Adorno draws from Hegel's aesthetics, who describes successful artworks as "free" and observes that artworks can express the subtlest of religious or philosophical concepts through sensuous depictions that imitate but perfect natural forms (Hegel, *Aesthetics* Vol. 1 7-8). This creates a super-sensuous sphere a perceiving subject sees as beyond itself which it must pierce through attention and reflection (8). Furthermore, because Christianity has moved beyond the necessity of art as a means of conveying spiritual notions, art has developed for us a primarily reflective function, in that rather than being the object of cultic activity, it can serve as a spark for thought; for Hegel, "Thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine art" and as such, art can no longer satisfy the intellectual and spiritual needs it did in its previous cultic functions, forcing it to pursue a different course (10). Art gives the artist a chance to externalize intimate thoughts and feelings while doubling the self for others to encounter (32). Art takes its place alongside religion and philosophy because it gives spirit the capacity to leave aside contingent worldly life and contemplate its own being (94).

Adorno takes inspiration from Hegel's account of "free" art while articulating with Horkheimer a distinctive narrative in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which they identify the separation of art as a self-contained sphere from science as a key moment in the constitution of reason against myth. Magic grounds itself on a ritualistic symbolic act in which the seasonal repetition of nature grounds the consistency of meaning through mythic symbolization (*DE* 12). Key to the project of identity thinking is the delimiting of concepts consistently indicated by symbols—definitions. This process finds its earliest origins in magic's attempt to wield the power of symbolism over nature. To overcome the legacy of magic, systematic science must

therefore define itself in opposition to poetry, which in part builds itself up from the inconsistency of language. Adorno writes,

Beneath the modest veil of the Olympian *chronique scandaleuse*, the doctrine of the commingling and colliding of elements had evolved; establishing itself at once as science, it turned the myths into figments of fantasy. With the clean separation between science and poetry, the division of labour which science had helped to establish was extended to language. (DE 12-3)

This passage can be read to suggest that Plato's expulsion of poets allegorically depicts the process of the separation of science from poetry: from the moment of reason's birth art is present at once as its sibling and contrary. Poetry begins as a proto-scientific attempt to describe nature by reference to divinity, but once the concept of divinity is established, it becomes necessary for reason to purge of it all that is contingent, arbitrary, and non-identical to the concept. The move from Homeric theology to Platonic ontology thus reflects the purification and stabilization of categories through the codification of language (DE 13).

The codification of signs renders language a vehicle for the conveyance of abstraction; scientific discourse necessarily stands at a level of distance from the nature it describes. Language can only approach nature through its artistic rather than instrumental application, for art finds its impetus and persistence in the mourning of the separation from nature and quixotic aspiration for reconciliation. Art becomes a way to think beyond immersion in everyday rational subjectivity and its compulsion to socially determined labour:

Art has in common with magic the postulation of a special, self-contained sphere removed from the context of profane existence. Within it special laws prevail. Just as the sorcerer begins the ceremony by marking out from all its surroundings the place in which the sacred forces are to come into play, each work of art is closed off from reality by its own circumference. The very renunciation of external effects by which art is distinguished from magical sympathy binds art only more deeply to the heritage of magic. This renunciation places the pure image in opposition to corporeal existence, the elements of which the image sublates within itself. (DE 14)

This passage compares the artwork to a magic circle, an image closely related to *Aesthetic Theory's* concept of the artwork's autonomy through form: "Form works like a magnet that orders elements of the empirical world in such a fashion that they are estranged from their extra-aesthetic essence" (AT 226). For, in absorbing and reordering diverse empirically derived elements through form into something unitary, art achieves a self-enclosed sphere at the cost of renouncing worldly efficacy: "The determinate antithesis of individual artworks toward empirical reality furthers the coherence of those artworks" (AT 157).



Thus, art's ability to capture the negative image of utopia requires it to overcome simple mimesis of nature, for if it does not depart from mere depiction by developing its own internal formal unity, it risks affirming the status quo by reproducing the existing world in thought (*DE* 13). This, paradoxically, would transform art into the rational reconstruction of the world science and philosophy strive to offer. The mimetic function, which Adorno speculates precedes art in the form of the ritualistic assimilation of the self to what is other to it, separates from magical practices proper and lays the groundwork for the refinement of artistic practices, early expressions of which appear on the walls of caves around the world (*AT* 329). At the same time, the progressive domination of nature through labour leaves a space for art as a field for the memory of a life not mediated by quantity:

If art has its roots in mimetic, prerational behaviour, if it represents the memory of that behaviour in the midst of the process of rationalization, this element of the qualitative, of difference, of whatever is not entirely subsumed into the rational, never relinquishes its claims. (*SF* 108)

This passage, taken from an essay criticizing overextensions of the category of Romanticism in music, draws a clear line between Adorno's aesthetics and *Negative Dialectics*. The nonidentical, the remainder left behind by rational categorization, continues to leave its stamp on art from the very moment of reason's birth. The trauma of reason's conquest of nature in the struggle for survival opened space for a means through which the loss of a qualitative relationship with the world could be mourned and remembered. Even cave paintings (which Adorno considers to have been, rather than primitive, "stages of a process and in no way an early one") strive to capture motion in "imitation of the indeterminate, of what has not been nailed down;" art appears as "a protest against reification," trying to capture action and change rather than ossified objects (*AT* 326-9). As we shall see, this indeterminacy is key to what art is trying to achieve. The various arts offered space for the extra-rational remainder to find expression, yet, because they are situated within the same historical process which nourished rationalization, they would come to develop their own specific rationalities within the social milieus in which they were systematized and practiced; "This element [of protest] should not be dismissed as irrational. Art is in its most ancient roots too deeply permeated with rationality" (*AT* 330). Art therefore comes to develop its own aesthetic rationality that protests conventional rationality by constructing an autonomous sphere, even as this autonomy renders it unable to overcome bourgeois rationality by changing social relations. Let us now explore the constructive and critical aspects of this rationality.

### 2.3 The Double Character of Aesthetic Rationality

Aesthetic rationality contains two aspects: the constructive and the critical. The constructive aspect is the operation of assembling empirically sourced experiences into some order which follows and realizes the formal logic of the work. Aesthetic rationality constructs its autonomy through formal unity even as it takes a critical stance towards the existing concept of art in order to open up new possibilities for art. Thus, aesthetic rationality does not merely sustain the memory of the pre-rational but also applies rationality's own means to the critique of bourgeois rationality's project of total subsumption of social relations to the mediation of the law of value. This not only accounts for rationality's scepticism of art, but also for the inability of previous aesthetic theories to account for the dialectical relationship between artistic practices and rationality: "The sentimentality and debility of almost the whole tradition of aesthetic thought is that it has suppressed the dialectic of rationality and mimesis immanent in art" (AT 54).

This dialectic consists in the way rationality forms and shapes the empirically derived mimetic elements that are the raw material of artworks. As rationality progresses and art moves further and further away from its origin, the element of subjective composition becomes more and more significant (AT 48). The more that subjective construction takes precedence in art, the more assertively must artworks take critical stances to previous artistic, rather than building upon a collaborative tradition. Thus, aesthetic rationality's constructive aspect arises in tandem with its critical aspect. This process becomes ever more heightened with modern art, which simultaneously protests this aesthetic subjectivity.

Modern art strives for Enlightened rational maturity as much as philosophy does while simultaneously rebelling against it in a form of immanent critique in which the dialectic between rational maturity and pre-rational "childish" mimesis is played out on the level of the artwork's formal construction: "Immaturity via maturity" (AT 43). Successful works of art deploy the means of rationality in a manner that still contains their own immanent critique, just as *Negative Dialectics* calls for philosophy to integrate dialectical autocritique into its categories. This immanent critique on the formal level allows artworks to imagine modes of life free of rational domination, even as the autonomy that makes this possible renders artworks unable to change the world directly: "The power of the aesthetic subject to integrate whatever it takes hold of is at the same time its weakness. It capitulates to a unity that is alienated by virtue of its abstractness and

resignedly casts its lot with blind necessity” (*AT* 29). Thus, the triumph of aesthetic rationality is also its impotence before a world from which it must derive its materials. The socially limited position of the aesthetic subject requires the artist to hone technical procedures that construct the unity of artistic form:

The concept of construction, which is fundamental to modern art, always implied the primacy of constructive methods over subjective imagination. Construction necessitates solutions that the imagining ear or eye does not immediately encompass or know in full detail. (*AT* 24)

Artistic techniques allow artists to overcome their own subjective impotence by offering tools that help stitch together empirically sourced experiences into the formal unity of the artwork.

The more that aesthetic rationality predominates, the more that artists come to emphasize technique: “Every authentic artist is obsessed with technical procedures” (*AT* 44). This becomes especially apparent in modernism: Schoenberg’s twelve-tone method, stream-of-consciousness prose, Charles Olson’s use of monosyllables to create a speech-like pace in poetry, Francis Bacon’s use of photographs as the basis for his paintings, for example.

The importance of technique therefore suggests that despite the subjective nature of aesthetic rationality, it nonetheless necessitates an *overcoming* of subjectivity through universalizing rationality. Construction does not simply impose the subjective fancy of the artist upon the materials of the artwork, but rather imbues it with a critical logic that constructs its formal unity against the insufficiencies of previous artworks:

Construction is currently the only possible form that the rational element in the artwork can take, just as at the outset, in the Renaissance, the emancipation of art from cultic heteronomy was part of the discovery of construction, then called ‘composition.’ In the artwork as monad, construction—its authority limited—is the plenipotentiary of logic and causality transferred to the artwork from the domain of objective knowledge. Construction is the synthesis of the diverse at the expense of the qualitative elements that it masters, and at the expense of the subject, which intends to extinguish itself as it carries out this synthesis. (*AT* 57)

Construction describes the ordering of experiential elements in a process of creating formal unity out of heteronomy through the application of logical relations like causality to the material of a given artwork. It allows the diversity of experiential input to be synthesized under the umbrella of an artwork’s form. The logical, fundamental operation of aesthetic rationality, that of creating unity from heterogeneity, participates in bourgeois rationality, even as aesthetic rationality’s renunciation of any effect in the world grants it critical autonomy from bourgeois rationality.

Aesthetic rationality's use of construction and technique offers a way to reduce the very primacy of subjectivity that Adorno accuses bourgeois reason of constructing (*AT 57*).

This objective logical aspect of aesthetic construction accounts for the importance of technique to art. Through construction and technique, the artist can create works that do not merely reflect internal subjective states but capture a dialectical tension between subject and object, between the new work and the history of art, that allows for the type of immanent critique proper to aesthetic rationality. This logical aspect distinguishes artistic construction from mere expression, which is but one tool in the artist's repertoire. For this operation to succeed, the work's construction must be derived in some way from the heterogeneous interactions of the work's empirical elements themselves, for these empirical elements can never be completely and perfectly subjected to a conscious and determined aesthetic ideal without some remainder. This accounts for the immanent nature of aesthetic form, which, rather than being imposed from outside, must relate in some way to the elements formalized:

Construction is the extension of subjective domination, which conceals itself all the more profoundly the further it is driven. Construction tears the elements of reality out of their primary context and transforms them to the point where they are once again capable of forming unity, one that is no less imposed on them internally than was the heteronomous unity to which they were subjected externally. (*AT 57*)

Construction reorders the elements it takes up under logical laws that are specific and inherent to the form of the work of art, which itself relates to those elements specifically. Adorno describes this process in violent terms: "Formalistic classicism commits an affront: Precisely the beauty that its concept glorifies is sullied by the manipulative, 'composed' violence of its exemplary works" (*AT 48*). This forceful uptake of its elements, in addition to art's critical stance towards pre-existing works, participates in the critical, destructive aspect of aesthetic rationality implicit in construction. Through this process heterogeneity is reduced to unity in a manner analogous to the rationalization of society through the quantitative mediation of the commodity form, yet in an autonomous parallel manner that allows art to envisage social contradictions critically.

At its most highly developed state, artistic rationality demands the same absolute correspondence of its elements to its concept as do the system-building philosophers Adorno critiques (*AT 35*). At the same time, however, art becomes aware of its own hyperrationality and seeks methods to check the subjective stamp left on artworks. Modernism's emphasis on technique and its diverse procedures for making subjective construction invisible (automatic

writing, etc.) even as it predominates conclude of the process of the constitution of aesthetic rationality against the diverse cultic milieux from which the various individual arts came. However, before turning to modernism we must further clarify the nature of the autonomy aesthetic rationality constructs and the process through which it successively constructs and critiques its categories.

## 2.4 The Autonomy of Art

A centrepiece of Adorno's aesthetics is the claim that art, starting roughly with the Enlightenment, achieves an autonomy that separates it from the heteronomous and largely cultic use-values that once limited the specific arts in the kind of forms and content they could explore. This thesis describes, on the one hand, the way in which artworks are considered useless to bourgeois society, and on the other hand, the way in which this uselessness allows art to think beyond conventional rationality and lurch towards something utopic. Key to this autonomy is not only the critical stance it takes towards society, but also towards all artistic practices and categories that came before it, meaning that Adorno's reconstruction of art history is structured not by tradition and influence but by each new artwork's negation of the insufficiencies of the pre-existing concept of art.

However, Adorno does not posit autonomous art as a purely independent sphere transcending any implication with society, for "to isolate culture as something superior to society, free from its constraints, was to ignore the pervasive power of the dominating totality into which modern life had coalesced" (Jay 113). Rather, Adorno sees autonomy as "the sedimentation of a historical process that constitutes its concept" (AT 17). This autonomy exists in a dialectically tense relationship with art's status as a social product of human effort: "Art's double character—its autonomy and *fait social*—is expressed ever and again in the palpable dependencies and conflicts between the two spheres" (AT 229). As we shall see, both constructive and critical aspects of aesthetic rationality play roles in this autonomy.

Adorno seeks to emphasize the social nature of autonomy for fear that if it is forgotten then art descends into ideology: "Art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art" (AT 225). Art's autonomy is a social fact in no small part because autonomy constitutes itself against the demands that society places on art. However,

there is a double-edged sword at play here, for art can either protest society by exposing its illusions or reify society by becoming Sunday consolation: “Autonomy, the very principle that renders art ideological, also provides a precondition for art’s emancipatory role” (Zuidervaart 32). The paradox of art’s autonomy consists in that, on the one hand, this autonomy offers art the distance from society it needs to offer a critical vision, but on the other, that this autonomy when reified reduces art to a temporary refuge from working life. Indeed, “To celebrate culture only for its transcendence of material concerns was...to undercut the concept’s critical potential” (Jay 113). Adorno frames this problem early in *Aesthetic Theory*:

The principle of autonomy itself is suspect of giving consolation: By undertaking to posit totality out of itself, whole and self-encompassing, this image is transferred to the world in which art exists and that engenders it. By virtue of its rejection of the empirical world—a rejection that inheres in art’s concept and thus is no mere *escape*, but a law immanent to it—art sanctions the primacy of reality. (*AT* 2)

Art’s ability to carve out a separate sphere for itself depends upon aesthetic rationality’s secularization of specific artistic practices. As we have seen, art achieves this autonomy by constructing the unity of its form, reflecting the ideological conception of a unified, reconciled world Adorno critiques, even as, on closer examination, each new work, convincing in its construction, highlights an example of a previously unaddressed insufficiency in artistic practice. This autonomy can give art a consolatory quality as a respite after a hard day’s work, thereby reinforcing the very social structures it tries to break from: “The society at which it shudders is left in the distance, undisturbed” (*AT* 226). Art is free to explore the insufficiencies it discovers in existing practices, even as this freedom disconnects it from efficacy in the social world.

However, because of this double-edged autonomy’s grounding in art’s sociality, artworks *qua* artefacts can never fully break from the societies they protest. Art’s autonomy is incomplete and precarious:

Art is autonomous and it is not; without what is heterogeneous to it, its autonomy eludes it... The history of art as that of its progressive autonomy never succeeded in extirpating this [empirical, extra-aesthetic] element, and not just because the bonds were too strong. (*AT* 6-7)

Artworks necessarily remain dependent on what they are not, that is, their empirically derived materials and the position in history out of which they emerge. Even abstract art can not completely sever the link, for as we shall see in the next chapter abstraction itself carries a social content. Nonetheless, autonomy as a historical phenomenon grows more central to art the more

art moves away from previous cultic uses. This autonomy did not exist in previous epochs: as Adorno observes, Homer's epics were tied up with history, geography, and pedagogy (*AT* 6). Autonomy is specific to the unfolding of aesthetic rationality in bourgeois society, not only through its participation in bourgeois rationality through formal construction, but also in the shift at the end of feudalism from private noble patronage to state and academic funding (*DE* 105). This "stiffened the backbone of art...against the verdict of supply and demand," giving aesthetic rationality breathing room to continue its experimental efforts.

While this state-backed independence was certainly not complete, it insulated aesthetic rationality from the market and gave it time to expand its own capacities and fortify its practices well beyond the conceptual horizons of the state. This gave art a persistence into the bourgeois epoch, since, though even the highest artworks become commodified, an institutional infrastructure of museums, galleries, and educational institutions subsidized the costs, if not directly of production of works, then of their maintenance and display:

Art was only ever able to exist as a separate sphere in its bourgeois form. Even its freedom, as negation of the social utility which is establishing itself through the market, is essentially conditioned by the commodity economy. Pure works of art, which negated the commodity character of society by simply following their own inherent laws, were at the same time always commodities. (*DE* 127)

The autonomy of art participates in bourgeois reason not only in that aesthetic rationality aspires to Enlightenment self-corrective, developmental maturity but also in that works of art themselves are commodities, despite their attempt to protest commodification: "art becomes commodity almost without remainder" (Goehr 87). Indeed, this commodification contributes to the maintenance of their autonomy, for, paradoxically, the state and private institutions have a direct financial interest in supporting the autonomy of art. Artworks *qua* commodities, as is well known, are highly valuable and appreciate with time, thus rewarding the institutions that support their production, even if those same institutions come under art's critical eye:

"Nonrepresentational art is suitable for decorating the walls of the newly prosperous" (*AT* 229). Since autonomous artworks are commodities, it follows, according to Marx's dialectic of use-value and exchange-value, that the use-value of artworks takes a back seat. This is why Adorno sees Kantian disinterestedness as a key step on the road to autonomy, despite critiquing it as a form of "castrated hedonism" (*AT* 11-3). This supplanting of use-value for exchange-value

contributes to the subjective freedom artists experience, for they are no longer compelled to specific contents (*AT* 43-4).

Art remains social in virtue rather than in spite of its autonomy because autonomy from market demands is made possible by the advancement of productive forces and the social relations surrounding them, while the impetus for this autonomy is its desire for the subjective freedom that attends developed rational maturity. The nature of this relationship has implications for how artworks can envision society. Art protests bourgeois society, but does so by constructing autonomy through form. This means art critiques society, not on the level of content, but of form; therefore, works “that make socially univocal discursive judgments thereby negate art as well as themselves. Immanent critique can possibly break through this rigid alternative.” (*AT* 248). Adorno rejects the usual response to the problem of Sunday consolation inherent to autonomy, that of the socially engaged work with pretensions to worldly efficacy, the socialist realism of his day. The phrase “socially univocal discursive judgments” is key: what Adorno takes issue with are artworks that critique society at a surface level way that can be boiled down to simple propositions about their content or purported message:

Artworks that want to divest themselves of fetishism by real and extremely dubious political commitment regularly enmesh themselves in false consciousness as the result of inevitable and vainly praised simplification. (*AT* 228)

Such works negate art’s most basic operation in that they neglect the way in which the construction of autonomous form grounds art’s ability to critique society: art that relies too heavily on parable versions of empirical reality do not successfully create an autonomous sphere, instead ending up something like footnotes to the social facts they try to oppose. Through form, by contrast, artworks capture something of their historical moment, sometimes without the artist’s awareness, simply in virtue of the determinate negation artworks perform against their historical situation. We can see at play here the two aspects of aesthetic rationality: art opposes society’s irrationality by constructing the autonomy of its own form. Art’s autonomy is at once constructive and critical in that it can only construct itself by criticizing its social context. This dual character of aesthetic rationality and the autonomy it creates manifests on the art historical level as well as within individual works:

The truth content of works is fused with their critical content. That is why works are also critics of one another. This, not the historical continuity of their dependencies, binds artworks to one



another; 'each artwork is the mortal enemy of the other'; the unity of the history of art is the dialectical figure of determinate negation. (*AT* 35)

The critical nature of aesthetic rationality constitutes the unity of art history as a non-linear web of interactions between artworks stepping out of their specific moments even as they bear the stamps of their moments. Artworks oppose not only society but each other, taking inspiration from each other even as they build their new horizons out of each other's inadequacies, in a manner that transpires on the level of the artwork's formal construction and historical situation, rather than on the biographical details of so-and-so's having read a formative predecessor (what we might call the banality of influence). Art's autonomy thus is not only contingent on the internal formal construction of works, but on the larger emergent structure of the negative dialectical interplay between authentic artworks emerging from their respective moments and positions in history.

Though artworks as socially grounded phenomena derive their materials from their own moment in history, the self-constructive nature of aesthetic rationality and the formal autonomy of artworks allows artworks to step outside of their own time and reach out ahead to moments of rupture in future artistic developments (*AT* 41). This means that sometimes works that were not resonant in their own moment find purchase among future generations, as in the cases of El Greco and Mahler, among others. The works of El Greco, many of whose paintings are divided into separate but interconnected spheres of divine and earthly action, capture the explosive social contradictions of the transition from pious feudalism to Enlightened capitalism in a manner that renders his paintings resonant to those modernists living through the collapse of colonial empires, economic depression, global war, and the impossibility of classical aesthetic categories in a world whose material basis has so dramatically shifted. Similarly, Mahler's refusal of the conventions of Romanticism, even if they led his work to be rejected in his own time, made his work prescient in of an age when Romantic categories were no longer tenable.

This account of autonomy in art history clarifies certain things: one, that the relationship between works and those that come before is grounded *not* in the continuity of tradition but in the constitutive rupture of a given artwork from its social environment as well as the aesthetic practices than came before; and two, that art's autonomy from society and history is historically contingent phenomenon dependent on the social relations art opposes. Even in their rupture from their own historical moment, works still carry the stamp of that moment. We see at play here the

two aspects of aesthetic rationality: art's constructive element depends on a negative moment, the critique of previous works. This is most obvious in satire, but even apparent in something like *Paradise Lost*, which plays itself out in the tension between classical culture and Christian theology. If art history's unity is dialectical, then the determinate negation that holds the structure together is the act of construction that emerges out of refutation. If artworks build on those that come before them, they can only do so by taking a critical stance towards their shortcomings. Now that we have accounted for aesthetic rationality, we can turn our attention to the historical process through which aesthetic categories are constituted.

## 2.5 From Natural Beauty to Art Beauty

There are a few steps on the road towards this dominance of the subject that must still be accounted for. The category of beauty, first theorised in the Platonic tradition and systematised in relation to art in Enlightenment aesthetics, marks an important milestone in the development of a specifically aesthetic rationality. It appears in two forms, natural beauty and art beauty, the former of which is historically prior even as the insufficiencies of each call upon the other: "Nature called on art for construction and form, as art called on nature for its spontaneity and immediacy, though each still recognized its difference from the other" (*AT* 97). Historically, beauty was considered from the perspective of individually beautiful bodies. Of ancient Greek aesthetics, scholar A.H. Armstrong writes,

The beauties of works of art, though sometimes highly esteemed, occupy generally a rather modest place in Hellenic sensibility. One does not meet many aesthetes in the ancient world, and ancient 'philosophies of art' have to be painstakingly constructed by moderns who have this sort of concern from, generally rather incidental, observations in contexts where the main interest of the philosophers do not lie in the appreciation of works of art. The kind of beauty with which philosophers are most concerned is of course not the beauty of nature or artefacts but moral and spiritual beauty, the beauty of souls, not of bodies. (Armstrong 51)

This corresponds with Adorno's argument that aesthetic rationality only constitutes itself as a separate sphere with Enlightenment modernity. Ancient philosophers theorized beauty not as a property of physical bodies but as an intellectual quality that must be abstracted *from* physical bodies by attention to form. This idea is most clearly articulated in Plato's *Symposium* and

*Republic* and in Plotinus. Adorno specifically takes aim at Platonic identifications of beauty with being:

Precisely Plato's ontology, more congenial to positivism than dialectic is, took offense at art's semblance character, as if the promise made by art awakened doubt in the positive omnipresence of being and idea, for which Plato hoped to find surety in the concept. If the Platonic ideas were existence-in-itself, art would not be needed; the ontologists of antiquity mistrusted art and sought pragmatic control over it because in their innermost being they knew that the hypostatized universal concept is not what beauty promises. (*AT* 83)

Plato mistrusts art not because its content is false but because art's project of separation from reality to conceive what does not exist and say more than it does challenges the idealist project of showing the necessary derivation of imperfect physical bodies from a unitary category. His suspicion of art derives from art's refusal and inability to elevate a pure category to the status of first principle, while for Adorno, beauty does not point towards the Good but rather an act of repression through which the category of beauty was constituted. In three key chapters of *Aesthetic Theory*, he describes how the category of beauty in art comes to be constituted against the ugly and distinguished from natural beauty. Throughout he maintains a careful distinction between natural beauty and art beauty, which is philosophically key to his critique of idealism and its claim of identity of conceptual reconstructions of reality with reality itself (Goehr 82).

It is important to note that Adorno distinguishes between natural beauty and nature proper. Art draws inspiration from natural beauty while nonetheless participating in Enlightenment's domination over nature: "Adorno...did not equate art with mimesis of nature *per se*, but with that of natural beauty, which required a human ability to respond affirmatively to form" (Jay 157). Though art beauty originates in natural beauty, Adorno observes that since Schelling the latter has taken the back seat. For Hegel, natural beauty hardly deserves attention because it was not intentionally formed by human activity; he famously declares that even a useless thought is superior to nature's most beautiful form because the latter lacks spirit and freedom (Hegel, *Aesthetics* Vol. 1 2). Adorno, by contrast, will argue that natural beauty "was repressed" as a step in the progression of aesthetic rationality (*AT* 61).

Natural beauty offends aesthetic rationality because it testifies to "the violence that artwork—a pure artifact—inflicts on nature" (*AT* 62). Artworks as socially produced artefacts are equally dependent on the exploitation of natural resources as any other, while their rational construction necessitates the forceful decontextualization and reordering of empirically derived

sensations. Yet, artworks also reach for the immediacy and memory of pre-subjectivity represented by nature; thus, the question of natural beauty is inescapable in aesthetics: “Hegel lacked the sensibility needed to recognize that genuine experience of art is not possible without the experience of that elusive dimension whose name—natural beauty—had faded” (*AT* 63). For Hegel, “Nature is the ‘other’ of art, but equally and inevitably the material source of all artistic fashioning, furnishing the ineliminable medium, the body that is to be enlivened and infused with spirit” in order to render nature less alien to subjectivity (Walker 89-90). For this reason, Hegel is uninterested in natural beauty except insofar as subjectivity perfects the forms of nature by ideationally imbuing them with formal conceptuality.

The reason idealist aesthetics suspects natural beauty is because of the contingency implicit in natural forms; while artworks undergo a process of rational construction that determines the place and role of empirically derived elements, in nature forms come into and pass out of being as imperfect types compared to the reified concepts we have in our heads. For Adorno, natural beauty is characterized by indeterminacy from the perspective of conventional aesthetic categories such as proportion (beauty) or magnitude (sublime): “According to the canon of universal concepts it is undefinable precisely because its own concept has its substances in what withdraws from universal conceptuality” (*AT* 70). Its beauty seems *sui generis* and unclassifiable through the usual categories. It is somehow simultaneously independent of our conceptualizations while still requiring us to notice it. This is why idealist aesthetics does not want to confront its implications, for to do so would be to contradict the thesis of universal conceptual determination. This indeterminateness necessitates a specific way of seeing distinct from that of art beauty:

The ‘Oh how beautiful,’ which according to a verse of Friedrich Hebbel disturbs the ‘celebration of nature,’ is appropriate to the tense concentration vis-à-vis artworks, not nature. Its beauty is better known through unconscious apperception; in the continuity of such perception natural beauty unfolds, sometimes suddenly. The more intensively one observes nature, the less one is aware of its beauty, unless it was already involuntarily recognized. (*AT* 69)

Natural beauty is generally not experienced through analysis or categorization, but rather taken in passively and unexpectedly, such that it subject surprises subjectivity by reminding it that it does not have absolute empire over reality, reminding it of a time before subjective rational domination: “Natural beauty is the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity” (*AT* 73). Idealism abhors natural beauty because natural reminds the subject of the non-

identity of its conceptual reconstructions of the world with reality itself. Natural beauty expresses itself as a memory of life before the ego in a context where mastery over nature creates the illusion of universal reconciliation through subjective dominance. It is this non-identical quality of natural beauty that will be passed on to art beauty.

It is important to note that the indeterminateness of natural beauty does not originate from some mystical quality but simply from its uncategorizability owing to its lack of participation in aesthetic rationality:

What is beautiful in nature is what appears to be more than what is literally there. Without [subjective] receptivity there would be no such objective expression [of natural beauty], but it is not reducible to the subject; natural beauty points to the primacy of the object in subjective experience. (*AT 70-1*)

Natural beauty unfolds in the relationship between subject and object, necessitating both poles. As we have seen the constitution of aesthetic rationality corresponds to the rise of aesthetic subjectivity's dominance over the materials it reorganizes into artworks; in natural beauty it is the object that holds the cards, impressing itself upon a receptive subject, without whose receptivity natural beauty would have nowhere to shine forth. Thus, natural beauty does not inhere in nature but arises in the relationship between nature and the receptive subject; it is for this reason that, as in the passage considered before, those human artefacts which get taken back into nature, such as a ruined chapel overgrown with vines or a sidewalk through whose cracks a flower grows, participate in natural beauty as well.

Because natural beauty unfolds in the relationship between subject and object, the historically constituted nature of that relationship affects how natural beauty is experienced in different periods: "For in every particular aesthetic experience of nature the social whole is lodged." (*AT 68*) The structure of a given society not only provides conceptual lenses through which to view the world but defines the very concept of nature and its relationship to society itself; if nature is the dialectical contrary of society, then the specific form a society takes will affect nature in specific ways which will determine the sorts of subjective relationships available between the individual and nature: "In natural beauty, natural and historical elements interact in a musical and kaleidoscopically changing fashion" (*AT 71*). Indeed, historically nature can only be seen as beautiful when it does not bodily threaten the subject: "Wherever nature was not actually mastered, the image of its untamed condition terrified. This explains the strange predilection of earlier centuries for symmetrical arrangements of nature" (*AT 65*).

As nature comes to be progressively mastered through scientific rationality, nature in what is imagined to be its “purest” state becomes increasingly aestheticized. Earlier periods more menaced by nature looked to find order in its forms, as exemplified in the Platonic method of abstraction, while those directly engaged in the exploitation of the land are not receptive to its beauty. This receptivity depends on the social embeddedness of the subject; only the autonomous subject whose reliance on the exploitation of nature is mediated rather than direct has the security and distance from nature necessary to find it beautiful. However, as Enlightenment advanced and feudalism gave way to capitalism, natural beauty came to surrender the indeterminacy that characterizes its beauty to art:

With the expansion of technique and, even more important, the total expansion of the exchange principle, natural beauty increasingly fulfils a contrasting function and is thus integrated into the reified world it opposes. Coined in opposition to absolutism’s wigs and formal gardens, the concept of natural beauty forfeited its power, because bourgeois emancipation under the sign of the alleged natural rights of human beings made the world of experience not less but more reified than it was in the eighteenth century. (*AT* 68)

Natural beauty’s embrace of the arbitrariness and indeterminateness of natural forms in opposition to the orderliness of eighteenth-century centralized absolutism could not hold up in the face of the inability of bourgeois society’s promise of abstract formal equality to answer the concrete needs of those facing poverty and oppression. The false reconciliation of bourgeois society neutralized natural beauty as something fully incorporable into its own logic. Awareness of this failure is what makes the Romantic hope for unmediated nature attractive, if impossible: “Rationalization is not yet rational; the universality of mediation has yet to be transformed into living life; and this endows the trace of immediacy, however dubious and antiquated, with an element of corrective justice” (*AT* 64). Bourgeois society’s inability to fulfil its own promise opens up a space for art’s arrogation of natural beauty’s promise.

It is this neutralization that allows art beauty to natural beauty’s ability to testify on behalf of the repressed nonidentical. In the process of constituting its own autonomous sphere, art tries to take up the mantel of natural beauty by systematizing the “aesthetic attitude,” learned from the experience of natural beauty, into a set of techniques, practices, and concepts that manipulate both physical, objective materials (pens, papers, paints, etc.) and experiential, subjective materials (concepts, emotions, memories, etc.) in a parallel process to physical labour (*AT* 77). The domination aesthetic rationality exercises over its materials through the unity of

form is precisely what allows artworks themselves to evade domination by the productive imperative and its attendant conceptual frameworks. This independence from the productive imperative allows artworks to take up the mantle of the subjective freedom from rational domination that natural beauty had promised but failed to provide: “Without historical remembrance there would be no beauty” (*AT* 65).

Yet, because of art’s necessary implication with rationality, art too participates in the repression of nature, for “the resistance to empirical reality that the subject martial in the autonomous work is at the same time resistance to the immediate appearance of nature” (*AT* 66). Nature, particularly as human-altered historically situated second nature, is still part of the empirical world art rejects to constitute its own autonomy. The failure of the Romantic identification with nature forces aesthetic subjectivity to turn its attention to the society that mediates its relationship with nature. Nature’s inability to provide an autonomous sphere, due to its inability to rework its own forms rationally or go beyond what merely is, spurs the artwork’s construction of one, initially through aestheticized reflection on the experience of natural beauty, through which art trains itself to take up the promise nature could not fulfil. However, as a no less rational process than conventional production, art must wrench this promise away from natural beauty: “Nature is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is. To wrest this more from that more’s contingency, to gain control of its semblance, to determine it as semblance as well as to negate it as unreal: This is the idea of art” (*AT* 78). Art strives to pin down and master the indeterminate “more,” the uncategorizable aspect of natural beauty that emerges from its unity. Art aspires to determine within its own sphere what is indeterminate in natural beauty and develop systematic methods of recreating the “more” that makes natural beauty speak to subjectivity. Aesthetic rationality hopes to absorb natural beauty into its own project: “Art is not nature, a belief that idealism hoped to inculcate, but art does want to keep nature’s promise. It is capable of this only by breaking that promise; by taking it back into itself” (*AT* 65). It is this “more” that gives art its utopic capacity: the indeterminacy of beauty learned from nature allows artworks to say more than they seem to at surface level.

Art tries to recreate the dialectical relationship between subject and nature by creating objects that demand immersive attention through techniques that draw the subject in. Aesthetic rationality tries to wield the “more” of natural beauty to command the attention of subjects by inviting them to dissolve themselves momentarily in the work:

Involuntarily and unconsciously, the observer enters into a contract with the work, agreeing to submit to it on condition that it speak. In the pledged receptivity of the observer, pure self-abandonment—that moment of free exhalation in nature—survives. Natural beauty shares the weakness of every promise with that promise's inextinguishability. (*AT* 73)

Through this operation art offers the memory of pre-subjectivity that a nature which bears the stamp of subjectivity cannot offer (Goehr 100). Yet, what distinguishes art's momentary rupturing of the subject from reactionary primitivism is the uniquely rational form of irrationality that art practices: art refines its ability to disturb the rational subject precisely because it has rationally perfected its methods of irrationality. The rational nature of this recreation means that the beauty of artworks is more tightly determined than that of nature (*AT* 82). Artworks, though they reject the determinate "univocity" of propositional judgments, nonetheless bear the determinacy of their immanent forms in tension with the empirical elements they take up. Though they have internal unity, they are nonetheless parceled out as objects, and must cultivate their immersive quality through technique and construction.

Despite this distinction, Adorno adds that "in terms of its own form, art has converged with natural beauty," precisely inasmuch that "artworks say that something exists in itself, without predicating anything about it" (*AT* 77). Nature "does not make judgments" but instead offers something "not-yet-existing," the possibility of a non-dominating relationship with nature (*AT* 73). Similarly, artworks, in that they say more than they seem to, anticipate "a being-in-itself that does not yet exist," the promise of a better world in which the rational exploitation of nature gives way to the satisfaction of human need (*AT* 77). This is why Adorno specifies that the isomorphism between natural beauty and art beauty occurs on the level of form rather than content: a landscape painting does violence to nature by separating it into classifiable, ossified elements, while a work of art whose content in no way tries to imitate nature ends up closer to natural beauty in virtue of the unity of its composition:

The more strictly artworks abstain from rank natural growth and the replication of nature, the more the successful ones approach nature. Aesthetic objectivity, the reflection of the being-in-itself of nature, realizes the subjective teleological element of unity; exclusively thereby do artworks become comparable to nature. In contrast, all particular similarity of art to nature is accidental, inert, and for the most part foreign to art. The feeling of an artwork's necessity is synonymous with this objectivity. (*AT* 77)

Artworks do not inherit natural beauty's qualities by imitating the forms of nature, for to copy nature would be to analyse and categorize nature in a manner that contradicts the unconscious



apperception which allows our subjective faculties to relate to nature as a unitary object. Art follows nature by cohering itself as unity through form, not through content that masters nature by reproducing its elements in paint or verse.

We have seen how art learns a sensitivity to beauty from nature in attempt to learn how to reproduce it. However, in the era of modern art beauty as an aesthetic category comes into question; as we shall see in the next chapter, modernism offers dissonance as an alternative. But before we can account for this, we must lay some conceptual groundwork by clarifying Adorno's interest in the aesthetics of ugliness.

## 2.6 Exclusion of the Ugly

We have seen that for Adorno beauty is not a natural kind or first principle for aesthetics but rather a historically constituted category that finds its origins in the dialectical relationship between subjectivity and nature. However, he argues that the category of beauty itself was constituted against something prior which it itself repressed, the ugly: "If one originated in the other, it is beauty that originated in the ugly, and not the reverse" (*AT* 50). Despite this repression, the ugly manages to break through in the bridge between late Romanticism and early modernism in protest of the organic unity of the artwork: "[Modernism's] admission of the 'ugly,' the dissonant, into art...was a sign of art's increasing ability to call itself into question" (Jay 158). In this process of constitution and exclusion both constructive and destructive aspects of aesthetic rationality play a role.

The ugly originates in fear Adorno describes as primordial; by contrast, the category of beauty itself is founded on a renunciation of fear of nature, necessitating a rejection of the ugly (*AT* 47). As we have seen, the appreciation of natural beauty necessitates a certain mediated distance from direct sustenance from nature; thus, the category of beauty, in virtue of its inheritances from nature, historically requires extractive mastery over nature. If the indeterminate unity of nature is preserved in art beauty, then the fear that this unity once provoked is preserved in the aesthetic category of ugliness:

What appears ugly is, in the first place what is historically older, what art rejected on its path toward autonomy, and what is therefore mediated in itself. The concept of the ugly may well have originated in the separation of art from its archaic phase: It marks the permanent return of the archaic, intertwined with the dialectic of enlightenment in which art participates. (*AT* 47)

Ugliness speaks on behalf of the fear of nature that mediation has suppressed, yet it itself is no less bound up in the historical process of Enlightenment than beauty is. To suggest that it is a “permanent return of the archaic” indicates its necessary implication in the category of beauty, equally substantive to it rather than dependent on or degenerate of as Platonism would argue; indeed, for Adorno, ugliness inheres in Enlightenment rationality: “Ugliness would vanish if the relation of man to nature renounced its repressive character, which perpetuates—rather than being perpetuated by—the repression of man.” (AT 47) Ugliness is a necessary complement to extractive domination of nature and the aesthetic rationality that simultaneously participates in and opposes this domination.

Prior to the category of beauty, ugliness had to be expiated through mask rituals that externalized fear, but the demands of subjective maturity result in fear’s exclusion as the taboo of the ugly (AT 47). As mastery over nature progresses, fear of nature becomes ever more intolerable. The locus of this fear therefore is no longer the indeterminate unity of nature but the dissonance of whatever is imperfectly or incompletely determined in the unity of universal mediation of social relations; in other words, the non-identical *qua* all that is excluded or leftover in a rationally administered world:

The prohibition of the ugly has become an interdiction of whatever is not formed *hic et nunc*, of the incompletely formed, the raw. Dissonance is the technical term for the reception through art of what aesthetics as well as naïveté calls ugly. (AT 46)

The ugly for classical aesthetics is that which is most distant from the internal consistency of form and concept. As the effort to reduce the multiplicity of being to the conceptual unity of categorization progresses, anything that does not fit neatly into the example set by formal categories comes to be seen as deficient or degenerate. Aesthetic rationality no less than bourgeois rationality maintains its own internal stability by excluding what does not fit into its categories. Its attempt to capture the indeterminate unity of nature results in the necessity of excluding the suffering once associated with nature through the taboo on ugliness (AT 49). As Enlightenment progresses it must justify itself as the systematic practice of beauty and rigorously exclude what does not fit its self-conception:

Accordingly, the pure concept of art could not define the fixed circumference of a sphere that has been secured once and for all; rather, its closure is achieved only in an intermittent and fragile balance that is more than just comparable to the psychological balance between ego and id. The act of repulsion must be constantly renewed. (AT 6)

Aesthetic rationality does not simply exclude the ugly but must renew and reconstitute its relationship to the ugly in lockstep with historical transformations in the social sphere from which art tries to insulate itself; in other words, if natural beauty and art beauty can be distinguished as historical stages, then so can different uglinesses. Without the constitutive motion of repression aesthetic subjectivity cannot maintain itself; artists must at some point choose what to include and exclude in their works. Even maximalist of works, such as Proust's *Recherche* or Pynchon's historical mock-epics, must at some point draw a circumference around themselves, even if they push against those boundaries through condensation and reference. Yet, despite the necessity of repression, it never quite succeeds in rooting out its enemy:

The reduction that beauty imposes on the terrifying, over and out of which beauty raises itself and which it banishes from itself as from a sacred temple, has—in the face of the terrifying—something powerless about it. For the terrifying digs in on the perimeter like the enemy in front of the walls of the beleaguered city and starves it out. (AT 51)

Since beauty can only keep the ugly at bay for so long, it must reconstitute its means of repressing in relationship to historical shifts in the larger social context by reducing or taming what is ugly through the application of aesthetic practices and principles. We have already seen how in natural beauty once terrifying landscapes can become objects of poetry. This shift in the Romantic period comes in response to the association of the calloused hands of labour and the polluted landscapes of industry with ugliness. This speaks to the specifically nineteenth century nature of Romanticism: as Adorno observes, in the period of art history corresponding to the social struggle against absolutist feudalism, the rough, unformed peasantry becomes admitted into the cannon of the beautiful in an anti-monarchical cross-class coalition. In this historical moment, the repression of ugliness is accomplished through its aestheticized neutralization in opposition to the opulence of Versailles:

The motive for the admission of the ugly was antifeudal: The peasants became fit subjects for art....The repressed who sides with the revolution is, according to the standards of the beautiful life in an ugly society, uncouth and distorted by resentment, and he bears all the stigmas of degradation under the burden of unfree—moreover, manual—labor. (AT 48)

The ugly comes to be conceptually associated with those excluded or repressed in any given society as a sort of physical manifestation of interior resentment. Therefore, moments when ugliness breaks through repression and becomes the object of art correspond to points in history at which previous assumptions have come into question. The peasant becomes a legitimate object

of Enlightened art in opposition to the palatial culture of the eighteenth century, before giving way to a reconfiguration in which the ugly becomes everything that bears the stamp of industry. The earlier configuration neutralizes the ugly by aestheticizing it, but in modern art, beginning with Baudelaire and reaching a height in the early twentieth century, Adorno sees a more radical interest in ugliness *qua* dissonance that testifies to the social crises that form its backdrop:

Archaic art and then traditional art, especially since the fauns and silenoi of Hellenism, abound in the portrayal of subjects that were considered ugly. In modern art the weight of this element increased to such a degree that a new quality emerged. According to traditional aesthetics, the ugly is that element that opposes the work's ruling law of form; it is integrated by that formal law and thereby confirms it, along with the power of subjective freedom in the artwork vis-à-vis the subject matter...Harmony that, as a mere result, denies the tensions that have entered into it, becomes something disturbing, false, and effectively dissonant. The harmonistic view of the ugly was voided in modern art, and something qualitatively new emerged. (AT 46)

There is something historically specific about modern art's interest in the ugly that far exceeds historical attempts to neutralize the ugly by aestheticizing it. For traditional aesthetics, the ugly could be transformed into the beautiful through the subjective rational dominance exercised by aesthetic form. However, the resulting harmony that tries to neutralize the tensions that compose it becomes untenable precisely because it is so recognizably dissonant and inharmonious in its process of composition. The acts of repression that go into a Romantic poem about nature reveal the historical dissonance of such a poem in the context of a society where nature is dominated through extractive labour, necessitating an entirely new approach to the ugly. Adorno continues,

The anatomical horror in Rimbaud and Benn, the physically revolting and repellent in Beckett, the scatological traits in many contemporary dramas, have nothing in common with the rustic uncouthness of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. Anal pleasure, and the pride of art at facilely being able to integrate it, abdicate: powerlessly the law of form capitulates to ugliness. (AT 46)

Modern art's interest in what Julia Kristeva calls the "abject," the destabilizing dissonance of the physically or anatomically revolting in art, introduces something new in art history in that it unveils the false nature of the reconciliation promised by the aestheticization of the ugly. The bourgeois inclusion of the peasant in art proved to be an aestheticization of the peasant's removal from the land and compulsion to wage labour as described in Marx's chapter on primitive accumulation. The revolt against feudalism unleashed the potential of enlightened dominance over nature through labour, thus requiring that art all the more poignantly fill its role of protest

against that domination. Modern art therefore heightens the dissonant aspect art can no longer repress:

If in modern artworks cruelty raises its head undisguised, it confirms the truth that in the face of the overwhelming force of reality art can no longer rely on its a priori ability to transform the dreadful into form. (*AT 50*)

Modern art's interest in the ugly serves as a critical refutation of the inability of previous manifestations of aesthetic rationality to offer a harmony that wasn't grounded on the same repression and exclusion that bourgeois rationality practices. The cruelty of modern art is an admission to the failure of art's project of aesthetic harmony, but this cruelty is made possible by the new horizons that the failure of the old has categories opened up for art: "What appears in art is no longer the ideal, no longer harmony; the locus of its power of resolution is now exclusively in the contradictory and dissonant." (*AT 84*)

For Adorno there is something more honest in this embrace of art's cruelty, for it acknowledges the destructive aspect of aesthetic rationality (*AT 50*). Modern art's cruelty simply tells the truth about the rational cruelty that art necessarily participates in. As we have seen, the more tightly constructed a given work's form is, the more aggressive a process of rational construction must be carried out: "The affinity of all beauty with death has its nexus in the idea of pure form that art imposes on the diversity of the living and that is extinguished in it" (*AT 52*). The advance that modern art represents over the ideal of beauty is that modern art does lie about its own ability to create harmony and reconciliation without remainder. In other words, modern art at its best is consciously critical of ideology in that it expresses the inharmonious truth that underlies the harmony of autonomous artworks, even if it maintains the capacity of autonomy to take a critical stance towards its historical situation as well as existing concepts of art. This leads Adorno to make a normative claim, which we shall explore further in the next chapter:

Art must take up the cause of what is proscribed as ugly, though no longer in order to integrate or mitigate it or to reconcile it with its own existence through humour that is more offensive than anything repulsive. Rather, in the ugly, art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image, even if in this too the possibility persists that sympathy with the degraded will reverse into concurrence with degradation. In the penchant of modern art for the nauseating and physically revolting—in objecting to which the apologists of the status quo can think of nothing more substantive than that the word ugly is enough as it is and art therefore should be responsible for idle beauty—the critical material motif shows through: In its

autonomous form art decries domination, even that which has been sublimated as a spiritual principle and stands witness for what domination represses and disavows. (AT 49)

Modern art's embrace of the ugly is a rejection of the Sunday consolation bourgeois rationality wants art to perform, allowing it to speak on behalf of all that bourgeois rationality represses in its progressive mediation of social life through the commodity form. It is this embrace of the ugly that allows modern art to retain its ideational autonomy and critically envision a society that dress up the ugliness of its foundation in the extraction of resources via the exploitation of labour and the expropriation of peasants and colonized peoples. The ugly allows art to protest not only against bourgeois rationality but also against its own participation in that rationality, for in embracing dissonance art unveils what previous aesthetic theories have obscured: that aesthetic rationality progresses in lockstep with conventional rationality and possesses two aspects, the constructive and destructive, which are co-constitutive of aesthetic categories and the autonomy of art within bourgeois society. Having shown how Adorno's distinction between the two rationalities relates to his understanding of art history, we can now turn our attention to the normative claims that follow from this account of the historical constitution of aesthetic categories.

### **Part Three : “*Il faut être absolument moderne*” : Aesthetic Normativity between the New and the Culture Industry**

In the last chapter, we saw that there is a rationality proper to art that is historically constituted through a process by which diverse arts came to fall under a unifying category. The unity of this category parallels the internal unity that artworks construct from the diverse empirical materials they take up through the mediation of form. It is this internal unity—within artworks as well as within art itself—that imbues art with the autonomy needed to envision society critically, even as artworks remain ineffective as regards to changing the world concretely.

What normative claims about artworks follow from this conception of aesthetic rationality? Early in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes,

In artworks, the criterion of success is twofold: whether they succeed in integrating thematic strata and details into their immanent law of form and in this integration at the same time maintain what resists it and the fissures that occur in the process of integration. (*AT*7)

This criterion is twofold: artworks must integrate detail through form even as it must maintain some internal dissonance that pushes back against the tight construction of form. Indeed, for Adorno, “An art that self-consciously debunked its illusory claim to wholeness and self-sufficiency was more capable of negating reality than one that kept up the pretence” (Jay 54). Here we see at play both aspects of aesthetic rationality: form must be constructed even as the work pushes back against it, hence Adorno’s dislike of minimalism, monochromatism, or any work lacking in internal tension. This gives us a preliminary sense of Adorno’s criteria for successful artworks, but in order to probe this question more deeply we must explore Adorno’s defense of modernism and critique of the culture industry.

By examining the former we can get a sense of what kinds of works Adorno finds convincing, while by looking at the latter we can understand what Adorno fears art will become at the hands of the rationality it protests. As we have seen, art that becomes subject to bourgeois rationality serves as Sunday consolation: the concept of the culture industry theorizes what happens to art at the other end of this process. On the other hand, Adorno sees in modernism’s

embrace of dissonance, for example, an aesthetic that can keep alive art's protest against the rationality from which it secedes. In this chapter I will clarify Adorno's normative claims about what art can achieve by exploring the tensions between the two principal paths art can take in the twentieth century. By exploring the dialectic between the new and the culture industry, we can tease out the nuances of art's immanent critique of bourgeois rationality as a historically specific form of rationality that has struggled to carve out its own autonomous social sphere.

### 3.1 The Category of the New

Modern art represents the culmination of the dialectic of construction and critique in aesthetic rationality as it defends its autonomy from an overarching bourgeois rationality, against which it protests: "Through the new, critique—the refusal—becomes an objective element of art itself" (*AT* 22). The new represents the completion of the process described in chapter two of this dissertation by which aesthetic rationality constitutes itself as a separate sphere from bourgeois rationality. This autonomy is sealed through the gesture of critique; the critique that art lobbs at bourgeois society is only made possible by the internal violence artworks commit in the process of their own construction out of the elements they combine.

As we have seen, for Adorno, "The purer the form and the higher the autonomy of the works, the more cruel they are" (*AT* 50). Modernism takes this to its furthest extent, formally determining its empirically sourced elements so tightly as to resemble the metaphysical systems of idealist philosophy while embracing cruelty as its explicit gesture towards its own material as well as towards existing artworks through its interest in ugliness (*AT* 35). Artworks unable to reach such a level of internal determination fall back on reified notions of tradition. Because modernism represents such a refinement of aesthetic rationality, there is something historically specific about the new in relation to modernism as a refinement of aesthetic rationality in the social context of the maturation of capitalism into a global economic system:

The authority of the new is that of the historically inevitable....Its concept is privative; since its origins it is more the negation of what no longer holds than a positive slogan. It does not, however, negate previous artistic practices, as styles have done throughout the ages, but rather tradition itself; to this extent it simply ratifies the bourgeois principle in art. The abstractness of the new is bound up with the commodity character of art. (*AT*21)



It is not merely that the new breaks with previous techniques or practices, but with the existing concept of art itself, thus opening up new horizons of possibility for art while revealing the irrelevance of assumptions that underlay previous concepts of art. This critical stance is made possible by developments in aesthetic rationality corresponding to the rise of capitalism. Modern art's rejection of tradition is more than merely technical and practical. Instead, modern art's distinctiveness derives from the way in which its abstraction ideationally depicts the abstraction of exchange-value at the core of capitalist economy:

If in monopoly capitalism it is primarily exchange value, not use value, that is consumed, in the modern artwork it is its abstractness, that irritating indeterminateness of what is and to what purpose it is, that becomes a cipher of what the work is. (AT 21)

Modern art's abstraction reflects the manner in which bourgeois society renders qualitatively distinct commodities quantitatively exchangeable through the mediation of value. The predominance of abstraction in modern art relates to the way in which abstraction structures social relationships in capitalist society. This abstraction gives modern art a particularly compelling quality because it draws upon the indeterminacy that, as we have seen, is characteristic of natural beauty and gives art the ability to say more than it does at face value, but modern art achieves that indeterminacy by indicating something about the nature of its own sociohistorical context:

The substantive element of artistic modernism draws its power from the fact that the most advanced procedures of material production and organization are not limited to the sphere in which they originate. In a manner scarcely analysed yet by sociology, they radiate out into areas of life far removed from them, deep into the zones of subjective experience, which does not notice this and guards the sanctity of its reserves. (AT 34)

The abstraction proper to modern art reflects the way in which abstract value mediates social relations in capitalist society. Abstract modern art's aestheticization of abstraction allows it to highlight the ways in which the processes of production that predominates in a given society place constraints and incentives on the available thought structures of those reared in a given position within that society. In other words, modern art takes up abstraction to show the predominance of abstraction not only in the material constitution of capitalist societies but also in how we think about our lives and what sorts of social changes we can envision as possible. Modern art protests against reification by turning abstraction against itself, that is, in producing

internally dissonant case studies of abstraction that show how abstraction seeps into every facet of our lives while holding out the hope for a negatively indicated possibility beyond it.

Modern art's abstraction relates not merely to capitalism's abstraction but also to its necessarily ineffectual attempts to offer a "negative appearance of utopia" (AT 130). Modern art's alternative to capitalist abstraction is its own aesthetic abstraction, which negatively indicates a better future through its cruel, dissonant honesty about the present, even as it is unable to act concretely towards its realization. Modern art's vision for a better mode of life against the bourgeois society it critiques is necessarily obscure, distant, and oppositional to existing concepts of art. This gives modernist abstraction an unsettling, prophetic quality:

The modern is abstract by virtue of its relation to what is past; irreconcilable with magic, it is unable to bespeak what has yet to be, and yet must seek it, protesting against the ignominy of the ever-same: This is why Baudelaire's cryptograms equate the new with the unknown, with the hidden telos, as well as with what is monstrous by virtue of its incommensurability with the ever-same and thus with the *goût du néant*. (AT 22)

This passage indicates that modern art's indeterminacy relates to an inability to envision concretely and in robust specificity an alternate future even as it protests the present. The reason for this limitation is that modern art, as the heightening of aesthetic rationality, cannot reconcile itself with magic and divination; even when it takes up magical means, as in some Surrealist works, it reorients them towards aesthetic ends rather than subjugating aesthetic means to magical ends. Thus, modern art's vision for a positive future is a sort of abstract placeholder, a "hidden telos," or perhaps some "rough beast" that "slouches towards Bethlehem to be born" (Yeats, "The Second Coming"). Modern artworks cannot name the future, they can only gesture towards it through the cracks in their own dissonant, cruel construction.

The abstract placeholder of modern art's alternative vision resembles the uncertain emptiness of death and nothingness, thus rendering it unsettling to those habituated to art grounded in canonical beauty and ornament. This relates to modern art's interest in ugliness, for art can only envision a positive future by peering through the darkness of its own historical moment, which is to say of the self-negation of existing aesthetic ideals that the new requires of art: "The new is akin to death. What adopts a satanic bearing in Baudelaire is the negative self-reflection of identification with the real negativity of the social situation" (AT 21). In taking a critical stance towards its social situation, modern art cannot offer a fantasy of reconciliation or try to liquidate itself into natural beauty. It must be honest about the darkness of its situation by,

as we have seen, taking up the cause of what has been repressed and excluded from the aesthetic sphere:

Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent; this is why art no longer tolerates the innocuous. (*AT* 20)

Art must tell the truth about the darkness of its social situation in order to become “eloquent,” that is, for it to be compelling, genuinely new, and expressive of more than what art had already become. Art cannot be “innocuous,” for to lose its unsettling quality would render it ideological and subservient to the bourgeois rationality from which it struggled so hard to carve autonomy: “Scars of damage and disruption are the modern’s seal of authenticity; by their means, art desperately negates the closed confines of the ever-same; explosion is one of its invariants” (*AT* 23). Modern art’s embrace of the dark allows it to break from homogeneity and achieve a flash-in-the-pan quality that draws in its viewers and makes an impact on their conceptual universe. This flash-in-the-pan quality leads Adorno elsewhere to say that “the phenomenon of fireworks is prototypical for artworks” precisely because of the way in which successful artworks command the attention of those who encounter them (*AT* 81). For Adorno, the “radically darkened art” modernism produces to reflect the “darkening of the world” achieves this flash-in-the-pan quality by provoking a reaction he calls the shudder (*AT* 19).

The quality of the shudder is closely linked with art’s historical relationship with reason and magic, for modern art rationally perfects methods of replicating the fearful shudder that magical worldviews sought to control through mimetic ritual (*AT* 80). As we have seen, the new’s abstract indeterminateness draws upon the indeterminateness of nature that once inspired fear but then came to be seen as a source of beauty. Just as art beauty tried to develop sure-fire techniques for recreating the indeterminateness that made natural beauty shine forth, modern art at the height of autonomy takes up the indeterminacy that was a source of fear for so-called “primitives” to construct its own abstract indeterminacy.

However, what makes this interest in pre-modern fear progressive rather than reactionary is that, unlike magical practice, modern art does not practice this shudder-inducing abstraction in order to control through ritual the natural elements; instead, it perfects the shudder in order to put the established concept of art into question and explore previously obscured possibilities (*AT* 20). Modern art’s practice of the shudder thus allows it to use “irrational” (according to conventional classificatory rationality) means rationally to protest the irrationality of bourgeois reason.

This makes modern art a form of immanent critique: since modern art is the product of a process of advancing aesthetic rationality, it is inextricably tied up with Enlightenment. However, the autonomy its rationality gives it, as well as its apparent uselessness to society, allows it to take stances that conventional rationality perceives as irrational, even as art denounces the irrationality of conventional rationality. This is key to modern art's critical power, and the emotional responses it provokes in those who engage with its works. Thus, what is key is the way in which modern art opposes established aesthetic categories and practices by drawing upon memories of pre-subjectivity while wielding pre-modern fear of nature and alterity to describe the darkness of the present moment in a way that negatively indicates a utopic future in abstract.

In summary, for Adorno, modernism, due to its historical correspondence with the supplanting of use value by exchange value as the mediating structure of social interaction, elevates the abstract aspect of the new while reintegrating the ugliness that classical aesthetics tried to exclude: its abstraction reflects the mediating domination of abstract value in social life, while its ugliness reflects the violent ugliness of a society that flattens out quality in favour of quantity. Thus, the historical backdrop of modern art and the advancement of the techniques of aesthetic rationality it necessitates make modern art a uniquely productive moment in art history to see the category of the new in action: the global reach of the commodity form's mediation of social relationships corresponds with the perfection of rational construction art achieves in modernism. Modern art's rational autonomy, achieved through the heightening of the cultivation of aesthetic rationality previously discussed, gives it the chance to envision critically the social situation from which it emerges. Since we are here interested in what normative claims motivate Adorno's aesthetics, it will help us to take a moment to clarify the conceptual differences between the new and innovation.

### **3.2 The New and Innovation**

The question of innovation in Adorno's aesthetics is best pursued by focusing in on a few passages about experimentation. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno clarifies the nature of the new's newness: "The new is the longing for the new, not the new itself: That is what everything new suffers from" (AT 32). As we have seen, the new *qua* aesthetic category is not mere innovation

but takes on historically specific implications under capitalist society. The new is the aspiration for transformation, not mere technical innovation, for were the new to reduce itself to innovation then it would be engaging in homogenizing repetition:

If a possibility for innovation is exhausted, if innovation is mechanically pursued in a direction that has already been tried, the direction of innovation must be changed and sought in another dimension. The abstractly new can stagnate and fall back into the ever-same. (AT 22)

The new is not reducible merely to whatever did not previously exist. Furthermore, though new art certainly practices innovation, it must do so *for* something, for innovation for its own sake stagnates into repetition of the process of experimentation. Thus, the new cannot show up merely on a technical level but must relate to the work's content as well, or else the new becomes reduced to the repetition of new techniques. This process is key to Adorno's normative claims about the success and failure of artworks: those that experiment consciously and for a purpose will succeed while those that experiment as a matter of rote mechanism become homogenous repetition. This tension in the concept of experimentation relates to the rational nature of art: aesthetic rationality protests conventional rationality through experimentation, but when experimentation becomes rote habit, it collapses back into conventional rationality.

As we saw in the beginning of chapter two, art and science are mutually implicated from the beginning. Nowhere is this clearer than in aesthetic rationality's use of experimentation:

The need to take risks is actualized in the idea of experimentation, which—in opposition to the image of the artist's unconscious organic labor—simultaneously transfers from science to art the conscious control over materials. (AT 37)

Experimentation originates in aesthetic rationality's interest in refining its own conscious mastery over the materials it forms into artworks. As aesthetic rationality comes to break further from established collective cultic practices, it begins to explore the new artistic techniques that are made available to it by developments in social relations of production. Aesthetic rationality uses experimentation to expand its reach and broach new forms and subject matters. However, as classical aesthetic categories come to be problematized and modern art appears on the scene, a shift occurs in the category:

The gesture of experimentation, the name for artistic comportments that are obligatorily new, has endured but now, in keeping with the transition of aesthetic interest from communicating subject to the coherence of the object, it means something qualitatively different: that the artistic subject employs methods whose objective results cannot be foreseen. (AT 24)

In modernism, experimentation with technique becomes increasingly independent from the subjective intent of artists; more and more, artists seek to use experimentation and technique as a way to remove the subjective and increase the element of chance. This has a positive side, in that, since for Adorno subjective intent of the artist is not the same as a work's objective meaning, technique allows the objective nature of artworks as spheres in themselves to predominate against subjective intent, which Adorno generally finds less important to the work: "It is hardly ever the case that what is decisive in a work is what the artist intended" (*AT* 60; Zuidervaart 155). However, this tendency in experimentation also has a negative side in the ease with which it becomes rote sameness; since it "takes shape as the testing of possibilities," experimentation "therefore tends to degrade the concrete work to a mere example: This is one of the reasons for the aging of new art" (*AT* 37) When experimental technique becomes the centrepiece of an aesthetic practice, the works produced no longer are self-contained constructed spheres but examples of a class of works produced according to a predictable and repeatable methodology, and therefore fail to break critically from the existing concept of art in the way that genuine newness requires. This is one of the hurdles modernism faces.

Adorno frames the problem in terms of means and ends: if experimentation becomes an end in itself rather than a means towards something, then it becomes a homogenizing force. This undercuts its critical potential and renders it amenable to established ideologies: "Currently official culture grants special funds to what it mistrustfully, half hoping for failure, calls artistic experimentation, thus neutralizing it" (*AT* 37). When modern art loses the critical stance towards bourgeois rationality its abstraction is historically constituted on, then it loses the aesthetic rational ends towards which it experimented. Hence, Adorno's concerns about the pitfalls of mere experimentation relate to his critique of the culture industry:

Now that American hotels are decorated with abstract paintings *à la manière de*...and aesthetic radicalism has shown itself to be socially affordable, radicalism itself must pay the price that it is no longer radical. Among the dangers faced by new art, the worst is the absence of danger. (*AT* 29)

When the new is reduced to mere innovation, without the critical spirit that animates successful works of modern art, then artistic technique becomes homogenized and aesthetic rationality's critical stance towards bourgeois society becomes neutralized, thus compromising art's capacity to rupture with the existing concept of art. However, not only does experimentation risk turning art into something mechanic, it also risks collapsing into ideology when it claims to have

discovered a pathway out of the problem of aesthetic rationality. John Cage sometimes claimed through his experiments in spontaneous sound to have found a way to reconcile music with nature, but as Lydia Goehr observes from Adorno's perspective, he instead ends up producing music whose sound mimics advanced technology and whose arbitrariness obscures the authoritarian violence inherent to aesthetic rationality's construction of form (Goehr 127-9). Indeed, rather than offering a solution to the crises of bourgeois society, the denial of the role of construction is simply an attempt to turn the clock back and avoid art's responsibility of challenging the existing concept of art (98). For Adorno, the destructive aspect of aesthetic rationality, the "danger" of modern art, is necessary to the success of artworks; to better understand what it means for an artwork to fail, we can now turn our attention to Adorno's concept of the culture industry.

### **3.3 Rationalized Art: The Culture Industry**

The culture industry thesis is among Adorno's more notorious intellectual constructions. Critiques of the notion of a culture industry, grounded in the charge of elitism, often overlook its explanatory power; but for our own purposes it offers insight into what artworks ought not to do according to his aesthetics. Adorno's critique does not attempt to frame an elitist contempt for the masses but rather a criticism of the manner in which the tastes and expectations of the masses are shaped by a centralized network capable of producing homogenous works on an industrial scale:

His hostility came less from the conservative mandarin conviction that the revolt of the masses had polluted the temples of culture than from his belief that the culture of the masses was a wholly synthetic concoction cynically imposed on them from above. Rather than cultural chaos or anarchy, the current situation was one of tight regimentation and control. (Jay 119)

The culture industry, for Adorno, represents the transformation of cultural products into commodities mass produced for the market and essentially homogenous in message; in other words, a process of leveling of qualitative difference in favour of quantitative exchangeability similar to that described in the first chapter of this dissertation. This process of rationalization which the culture industry imposes on art exists in dialogic tension with the historical process described in chapter two by which aesthetic rationality carves out an autonomous sphere which gives it a foundation for the radically critical stance that new art takes towards bourgeois society.

Thus, new art, the result of a coherent aesthetic rationality that becomes aware of the illusory nature of its own categories, can rightly be understood as a dialectical contrary to the culture industry, in that they oppose each other even as they both spring from the same historical tendencies.

The culture industry arises in response to art's persistence as an autonomous sphere. It cannot be understood simply as art's debased contrary but in historical relationship to its autonomy. Bourgeois rationality resents art's impracticality and tries to find a use-value modelled on sensual pleasure that it can commodify (*AT* 14). This results in the transformation of art into Sunday consolation: "Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labour processes so that they can cope with it again" (*DE* 109). Adorno's critique of the culture industry is tied with the Marxist tradition of ideology critique, for his claim is that the culture industry functions as ideology in that it creates structural obstacles to social change by constricting the conceptual horizons of its consumers such that the existing social arrangement appears natural and necessary. A passage in "Culture Industry Revisited" summarizes how the culture industry's substitute gratification of human desires imposes constraints on subjectivity:

The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, in which...enlightenment, that is the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves. ("Culture Industry Revisited" 106)

The pleasure that cultural commodities inspire functions as a palliative that prevents meaningful action in the world by offering a simulation of the gratification that would follow from action by using visual and narrative techniques to generate empathetic receptivity to the emotions displayed onscreen or in song. It is this quality that gives culture industry products the status of Sunday consolation. This substitute gratification through the replacement of individual action with passive consumption of vicarious experience proves an impediment to the ability of individuals to act in the world, for their conceptual horizons come to be limited by the constrained worlds of cultural commodities. To this end, Horkheimer and Adorno observe that the culture industry often offers parables of rebellion in which the rebellious character is nearly always defeated:

Tragedy is levelled down to the threat to destroy anyone who does not conform....Even the worst outcome, which once had better intentions, still confirms the established order and corrupts



tragedy, whether because the irregular lover pays for her brief happiness with death or because the sad end in the picture makes the indestructibility of actual life shine all the more brightly. Tragic cinema is becoming truly a house of moral correction. (DE 122)

Characters who do not conform to the exigencies of bourgeois propriety are either mocked for their eccentricity or, when their rebellion is serious, punished with death, as compelled by the Hays Code, the moralistic, censorious set of standards in place in early twentieth century Hollywood that governed the sorts of contents allowed in film and determined how transgressive characters should be punished. For example, any character who committed murder had to be punished with death before the end of the film (or immediately after by implication). This censorious code would only finally be overturned in the 1960s, in large part thanks to the film *Blowup*. Rebellion in culture industry products is nearly always individual and results in punishment in a ritualistic parable that reinforces the existing relations of production. This affirms the culture industry's role as ideology: it pressures the individual to conform by offering a didactic moral lesson on the consequences of failing to do so.

In addition to this, Horkheimer and Adorno express concern about the passivity with which cultural commodities are received (DE 96). The culture industry leaves no possibility of reply to its products, even as it carefully regulates who is allowed to enter cultural production, drawing sharp distinctions between professionals and amateurs. It carefully regulates and homogenizes its message, which it then diffuses through its widespread technical logistics networks in order to suffuse everyday life, thus making leisure time resemble work time by mediating it through commodities (DE 100). Horkheimer and Adorno see in this centralized, homogenizing, passively received network of distribution a powerful tool that could, under certain circumstances, fall into the hands of dangerous forces. They draw an explicit comparison to the propaganda techniques of the Nazis:

The National Socialists knew that broadcasting gave their cause stature as the printing press did to the Reformation. The *Führer's* metaphysical charisma, invented by the sociology of religion, turned out finally to be merely the omnipresence of his radio address, which demonically parodies that of the divine spirit. (DE 129)

What is most frightening in a highly integrated technical and social mechanism for the mass production and distribution of ideologically charged cultural commodities is the manner in which it can become the cornerstone of an advanced propaganda campaign. The networks of production and distribution that form the material basis of the culture industry are honed to deliver

instantaneously a homogenous and passively received message to large numbers of people. The Big Lie was not merely a rhetorical trick but a material network of production and distribution that carried that lie into every radio in the country. This capacity is what leads Horkheimer and Adorno to call the culture industry “mass deception.”

Beyond its function as ideology, the culture industry has aesthetic and cultural implications as well. Because of its corporate structure, the culture industry is not in contiguity with folk cultures of village life, for unlike the latter, the culture industry is centralized, imposed from on high, and consciously directed in response to consumer and broader economic trends (*DE* 98). The commodities of the culture industry are industrially produced and distributed and centrally planned by the corporate hierarchies of movie studios. Cultural commodities are homogenous in content and message and refer to other commodities which the consumer must acquire to signal status: “Music serves in America today as an advertisement for commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music” (*DE* 38). In Martin Jay’s words, “The distinction between art and advertising, he claimed, was obliterated, as cultural products were created for exchange rather than to satisfy any genuine need” (Jay 122). The commodities of the culture industry try to supplant both art and folk culture by denouncing the former’s impracticality and by liquidating the means by which knowledge and skills of the latter were passed on intergenerationally:

It forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total. (*DE* 99)

What is key in this passage is the manner in which the culture industry liquidates seriousness; since culture industry commodities are industrially manufactured, less and less do they require cultivated skill. Consequently, both high and low culture in their historic forms struggle to compete in an economic system which incentivises maximal efficiency of production. Culture industry firms accomplish this by developing sure-fire formulas with just enough variables to allow for repeated use, by integrating their supply and logistics networks, by signing contracts of exclusivity with actors, and by concentrating themselves into large monopolistic firms fully integrated with other sectors of the economy (*DE* 98). This efficient method of production creates the appearance of democratic responsiveness through its ability to mass produce additional works tailored to the sales numbers of previous ones, but this appearance of

responsiveness obscures the manner in which the centralization of the culture industry cultivates the tastes of its consumers by limiting what is available to them: “The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object” (DE 99).

To summarize, the culture industry participates in bourgeois rationality in that it expands the universal mediation of social relations by the commodity form into the aesthetic sphere. It additionally participates through the homogeneity of its commodities, which encourage a conceptual homogeneity among its consumers; and finally, it participates in bourgeois rationality through the role of its commodities in reifying bourgeois social relations. The constrained conceptual horizons it produces in its consumers serve as a structural obstacle to meaningful social change. However, not only does the culture industry block social change, it threatens art itself:

The autonomy of works of art, which of course rarely ever predominated in an entirely pure form, and was always permeated by a constellation of effects, is tendentially eliminated by the culture industry, with or without the conscious will of those in control. (DE 99)

The autonomy that art carved out for itself was always precarious but faces menace from the culture industry. The consolation the culture industry offers trains its consumers to expect immediate pleasure from art, which the dissonant, ugly modern artworks that speak on behalf of what has been excluded cannot offer. While Adorno is careful to note that autonomous art and the culture industry do not exist in simple binary opposition but are historically implicated in each other and that artists, particularly in theatre, have always been concerned with audience reception, Adorno nonetheless sees an antagonism between the two. He writes,

In fact, the present rigid division of art into autonomous and commercial aspects is itself largely a function of commercialization. It was hardly accidental that the slogan *l'art pour l'art* was coined polemically in the Paris of the first half of the nineteenth century, when literature really became large-scale business for the first time. Many of the cultural products bearing the anti-commercial trademark ‘art for art’s sake’ show traces of commercialism in their appeal to the sensational or in the conspicuous display of material wealth and sensuous stimuli at the expense of the meaningfulness of the work. This trend was pronounced in the Neo-Romantic theatre of the first decades of our century. (“How to Look at Television,” 159)

In this example we can see, first, how Adorno problematizes an overly simplistic schematization of the culture industry’s relation to art, and second, a way in which artworks fail in his aesthetics. While the fact of mass production is key to the culture industry as we know it in the twentieth century, the origins of its categories trace back as far as the late seventeenth century English

novel; it is thus present at an early stage in the constitution of aesthetic rationality, suggesting that the two phenomena have been in tension since the very beginning of capitalism as a social system (“Culture Industry Reconsidered” 100).

Meanwhile, works that try to respond consciously to commercialization often end up falling into a superficial gimmickry that reproduces the hedonistic basis of commercialized art. His example about Neo-Romanticism is instructive. The “art for art’s sake” movement tried so hard to distinguish itself from popular literature that it ended up falling back on tantalizing gimmicks that emphasized sensory intensity “at the expense of the meaningfulness of the work.” *L’art pour l’art* so jealously and clumsily tried to defend its autonomy that it ended up negating that autonomy by embracing pure shock-value, which differs from modern art’s shudder through abstraction in its sensuous maximalism. What we can see from this is that autonomy and commercialization exist in a mutually implicated relationship. Art’s autonomy is not a guarantee but is something historically specific and socially constituted, born from the same advancing rationality that gave birth to the culture industry.

However, this mutual implication necessarily contains an antagonism. Adorno fears that the culture industry incentivizes the “deestheticization of art” and the “narrow[ing]” of the work’s “distance from its viewer” (*AT* 16). The sense of alienness in art that its autonomy protects is precisely what the culture industry wants to eliminate. If art is to be reduced to sensory pleasure, then the ugly as an aesthetic category once again becomes prohibited, and the category of sensory pleasure comes to be separated from its immediacy by the necessity of repressing what is other to it. For Adorno, the call to make artworks relatable, in today’s parlance, is an anti-aesthetic impulse that risks eliminating art’s hard-won autonomy and gutting its capacity to challenge the existing concept of art.

Thus, the reason why the works produced by the culture industry do not pass muster for Adorno is the same reason why the category of beauty could not continue to hold up once capitalism had gained momentum: the culture industry offers consumers a false reconciliation that reduces art to the non-autonomous function of Sunday consolation. This is an ideological function, for culture industry works serve as parables of neutralization that warn consumers of the impossibility of an alternative. As we have seen, however, the Marxian tradition of ideology critique hopes to show that the composition of a given society is historically contingent and capable of transformation through consciously organized action, which artworks can help us

abstractly envision through their immanent-critical opposition to categories of mainline bourgeois reason. Just as a regressive aesthetics, instead of offering an immanent critique, ends up reinforcing bourgeois rationality by repeating prior forms as though the nineteenth century had never happened, the products of the culture industry, even its most high-minded works, conceptually reinforce the impossibility of meaningful social transformation by offering parables of individual rebellion rather than availing themselves of art's power to critically envision society through dissonance, simply in virtue of the exigencies imposed on cultural commodities by the social structure surrounding their production.

A nuancing of the culture industry thesis might serve as a defence of the critical power of those Hollywood films developed by German expressionist filmmakers living alongside Horkheimer and Adorno in exile, as argued by film scholar Aaron Nyerger in his Adornian defence of Billy Wilder's post-War films ("Wilder than Adorno," 606-7). However, Adorno dismisses the commercialism of such works as well, noting that expressionism had lost any revolutionary impetus it may have had once the Soviets had started persecuting modern art, leaving it nowhere to go but to Hollywood with hat in hand (*AT* 229). Despite its apparent cynicism about American capitalism, a film like *Double Indemnity* (premiering the same year *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published, and therefore not eligible for Nyerger's defense) depicts a purely interpersonal rebellion (for Walter Neff, against an overbearing claims-manager at the insurance bureau he works for, and for Phyllis, against her wealthy husband) that is necessarily neutralized and whose premises, follow-through, and goal (murder for insurance fraud) rest on the maintenance of existing economic, gender, and racial relations (Fotsch, "Film Noir and Automotive Isolation in Los Angeles," 108-11). Indeed, that Mr. Dietrichson must die in a train accident for Phyllis to be eligible for the double indemnity life insurance payout that gives the film its name illustrates the reactionary nature of their rebellion, for they are reliant on an older technology to carry their plan out even though both characters have their own automobiles. How, then, if we cast *film noir* aside, can cinema offer a radical message? In one essay, Adorno himself plays with this question:

'Even a radical film director who wished to portray crucially important social developments like the merger of two industrial concerns could only do so by showing us the dominant figures in the office, at the conference table or in their mansions.' Continuing his fancy of playing 'radical film director,' Adorno imagines the 'intercut' images of a 'montage technique' juxtaposing the industrial magnates with balance sheets of the companies, and finally with the director himself.

Supposing such a film would be a muddled bore to the audience, he goes no further, and maintains his supposition that film is useless for the kind of cultural critique he formulates in prose.

(Adorno, "Schema" 66; quoted in Nyerges 609)

This seems to suggest a skepticism of film that may disappoint those looking for a more nuanced account than that initially offered in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Indeed, Martin Jay observes that "In contrast to [Benjamin]...Adorno was wary of the representational fidelity of movies, with their powerful unity of sight and sound" (Jay 126). Space does not permit me to go in depth into further detail here, but for our own purposes what is key in his critique of the culture industry is the way in which it is passively received, is homogenizing, and constricts the political imaginations of viewers in order to make a historically contingent social arrangement appear natural and necessary. In other words, for Adorno, the culture industry is a social system that solidifies reification as a conceptual block to the possibility of positive social transformation. For Adorno, it is a corporate infrastructure whose only product is ideology.

It is certainly the case that Adorno's rhetorical style contributes to misperceptions of his arguments about the culture industry, but I am of the mind that the concept itself is undertheorized. A stronger critique of the concept than those usually offered might have something to do with his overlooking of labour struggle among workers within the industry, something hardly touched on by Adorno but taken up by other scholars such as Gerald Horne in his *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930-1950*. Though Adorno insists we not take the term "industry" too literally, perhaps we ought to take it more literally in order to give the concept legs and apply its insights to understanding the social functions of specific culture industries in specific places ("Culture Industry Reconsidered" 100). For example, it is obvious how a concept like the culture industry is useful to theorizing an alternative account grounded in political economy and historical materialism of what international relations scholars call soft power. There are other questions to be asked, but what is key in the concept for our immediate purposes is what Adorno's critique shows about art that has been subjected to the same rational mediation that its very existence protests. Art becomes ideology in the form of consolation in that it makes the present organization of society appear natural and necessary instead of historically contingent, thus conceptually disincentivizing attempts at social transformation. The technical innovations that both bourgeois rationality and aesthetic rationality refined become reified and commodified by a monopolistic corporate structure as a new means of generating profit while communicating an ideological message that creates conceptual blocks that function as structural

obstacles to social change. With this conceptual foundation laid we can now return to the question of Adorno's positive alternative for art.

### 3.4 Ascetic Art: The Example of Beckett

What is notable in Adorno's speculative example of a radical film is its austerity: his strikingly literalistic depiction of a corporate merger seems far removed from the experimental cinema of the years following the Russian Revolution, either of the variety of Eisenstein's maximalist historical epics or of the 1924 proto-science fiction silent film *Aelita*'s culmination in a fancifully Dionysiac scene in which Martian workers rise up in revolution to the backdrop of a Shostakovich piano score. This austerity is characteristic of the art Adorno finds genuinely challenging to the received categories of bourgeois reason: "The bourgeois want art voluptuous and life ascetic; the reverse would be better" (*AT* 13). This ascetism proves more radically critical of established aesthetic practices and social relations than the sensuosity of the culture industry: "Works of art are ascetic and shameless; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish" (*DE* 111). Adorno denounces bourgeois rationality's use of a sensorially robust art as a consolatory break from the tedious lives it compels working people to accept. Life, not art, should be stimulating; but at first glance a call for an ascetic art seems to be a sharp limitation of its capacities. To shed light on why Adorno does not think this is the case and round out our discussion of Adorno's normative claims about successful artworks, we can look at his comments on Beckett to explore how a specific modernist artist responds to the social crises that laid the groundwork for his aesthetic practice.

The ascetism of Beckett's work consists in his refusal of conventional narrative, his restricted use of place and setting, and his disjointed dialogue; these qualities all contribute to his work's lack of commercial appeal (*Zuidervaart* 38). This ascetism allows Beckett to overcome the insufficiencies of previous concepts of art and to say more than the disjointed, mute language he uses would suggest: "Aesthetic transcendence and disenchantment converge in the moment of falling mute: in Beckett's oeuvre. A language remote from all meaning is not a speaking language and this is its affinity to muteness" (*AT* 79). The muteness of Beckett's work reflects a new path forward for art once aesthetic rationality has come into question for its participation in the rationality that nourished the crises of the twentieth century. This is what is meant by the

convergence of aesthetic transcendence and disenchantment: Beckett wields transcendence to the ends of disenchantment, all while disenchanting transcendence. In doing so he acknowledges something true about the impasse art finds itself in. As such, his muteness makes him uniquely capable of expressing the suffering of post-War Europe: “Suffering conceptualized remains mute and inconsequential, as is obvious in post-Hitler Germany” (*AT* 18).

Adorno finds in these qualities in Beckett’s work an honest description of the crises of the twentieth century: “His shabby, damaged world of images is the negative imprint of the administered world. To this extent Beckett is realistic” (*AT* 31). Beckett constructs a world whose dark humour and dissonant construction appeal to Adorno’s aesthetic perspective. Beckett’s revision of unity means that his work does not succumb to the ideological pitfalls of classical aesthetics whereby the unity of the work is taken to be analogous to the unity of the world: “What governs Beckett’s work, certainly, is a parodic unity of time, place, and action, combined with artfully fitted and balanced episodes and a catastrophe that consists solely in the fact that it never takes place” (*AT* 154). For Adorno, this formal structural dissonance allows Beckett’s work to express more than it does on surface value, in virtue of the way in which its seeming lack of meaning testifies to the *reductio ad absurdum* leveled at Enlightenment by the crises of the twentieth century: “The explosion of the metaphysical meaning, which was the only thing guaranteeing the unity of the aesthetic structure, causes the latter to crumble with a necessity and stringency in no way unequal to that of the traditional canon of dramatic form” (242).

Beckett’s plays are meaningless not because they are devoid of any content but because they refuse to offer a univocal metaphysical meaning as Sartre would impose on his own plays or as Lukács finds in Beckett (*Zuidervaart* 152). For Adorno, Beckett’s work testifies to the collapse of such a univocal meaning and must be understood from this perspective:

Beckett’s oeuvre already presupposes this experience of the destruction of meaning as self-evident, yet also pushes it beyond meaning’s abstract negation in that his plays force the traditional categories of art to undergo this experience, concretely suspend them, and extrapolate others out of the nothingness. (“Trying to Understand Endgame” 153)

Beckett challenges the concept of art not by destroying meaning but by forcing art to follow out the consequences of a destruction of meaning that has already taken place: “Beckett’s plays are absurd not because of the absence of any meaning, for then they would simply be irrelevant, but because they put meaning on trial; they unfold its history” (153). Beckett’s acknowledgement



that “there’s no more nature” corresponds with Adorno’s idea of a human-altered second nature and testifies to art’s inability to recapture the unity it had learned from natural beauty in a world whose horrors can no longer be denied (Beckett, *Endgame* 11; Adorno, “Trying to Understand Endgame” 242). Where Beckett’s response to this collapse of meaning differs from that of existentialism is in his refusal of a formal, ontological account of subjectivity in favour of a flattening of subjectivity to a sort of thing-like status in time (246). This seemingly regressive approach allows Beckett to survive the crisis of meaning in drama: “Language, regressing, demolishes that obsolete material. In Beckett, this kind of objectivity annihilates the meaning that culture once was, along with its rudiments” (241-2). Beckett’s language refuses formal unity, thereby placing him in opposition to the established concept of art and insulating him from the crisis of aesthetic rationality triggered by the larger crisis of Enlightened rationality.

Beckett brings to bear the techniques of modernism, such as ugliness, disgust, and dissonant structure (243). In specific, he learns from those techniques such as montage that tried to reduce the influence of subjectivity on art: “Beckett draws the lesson from montage and documentation, from all attempts to free oneself from the illusion of a subjectivity that bestows meaning” (*AT* 30-1). His use of these techniques, paradoxically, allows him to reach a higher level of realism than socialist realism:

Today the primacy of the object and aesthetic realism are almost absolutely opposed to each other, and indeed when measured by the standard of realism: Beckett is more realistic than the socialist realists who counterfeit reality by their very principle. (*AT* 322)

As we have seen, Adorno does not like works of art that make univocal judgments about society, whether from a celebratory or from a purportedly radical perspective. Since the defining moment in the construction of an artwork is its opposition to reality, such works betray art’s fundamental role:

Rather than evincing scarcely disguised nostalgia for the lost golden age of bourgeois high art, Adorno ruthlessly rejected any calls for the restoration of an allegedly ‘healthy’ realism or classicism, either in bourgeois or proletarian guise. (Jay 106)

Beckett does not attempt to mimic the world; rather, the formal disjointedness of his work depicts the disjointed nature of post-War society in which all previous certainties had been overturned. Thus, Beckett’s use of modernist techniques to capture a world rent by capitalist modernity allows him to express a far more robust critical vision of post-War society than his stripped-down language seems to suggest, just as Adorno argues that successful artworks say

more than they seem to. Because Beckett says more than he does, his message is far more radical than it seems at first glance:

Art, even as something tolerated in the administered world, embodies what does not allow itself to be managed and what total management suppresses. Greece's new tyrants [the Regime of the Colonels brought to power in a right-wing military coup in 1967] knew why they banned Beckett's plays, in which there is not a single political word. (*AT* 234)

This passage testifies to Beckett's ability to say more than he appears to, to the extent of earning the fear of a military junta. This is because, despite not expressing anything political, the inherent social nature of art and the inherent manner in which art protests reality render its content necessarily social in a distorted dream-like manner whether the artist intends to or not: "At the risk of its self-alienation, radical modernity preserves art's immanence by admitting society only in an obscured form, as in the dreams with which artworks have always been compared" (*AT* 226). A work's sociality is never unmediated; this means that a socialist realist work that tries to imitate reality to transform it does not properly acknowledge its own distance from society; at the same time, because of this mediated sociality, no artwork is ever not social, even if the artist intends no commentary. This is no less true of Beckett, whose artistic method best captures the crises of the twentieth century precisely by never once referring to them, for the reference occurs not on the level of content but of form.

Beckett wields humour against its typical ends. His works, despite their austerity, inherit much from slapstick and the circus, even as these techniques are used to construct a dissonant form rather than to entertain or offer relief from more emotionally taxing scenes (*AT* 81). His slapstick is on the level of form, rather than content; the repetition of actions and catchphrases is interrupted by puns, non sequitur interjections, and fruitless gestures (*AT* 82). This allows him to wield play against ideological purposes or taunting in favour of an awareness of the violent, predatory nature of play: "The putative play drive has ever been fused with the primacy of blind collectivity. Only when play becomes aware of its own terror, as in Beckett, does it in any way share in art's power of reconciliation" (*AT* 317). Beckett weaponizes playfulness against the false reconciliation of a happy ending, instead preferring to testify to the animal, mob-like way in which play can become an impetus for violence.

Thus, to say that Beckett's work is ascetic is not to condemn his work as somehow limited, but rather to highlight the way in which it says much more than it seems to, the way in which it opposes society without saying anything literal about society, and the way in which its

disjointed formal construction, choppy dialogue, and cynical opposition to classical aesthetic categories allows it to overcome the insufficiencies of the existing concept of art and bring something genuinely new to the table. For Adorno, Beckett's works succeed precisely because of the disjointed, slapstick muteness that classical aesthetics might find undesirable: this muteness in its capacity to say more than it does expresses a truth about post-War society that both conventional art and conventional reason, as products of the same overarching historical trend of Enlightenment, are unable to say: "Ontology comes into its own as the pathogenesis of the false life" (AT 247).

The negative truth that Beckett mutely expresses is the necessary precondition for a positive next step that might improve conditions both for art and for humanity at large. Only a liberation of humanity *tout court* could liberate art such that the darkness of modernism embodied in Beckett will no longer be necessary:

A liberated humanity would be able to inherit its historical legacy free of guilt. What was once true in an artwork and then disclaimed by history is only able to disclose itself again when conditions have changed on whose account that truth was invalidated: Aesthetic truth content and history are that deeply meshed. A reconciled reality and the restituted truth of the past could converge. (AT 41)

What has been lost in art due to the crises of the twentieth century could only be brought back through a genuine material liberation of humanity. Without this, any return to classical aesthetic categories is a lie. Even modernism must come to bear with the ease with which it itself can be made acceptable to the ruling class. Art cannot show us the way to liberation, and it certainly cannot carry us there, but as a parallel form of rationality that protests bourgeois rationality even as it draws from it, art can negatively gesture towards something better even as it remembers a lost relationship with a nature that nourished humanity rather than rising up against it.

## Conclusion

Late in the night of July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1960, Richard Nixon flew into New York City on very short notice, where he was chauffeured directly to the central Manhattan apartment of Nelson Rockefeller for a late-night session of negotiations over that year's Republican policy platform (Perlstein, *Before the Storm* 82). Nixon, the presumed front-runner and eventual victor in the race for the Republican nomination, had to win Rockefeller's support by appealing to the patrician New Yorker's social liberalism and foreign policy hawkishness. That night (and well into the morning) Nixon was forced to make policy concessions to Rockefeller that enraged his party's base, who under the influence of the coterie surrounding Barry Goldwater had begun to shift sharply to the right on both domestic and foreign affairs.

At Rockefeller's apartment Nixon had the opportunity to look over the latter's art collection, which featured a number of works by modernists like Picasso. Though it is difficult to know whether Nixon was more concerned with aesthetic rationality's self-negation or with how best to satisfy the various factions of his party in the coming election, his visit allowed him the opportunity to verify first-hand Adorno's observation that "nonrepresentational art is suitable for decorating the walls of the newly prosperous" (*AT* 229).

Adorno's account of aesthetic rationality traces the genesis and subsequent overturning of aesthetic categories and conceptualizations of what counts as art. His defense of modern art shows how, on the one hand, modernism's heightened construction and technical accomplishment demonstrates how it is the most developed product of aesthetic rationality; and how, on the other hand, its interest in ugliness, its dissonant, disjointed constructions, and its irreverence towards previous concepts of art allow modernism to protest aesthetic rationality's ritual of domination over the sensory, emotive, and ideational materials that are taken up by form in artworks. Modernism produces artworks that put the fundamental unifying operation of artworks into question in order to overturn an existing concept of art and open up new possibilities previously unimaginable under art's rubric.

Yet, as we have seen, even modernism is susceptible to the neutralization of which all art is at risk, for its interest in technique and experimentation runs the risk of deteriorating into mere repetition. More insidious, however, is the way in which the culture industry renders artforms into industrially produced commodities that carry homogenous and ideologically charged

messages intended to reinforce the status quo. Modernism must therefore insulate itself against this problem by, on the one hand, maintaining its internal dissonance, and on the other, by embracing a darkness and ascetism that makes its works contrary to the expectations of aesthetic sensibilities formed by the culture industry, all while avoiding tumbling into sensuous intensity that mimics the culture industry's voluptuousness. What is needed is a disciplined art whose negative honesty speaks the truth not only about the crises of bourgeois reason but of art's participation in these crises. Only such an art can offer the immanent critique Adorno's aesthetic theory calls for.

Thus, Adorno's aesthetics aspires to offer something not unlike his reconceptualization of the role of philosophy in *Negative Dialectics*: the promise of an immanent critique of Enlightenment rationality, that is, a criticism of rationality that shows how the dominant mode of rationality collapses into unreason, while the dialectical mode of thinking dismissed as unreason proves to be among reason's last defences in an irrational world. Thus, just as philosophy must allow its categories to be transformed by the experience of the object, art must similarly allow its own concept to be overturned by exciting new works.

Art's capacity to lurch towards hazy utopic futures gives it a unique capacity to support us in our attempts to improve our situation in the aftermath of the twentieth century. While art is not the answer to our predicament, the form of rationality it represents helps us formulate the right questions, on which we can build through concrete action towards a world where art can once again mean something. As we approach the aftereffects of COVID-19, economic frailty, international tension, and climate crisis, it becomes ever more important to remember the limitations of art as well as its possibilities. We can aspire for a future where art will no longer need to overturn itself, for there will no longer be a reason for it to collapse into ideology; until such a time, Adorno's work offers much to consider about art's position in our historical moment and the possibilities for its transformation, with the knowledge that contained within their formal construction will be some indication in negative of what a better world might look like.

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