

Université de Montréal

Between Truth and Trauma: The Work of Art and Memory in Adorno

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Between Truth and Trauma: The Work of Art and Memory in Adorno

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Résumé

En analysant les processus dialectiques par lesquels l'art repense le passé, *Between Truth and Trauma: The Work of Art and Memory work in Adorno* traite du concept adornien de la mémoire. Je postule que l'œuvre d'art chez Adorno incarne un *Zeitkern* (noyau temporel). Je démontrerai que l'immanence réciproque de l'histoire dans l'œuvre d'art et l'immanence de l'œuvre d'art dans l'histoire permettent de repenser le passé. Le premier chapitre examine la manière par laquelle le passé est préservé et nié par l'œuvre d'art. Le deuxième chapitre montre comment, à l'aide du processus interprétatif, le passé est transcendé à travers l'œuvre d'art. Le dernier chapitre évoque la lecture adornienne d'écrits de Brecht et de Beckett dans le but d'illustrer la capacité de l'œuvre d'art à naviguer entre la vérité et le trauma.

Mots clés

Adorno, mémoire, œuvre d'art, dialectique, sursomption, philosophie allemande du 20^e siècle, interprétation, *Zeitkern*.

Abstract

Analyzing the dialectical processes through which art works through the past, *Between Truth and Trauma: The Work of Art and Memory in Adorno* examines Adorno's concept of memory. I argue that, for Adorno, the work of art both has and is a *Zeitkern* (temporal nucleus). I demonstrate that the reciprocal immanence of history in the work and immanence of the work in history allows for the past to be worked through. The first chapter examines how the past is preserved and negated by the work of art. The second chapter examines how the past is transcended through the work of art via the interpretive process. The final chapter looks at Adorno's reading of work by Beckett and Brecht in order to illustrate the ability of the work of art to navigate between truth and trauma.

Keywords

Adorno, memory, artwork, dialectics, sublation, 20th century German philosophy, interpretation, *Zeitkern*.

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Among the many problems with which philosophy actively engages, one problem meriting more attention is the problem of memory. Memory is linked with philosophy's ultimate love of wisdom and quest for truth. For example, philosophers as disparate as Plato and Martin Heidegger have characterized the process of uncovering truth as the process of un-forgetting.¹ Philosophy, considered within this conception, has a role to play in the process of un-forgetting, or memory. What is the role of philosophy in remembering? What exactly is philosophy trying to uncover and remember? How does memory relate to truth?

Both memory and truth are temporal phenomena. If Hegel was the first modern thinker to rediscover the temporal and historical nature of the truth² then it was his successors, such as Theodor Adorno, who gave philosophy the task of trying to recover historical truth. This recovery does not try to return truth to its particular context, as in historiography, but rather to uncover its contemporary presence.

Uncovering temporal presence is the fundamental objective of memory. Memory and historical truth converge in the concept of temporal presence.

¹ In Greek mythology forgetfulness is represented by the underworld river Lethe. Lethe plays a prominent role in various philosophies, perhaps most notably in Book X of Plato's *Republic*, in the Myth of Er, when the souls about to be reincarnated or transmigrated drink from it on their way back up to their next lives. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 621a. Lethe, as Heidegger points out, means concealment: "Ἀλήθεια, oblivion, is a concealment that withdraws what is essential and alienates man from himself, i.e., form the possibility of dwelling within his own essence." Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. A. Schuwer & R. Rojcewicz, (Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1992), 72. ἀλήθεια, the Greek word for truth, implies an unconcealedness.

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 32. See also when Adorno writes about how Hegel exploded the notion eternal truth: "[...] philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought." Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models, Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. H. Pickford, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 15.

Much of 19th and 20th century theory and art was devoted to understanding the question of temporal presence. Marcel Proust's search for lost time amidst the madeleines and the bells is perhaps the best example. However, phenomenologists, critical theorists, cultural critics, and artists alike have all been drawn towards the riddle of Proust's *pyramid of past life*.³ In this pyramid, nothing is ever consumed by utter oblivion. The past lingers in the unconscious as well as in the world of sensuous objects and images. The riddle asks: how does the unconscious become conscious? What does it mean when it does? What happens if it does not? Perhaps most importantly, what is the nature of our responsibility in this process?

The solution to this riddle lies in understanding memory. Rising to prominence in the 1990s, Memory Studies occupies a huge space in both academic and popular discourse. As the 20th century slipped away, and as borders, once thought forever locked, opened up, the availability of previously classified information stoked the fires of end of century (and millennium) malaise. The simultaneous ability and drive to re-conceive our relationship to the past is perhaps one of the reasons why discussions about memory became so ubiquitous. Poised at the nostalgic end of an era precipice, the notion of how to move forward and what to take with us in this move becomes important.

No thinker has been more emphatic regarding the ethical imperatives and duties that we have in response to the barbarism of the 20th century than Adorno. There is a

³ See Merleau-Ponty's description of the lived body as a sedimentary *cogito* that is *perched on* Proust's *pyramid of past life*. He gives the example of a middle class man turned workman who will always be the middle class man who turned workman. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, (New York: Routledge Classic, 2002), 457-458.

sense of urgency in Adorno's work that appears most poignantly in his need to re-locate and strengthen the subject in order to fight administered society and the culture industry, and to awaken consciousness from its reified slumber. This sense of urgency is heightened because the contemporary subject must contend with the presence of the past of the 20th century. Adorno's concern regarding the presence of the past relates to what he saw as the failure to collectively work through the Holocaust. In his essay, *The Meaning of Working Through the Past*, possibly where he most clearly and colloquially addresses the question of responsibility towards the past, Adorno states that the past cannot be worked through until its objective conditions are dealt with:

That fascism lives on, that the oft-invoked working through of the past has to this day been unsuccessful and has degenerated into its own caricature, an empty and cold forgetting, is due to the fact that the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist.⁴

Adorno attributes the failure to contend with the presence of the past to both collective and individual repression, repetition, and persistent prejudice. Certainly, philosophy has something to say about these problems that is important both for philosophy and for the general discourse on the matter. But more particularly, I think that Adorno has something very significant to say about memory, in spite of his never having worked out something like a 'theory of memory'. It is perhaps for this reason that there has yet to be an extensive study of Adorno's concept of memory.

As Adorno's concept of memory is both elusive and omnipresent in his work, my long-term project is to piece it together by merging the various fragments he gives us

⁴ Adorno, *Critical Models*, p. 98. Given that objective conditions are hard to change, it becomes very important to free the subject from its total implication in the collective. See for example, Adorno, *Critical Models*, 192-193 or Adorno's description of the authoritarian personality, *Critical Models*, 198-199.

in his more essayistic work with the more densely philosophical texts. On a very basic level, memory for Adorno is dialectical. This implies that the past is worked through (*Anfarbeitung*) by sublation (*Aufhebung*). Memory as the sublation of the past is a transcendence of the past via a process of simultaneous negation and preservation. Adorno's conception of memory as an active and dialectical working through of the presence of the past in the present poses a challenge to other discourses where remembering treats the past as something to be preserved (via monuments and memorials etc), negated (forgotten) or transcended (gotten over at whatever cost). For Adorno, only the simultaneous working of all three processes ensures that memory is more than a return to barbarism.

Within the context of Adorno's conception of memory work, two main questions emerge: first, how does the past manifest itself in the present (how is it preserved and negated)? Second, how is the past recognized in the present and ultimately transcended? I will argue that for Adorno, the active living past⁵ appears in the present through ciphers, or dialectical images, conflating the temporal distance between present and past. Language, art, and cultural items, when interpreted as dialectical images, reveal the concealed past.⁶ Thus in order to truly work through the

⁵ Like other thinkers within the dialectical materialist tradition, the past has a sort of life in the present as it is suspended in a manner that invokes a simultaneous return of the same as well as a frozenness. For example see Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit*, from his essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, and the present as that "[...] in which time stands still [...]." Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 261-262. Another example comes from the *Arcades Project* where Benjamin states that the image is where the past and present come together to form a constellation. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 463. He also describes the historical materialist take on temporality as the "[t]elescop[ing] of the past through the present." Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 471

⁶ For a clear and thoughtful discussion of images in Adorno's work see Richter's *Thought Images and the Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life*. He writes that: "[t]he image records an historical moment at the same time that it interrupts history, perpetuating the very thinkability of history even as it breaks with the logic of historical unfolding." Gerhard Richter, *Thought Images and the Frankfurt School*

past, its way of underpinning the present must be rendered visible. Memory, for Adorno, can be conceived as a process of deciphering this living presence of the past. This deciphering constitutes a form of philosophical work. This philosophical work can be considered to be a sort of archaeology or excavation of these dialectical images.

The concept of the dialectical image is a key to understanding the relationship between the work of art and memory in the Adornian context. Conceiving of an image as dialectical suggests that the image, whether it is a work of art, a word, or cultural item, sublates the past. Two key processes must take place: first, the image preserves the past via negation, and second, the image allows the past to be transcended through it. The image marks a *caesura*: time stands still in the image. However, the image is also an impetus for interpretive movement.

Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 107. Richter performs a clear and lucid analysis of Benjamin, Bloch, Kracauer, and Adorno's use of images in their writing. While dialectical images and thought-images (*Denkbilder*) are not the same concept, I would propose that the dialectical image is a sort of thought-image. On the dedication page of his book, Richter cites Adorno: "Thought-images (*Denkbilder*) are not images like the Platonic myths of the cave or the chariot. Rather, they are scribbled picture-puzzles, parabolic evocations of something that cannot be said in words (*des in Worten Unsagbaren*). They do not want to stop conceptual thought so much as to shock through their enigmatic form and thereby get thought moving, because thought in its traditional conceptual form seems rigid, conventional, and outmoded." The citation comes from Adorno's writing on Benjamin's *One Way Street* in his *Notes to Literature*. Richter states that because the *Denkbilder* were *fragmentary, explosive, and decentering*, they helped the thinkers of the Frankfurt School in their "[...] struggle against the reactionary modes of cultural and political coordination that constituted the so-called conservative revolution in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s [...]" Richter, *Thought Images*, 8. The images also perform two very important functions, they express what cannot be said (Richter, *Thought Images*, 13), and they read the world as though it was a text (Richter, *Thought Images*, 18). Finally, the idea of the image plays with the notion of presence and absence, and thus participates in a sort of *Aufhebung* by simultaneously preserving and negating their socio-historical reality (Richter, *Thought Images*, 108). Excavating, creating, and interpreting these images allowed the thinkers to be connected to and critical of the lingering presence of the 19th century.

The dialectical image is a *cipher of social reality*⁷ or a riddle containing the presence of the past. Deciphering this riddle is, for Adorno, how the past it is to be worked through.⁸

The idea of the dialectical image most likely originated with Benjamin's failed habilitation: *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. Adorno borrows this concept, and uses the word dialectical image in his early work *Kierkegaard Construction of the Aesthetic* when discussing the relationship between dialectic, myth and image. He writes:

Dialectic comes to a stop in the image and cites the mythical in the historically most recent as the distant past: nature as proto-history. For this reason the images, which like those of the *intérieur* bring dialectic and myth to the point of indifferenciation, are truly 'antediluvian fossils,' They may be called dialectical images, to use Benjamin's expression, whose compelling definition 'in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history, a petrified primordial landscape'⁹

For Benjamin, history breaks down into images.¹⁰ The image is a particular fragment or trace of an epoch that is imbued with the universal socio-historical condition of the epoch.¹¹ Benjamin describes these images as fossils, and the landscape as *petrified* and *primordial*, thus evoking the notion of a past whose immanent presence is experienced in both the minutiae and totality of what is left behind. These dialectical images are mimetic translations, transformations, and authentic replications of social reality because they are part of a social reality.

⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute, (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 97.

⁸ *Ibid*, 97. Buck-Morss also argues that Benjamin's dialectical images are where *thesis and antithesis converge* and where *reified objects are set in motion*. See Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 106.

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 54. See also Adorno, *Critical Models*, 160. Benjamin cites this passage in Konvolut N (On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress) of the *Arcades Project*, 461.

¹⁰ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 476. This is cited in Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe, The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2000), 68-69.

¹¹ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 102-104.

However, the concept of the dialectical image differs in Benjamin and Adorno. Adorno sometimes prefers the term historical image, a term he introduced in his early writings on nature-history.¹² Susan Buck-Morss suggests that Adorno chose to describe these images as *historical* in order to ensure that they were to be understood *objectively* due to their *socio-historical specificity* and not *psychologically*.¹³ In fact, the concept of the dialectical image was cause for contention between Adorno and Benjamin in the 1930s.¹⁴ As the term dialectical image is both more evocative and prevalent in the literature, I will employ it to describe Adorno's concept.¹⁵

Here, my aim will be to examine one specific kind of dialectical image: the work of art. Not only is the work of art is the best example of the dialectical image, but it is also the image that occupies the most central place within Adorno's body of work. We will see how, for Adorno, the work of art holds a position of privilege. I think that for Adorno the greatest possibility of working through the past lies in the making and interpretation of autonomous works of art. In this way, the work of memory would help to fulfil a renewed categorical imperative.¹⁶

¹² *Ibid*, 103.

¹³ *Ibid*, 103.

¹⁴ For a good analysis of the difference between Benjamin and Adorno's concepts see Buck-Morss *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 102-106. The strife raged around the idea of the objectivity of these images. Also see Theodor W. Adorno, and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, ed. H. Lonitz, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Harvard University Press, 1999), 104-115.

¹⁵ Dialectical images were very important conceptual tools and devices for German thinkers of the Frankfurt School and their associates in the early to mid 20th century. According to Buck-Morss, not only did Benjamin write about dialectical images, his work itself (eg. *The Arcades Project, Berlin Childhood Around 1900*) could be considered to be dialectical images. See Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 106.

¹⁶ *Never Again Auschwitz* has often been described as Adorno's new categorical imperative relating to education. Adorno, *Critical Models*, 191-192. Also see the section *Metaphysics and Culture* in the *Meditations on Metaphysics Chapter* in Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2005), 365.

Adorno's writing on the work of art, specifically when coinciding with his writing on memory, offers a way of reading the problem of the relationship between art and memory in the contemporary context. The specific question to which the present project responds is: how does the work of art participate in memory work?

My working hypothesis is that the work of art participates in memory work via sublation. The work of art preserves and negates the past by constituting it in the form of dialectical images. The work of art transcends the past by inviting the interpretation of these dialectical images. I will also argue that it is because of the work of art both *having* and *being* a *Zeitkern* (temporal nucleus) that it participates in memory work.

Though Adorno uses the expression *Zeitkern* just over a dozen times in his collected writings, Peter Uwe Hohendahl maintains that the concept is “[...] a very important component of Adorno's theory [of the artwork as a dialectical process].”¹⁷

Nonetheless, despite its importance, the *Zeitkern* remains an undeveloped concept in the secondary literature on Adorno's aesthetic theory. I agree with Hohendahl and think that greater development of the little-commented *Zeitkern* concept could lead to a better understanding not only of Adorno's theories of the work of art, but could also provide for a touchstone around which to constellate the relationship between the work of art, history, and memory. Thinking of the *Zeitkern* as a conceptual pivot allows for a conception of the work of art that has time (history) at its centre. It also simultaneously allows for a reading of the work of art within a history of its reception.

¹⁷ Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought Theodor W. Adorno*, (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 198-199.

I will proceed by examining the work of art in terms of its structural features and its functions. The first chapter will look at how the work of art preserves and negates the past. I will argue that the work of art's preservation of the past is actually a form of negation. The work of art's *Zeitkern* is formed in this manner. The second chapter will look at how the past is transcended through the work of art. I will argue that the work of art becomes a *Zeitkern* within history. I will conclude the study in a comparative analysis of Adorno's thoughts on specific works of art, namely works by Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett.

In terms of Adorno's primary texts, I will focus mainly on *Aesthetic Theory*. As the need arises, I will refer to some of his other works: *Kierkegaard Construction of the Aesthetic*, *Notes to Literature*, and several essays from *Critical Models* (most notably "Working Through the Past"). In terms of secondary sources, I will principally draw from the work of Robert Hullot-Kentor, Susan Buck-Morss, Albrecht Wellmer, Lambert Zuidervaart, Jay Bernstein, Max Pensky, Peter Uwe Hohendahl, and Roger Foster.

Chapter 1: Cipher of the Past: how the work of art becomes a dialectical image (preserves and negates)

In one of his more colourful passages on the work of art, Adorno recounts a story about Picasso and *Guernica*, which depicts the German bombing of the Spanish town Guernica: "When an occupying German officer visited the him in his studio and asked, standing before the *Guernica*, 'Did you make that?,' Picasso is said to have

responded, ‘No, you did.’”¹⁸ I think that this passage is an illustration of Adorno’s conception of the relationship of the work of art to the socio-historical moment, as well as of how the work of art becomes a dialectical image. As I will argue in this chapter, the work of art becomes a dialectical image because of its *Zeitkern*. In Adorno’s language, the *Zeitkern* can be conceived as “[...] the immanence of society in the artwork [...]”¹⁹ In discussing how the work of art preserves and negates the socio-historical moment, in other words, how art preserves and negates the past, I will be able to unpack Adorno’s conception of the *Zeitkern* as the *immanence of society in the artwork*. This immanence is the first and most important relationship of art to society. However, as chapter two will explore, there is a reciprocal immanence of the artwork in society through which the past is transcended.

Using the notion of the *immanence of society in the artwork* as the starting point of my argument, and wanting to better understand what is behind the *Guernica* anecdote, I will argue that because of its *Zeitkern*, the work art both preserves and negates the past and in so doing, becomes a dialectical image. For Adorno, the production of the dialectical image is fundamental to the conception of how the work of art participates in memory work.

I will first look at how the work of art preserves the socio-historical moment and then how the work of art negates the socio-historical moment. The first section of the chapter addresses questions pertaining to the work of art’s preserving function. These

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature Volume Two*, trans. S. Weber NicholSEN, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 89.

¹⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 232

include: What is the nature of that which is being preserved? How is it preserved? What is the new entity that emerges from this preservation? The second section of this chapter addresses similar questions though from the perspective of negation. These include: What is the nature of that which is being negated? How is it negated? What is the new entity that emerges from this negation? I will show that the nature of the preservation of the work of art's *Zeitkern* is *negative* in character. Towards the end of this chapter, I develop the idea that the work of art as a dialectical image, formed by this negative preservation, is a cipher. This will move my argument into the second chapter on the work of art's transcendent quality.

I Preservation

Ia What is the nature of that which is being preserved?

In characterizing the essential social relation of art as the immanence of society in the artwork, Adorno argues that the work of art preserves historical truth as its *Zeitkern*. By looking at the idea of historical truth, this section will be able to respond to the question of what the work of art preserves.

Truth, for Adorno, is historical, contingent, and ephemeral. The general notion of truth as historical is omnipresent in Adorno's work and fundamental to Adorno's larger philosophical project expressed through critique and fragment as opposed to totalizing system. He clearly states that even his own work is not exempt from the criticism he levels at other thinkers.²⁰ Adorno attributes the shift in philosophy's

²⁰ For example, see the Preface to the new edition of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer and Adorno write: "[w]e would not now maintain without qualification every statement in the book: that would be irreconcilable with a theory which holds that the core of truth that is historical rather than an unchanging constant to be set against the movement of history." Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W.

search for truth from the realm of the eternal to the realm of the ephemeral to Hegel. No longer must philosophy seek to be a *philosophia perennis*: “[t]he vested bearer of eternal truth.”²¹ Instead, Adorno takes Hegel’s concept of philosophy as “[...] its own time comprehended in thought.”²² Philosophy’s compulsion towards truth, in this sense, is an expression of the compulsion towards understanding the truth about its own particular socio-historical context. I will show how it is this notion of truth that resonates in Adorno’s concept of the temporal truth of the *Zeitkern*.

Similar to philosophy expressing the truth of a particular historical context, the truth that is preserved in the work of art is historical, contingent, and ephemeral in nature. Both philosophy and art express their *own time* in thought (in the case of philosophy) and image (in the case of art) because they are *faits sociaux*. According to Adorno, the authentic work of art is both autonomous and a *fait social*.²³ In this conception, the idea that art is a *fait social* is derived from its being a product and by-product of a particular socio-historical moment: this moment produces and is preserved in the work of art. The idea of the work of art as a *fait social* will be discussed in greater detail in the next section of this chapter. The idea of art’s autonomy will occupy the second half of this chapter. However, before I move towards looking at how the socio-historical moment is preserved in the work of art, I need to look a bit closer at the nature of the historical truth preserved in and by the work of art.

Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming, (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2000), ix.

²¹ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 15.

²² *Ibid*, 15.

²³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 225.

In Adorno's concept of the expression of historical truth in the artwork, there is no driving teleological totality. This is analogically related to how Adorno views philosophical truth. To give an example, Adorno turns to Hegel. He writes: "[t]here is a truth in [I]dealism [...]."²⁴ This truth was relevant to the time from which Idealism emerged. More precisely, "Idealism is true because it grasps the 'need' of thought: to have content, to grasp the content, beyond the simplicity of simply receiving this content 'empirically'."²⁵ The advancement of consciousness of truth and the expression of rational Absolute spirit was directly relevant in a time of Enlightenment belief in progress both in terms of technology and in terms of rationality. This belief is no longer relevant to us in the same manner. Throughout his work, Adorno always casts the idea of Enlightenment in a dialectical manner.

In order to see how the idea of historical truth is expressed in art, I would like to take a brief look at the example of the architecture of Berlin's *Neues Museum*. Originally built by Friedrich August Stüler in the middle of the 19th century, it was severely damaged by allied bombing and then left exposed to the elements until reunification. Re-opened in November 2009, with David Chipperfield's new architectural concept blending old and new material, the *Neues Museum* re-assumes its collection of artifacts from Egypt, as well as both ancient and pre-history. However, whereas once the museum expressed Enlightenment faith in progress and technology, now the museum expresses a tension and ambiguity where progress is concerned. For example, whereas the content of the building shows advances in terms of the weapons and their potency and thus present a clear argument for the existence of progress, the form of

²⁴ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 15.

²⁵ I am indebted to Iain Macdonald for this formulation.

the building provokes questions regarding the very possibility of progress because the museum walls are still dotted in bullet holes resulting from the *progress* in weapon technology. In a book of essays that was released upon the re-opening of the museum, Peter-Klaus Schuster writes:

A temple of memory has emerged out of what was once the temple of a progressive faith in history. On the Museum Island Mnemosyne has once again found a 'home,' where history is neither sentimentalised nor corrected but perceivable in all its shadings, graphically venerable and perilous.²⁶

These bullet holes and the constellations formed by drawing imaginary lines in between them illustrate Adorno's idea of the work of art's preservation of constellations of historical truth. The truth that is conveyed in these constellations relates to the damage sustained by the particular structure given its particular historical, social, and geographical context. A building with the same meaning could not be built in another location out of different material. The work of art is only able to express this contingent truth.

Ib How is the socio-historical moment preserved?

The socio-historical moment is preserved by a caesura, or a break in the temporal continuum that occurs during the formation of the *Zeitkern*. It is during this process that the work of art becomes a dialectical image by bringing the fleetingness of history to a standstill. I return to Adorno's use of Benjamin's notion of the image as the place where dialectics come to a standstill.²⁷ As the work of art is the dialectical image par

²⁶ Peter-Klaus Schuster, "A Temple of Memory - On David Chipperfield's Neues Museum," in Rik Nys & Martin Reichert, ed. *Neues Museum Berlin*, (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König), 2009, 183.

²⁷ See note 6. Adorno describes the work of art as a continued dynamic, Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 176. See also Adorno, *Kierkegaard Construction of the Aesthetic*, 54.

excellence, the logical conclusion to draw is that dialectics come to a halt in the work of art.

For Adorno, movement in general, and movement in history in particular, is suspended in the work of art through a process of objectivation. He writes that

[i]n art something momentary transcends; objectivation makes the artwork into an instant. Pertinent here is Benjamin's formulation of a dialectic at a standstill, which he developed in the context of his conception of a dialectical image. If, as images, artworks are the persistence of the transient, they are concentrated in appearance as something momentary. To experience art means to become conscious of its immanent process as an instant at a standstill [...]²⁸

Objectivation of the socio-historical moment in and by the artwork is the key to understanding how this moment is preserved. In objectivation, the past is turned into an object to be experienced.

In order to understand objectivation and how history comes to a standstill in the dialectical image we can turn to Adorno's engagement with the episode of Odysseus' hanging of the maids. Adorno responds to Homer's description of the hanging maids whose "[f]eet danced for a little, but 'not for long [...]"²⁹ in a pathos-filled manner.

Adorno writes:

But after the 'not for long' the inner flow of the narrative comes to a halt. The gesture of the narrator...is that of a question: Not for long? By bringing the

²⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 84. See also Adorno's description of the artwork as both process and instant, Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 6, 179. For further commentary see Düttmann's description of this process as a *messianic stilling*, Alexander García Düttmann, *The Memory of Thought, an essay on Heidegger and Adorno*, trans. N. Walker, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 95. See also Hullot-Kentor's writing on Adorno's notion of the work of art as the moment of expression where "[...] [t]he Hegelian dialectic is brought to a standstill [...]" Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance, Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 42.

²⁹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. R. Fitzgerald, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961). Adorno writes about the feet of the maids in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. He uses a different translation of the line from the one I cited in this note in which he uses the word *kicked* instead of dancing. See Horkheimer & Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 79.

account to a halt, the gesture prevents the forgetting of the condemned and reveals the unnameable eternal torture of the second in which the maids struggled against death.³⁰

The operative concept in the above quotation is the idea of the *not for long*. In one sense, the maids' suffering was momentary; their necks broke and the struggle came to an end. In another sense, the maids' suffering is eternal; the momentary struggle is given a form of perpetuity in the narrative.³¹ Adorno's use of the story of the maids illustrates both the idea of the break that forms the *Zeitkern*, and the idea of dialectics *at a standstill*. The breaking of the maids' necks expresses the concept of the breaking of the temporal continuum. Two temporalities are created for the maids. On the one hand time moves forward for the maids: they die, and the story of the *Odyssey* continues. On the other hand, time stands still for them: they are preserved in an eternal and inescapable struggle. In cruel sounding terms, the breaking of the maids' necks heralds the breaking of the temporal narrative into these two aspects, the one linear and historical and the other a closed circle of *dialectics at a standstill*. In this instance, the *Zeitkern* is formed when the struggle of the maids is turned into an object to be experienced via its place in Homer's narrative. This object is the dialectical image.

As noted by Hullot-Kentor, fundamental to Adorno's reading of the hanging maids is the possibility for the space opened up by the forming of the *Zeitkern* to be a space of

³⁰ Horkheimer & Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 79. I am indebted to Hullot-Kentor's citing of this passage and its modified translation in Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 43-44.

³¹ Adorno is not the only one who has focused on the role of the maids and the moments in which they struggled against death. For example, Margaret Atwood's 2005 work entitled *Penelopiad*, a re-telling of the *Odyssey* story from the perspective of Penelope. Atwood cast the maids in the role of the chorus and suggests that they are Penelope's allies, who slept with the suitors in order to spy for her. Atwood conceives of their hanging as violent betrayal and mourns these woman in her work. The *Penelopiad* was turned into a play in 2007. See Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus*, (Toronto: Vintage Canada Edition, 2006).

remembrance.³² By breaking the narrative of temporal continuity into two different but related narratives, the frozen time of the maids' struggle and the continuation of the narrative, the maids' struggle is both preserved and given a presence. Analogous to the manner in which the breaking of maids' necks breaks the temporal continuity of the narrative by opening up two temporalities, the objectivation of the socio-historical moment by the work of art breaks the continuum of history and yields two temporal expressions of the past. In the first instance, once preserved, the past is frozen in the artwork, in other words, the dialectical movement of history is brought to a standstill. In the second instance, once objectivated, the past may attain a sort of transcendence through the artwork. This transcendence will be the subject of the second chapter of this study.

The socio-historical moment becomes objectivated and appears in the artwork in two main ways: first, via the production process, and second via mimesis. In terms of the production process, the work of art is produced with the tools and processes that typify the era in which it is produced. Adorno writes:

That artworks are not being but a process of becoming can be grasped technologically [...] The processual quality of artworks is constituted in such a fashion that as artifacts, as something humanly made, they have their place a priori in the 'native realm of spirit' but are, in order to become self-identical, in need of what is non-identical, heterogeneous, and not already formed.³³

This citation contains two main points. The first is that the process that forms the work of art and by which the socio-historical moment is objectivated, transpires technologically. The work of art becomes an artifact of a particular socio-historical moment because it manifests the technology of this moment. The second point is that

³² Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 44.

³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 176.

because time and history continue while the time and history in the work remain still, the artwork is not in a homeostatic state of self-identity. Both of these points relate to the *processual* character of the artwork. They also refer back to the idea of the suffering of the maids outliving the actual moment of suffering. I will look at the first point in the next couple of paragraphs and the second point in the second chapter.

In terms of the first reason, the technology of a particular socio-historical moment participates directly in the creation of the *Zeitkern*. The technology is objectivated in the work. The objectivation relies on the idea that the work of art is a *fait social* that emanates seamlessly from its socio-historical context. The technology of a particular socio-historical moment expresses the general condition of the moment. For example, montage or collage emerged in the early modernist era, during a time in which questions of fragmentation of the temporal narrative first emerged at the forefront.³⁴

At present, we see an absolute proliferation of works of art using digital media and highly technologically advanced material.³⁵ Our dependence on these materials and processes is incarnated in our works of art. Even work that chooses to not incorporate the newest technology still somehow exists in relation to it. If an artist chooses to paint a landscape using traditional methods and materials, they are making a specific choice against technology. In a sense, this notion is very similar to the idea

³⁴ See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 133, 218-219. Adorno discusses the possibility for art in technological world.

³⁵ A really excellent example of this is the work of New York based artist, designer, and computer programmer Cory Arcangel. Arcangel's material includes youtube clips, Guitar Hero style programs, old film projectors and 16 mm, and video games. See his website at: <http://www.coryarcangel.com>

that it is impossible to opt out of the culture industry. Even the choice to not buy an iPod implicates the chooser in the logic of contemporary culture.

The second way in which the past is preserved in the work of art is via mimesis. The following is as close as Adorno comes to offering a definition of mimesis in his writings on aesthetics: “The mimesis of artworks is their resemblance to themselves [...]”³⁶ The artwork emerges from and is inseparable from history because it is a *fait social*. In other words, the artwork is both made by and made of society. In being society, the artwork resembles itself. Tom Huhn describes Adorno’s conception of mimesis as follows: “Mimesis is not then the copying or imitation of what has been but the continuity from reflection to reflection [...]”³⁷ The continuity between reflections Huhn finds in Adorno’s definition of mimesis draws upon Adorno’s notion of the artwork’s resemblance to itself, or in other words, to the society from which it is derived. Because the work of art is a *fait social*, the border between the work and society is porous. The porous nature of the border between the work of art and society is what allows society to permeate the work.

In order to describe the process through which the socio-historical content permeates the artwork, I will turn to Paddison’s reading of Adorno. He writes:

Adorno maintains that it is via the dialectic of mimesis and rationality that the outside world enters the hermetic world of the artwork – not directly, but in

³⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 104. See also Hohendahl, who notes that Adorno “[...] never offers a formal definition of mimesis [...]” Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Adorno: The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language,” in Max Pensky, ed, *The Actuality of Adorno, Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 81.

³⁷ See for example: Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 245; Tom Huhn, “Introduction,” in Tom Huhn ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7; Max Paddison, *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture, essays on critical theory and music*, (London: Kahn & Averill, 1996), 61.

mediated form. Society, as collectivity, penetrates the work through, for example, historically and socially mediated musical material, through the process of rationalization which it both takes from the instrumental rationality of society and at the same time opposes, and through the mimetic impulse which imitates the dynamic movements of the outside world but which also expresses resistance to it.³⁸

While I find Paddison's description of the permeation process very effective, and I am sympathetic to his discussion of the mediation and opposition that takes place within the artwork during the dialectic between rationality and mimesis, I struggle with his reliance on the idea of imitation. Imitation contradicts the idea that society and art are permeable because a border is established between the one imitating and the one being imitated. I think, the Adorno's concept of mimesis implies a transformation rather than an imitation. Neither imitation nor mirroring manages to cross the barrier between the work of art and society because there is no real objectivation taking place. In order for the past to be objectivated and for mediation between the past and the subject interpreting the past (more on which in the second chapter) to take place, history must actually be immanent in the work of art. History may only be immanent in the work of art because the work of art is part of history: the work of art is thus is a *fait social* rather than a reflection of history. Buck-Morss illustrates this Adornian phenomenon in the following manner: the "[...] 'whimpering vibrato' of the jazz instrumentalist *was* the bourgeois subject's helplessness [...]."³⁹ The whimper *was* the whimper of helplessness, it was neither like nor analogous to the whimper of helplessness. The work of art is neither like nor reflective of the socio-historical moment, it is the socio-historical moment; it is an instantiation of history and not merely a representation of history. To put this relationship into a

³⁸ Paddison, *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture*, 61.

³⁹ Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 102-103.

reciprocal equation yields the following: the work of art is an expression of history and history is expressed in the work of art.

Another way of looking at Adorno's concept of mimesis in the aesthetics' context comes from Hohendahl who describes the objectivation process as a form of translation. Translation is a process through which a concept or a work is passed from one medium to another. In terms of the work of art and the socio-historical moment, historical content and processes are translated into art. The translation process, in this context, functions as a form of mediation. Hohendahl calls this translation process aesthetic imprinting. The nature of aesthetic imprinting will be discussed in further detail in the second part of this chapter (on negation). However, in terms of illustrating the idea of translation as imprinting Hohendahl gives the example of language as a mediating third term in the dialectical equation between art and history.

He writes:

The process of aesthetic imprinting works in such a way that the social forces are not reflected but translated, so to speak, into a linguistic form of entirely individual character [...] The relationship is a dialectical one: in the mediation of poetic language the subjective expression (of suffering) turns into objective meaning. In other words, language is the third term that makes a social hermeneutics possible.⁴⁰

Hohendahl gives the example of this process by using poetic language, or rather poetry, as that which objectifies subjective suffering and thus translates it into art. The subjective experience is translated into objective content via the work of art. The work of art thus acts as a point of mediation between subject and object.

⁴⁰ Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, 173-174.

I think that Hohendahl's characterization of mimesis as translation better explains Adorno's concept of mimesis as the process through which historical content is preserved in the artwork than Paddison's concept of imitation. I prefer Hohendahl's notion of translation because it implies that both objectivation and mediation take place; both of these processes are essential for the sublation of the past and art's ability to engage in memory work.

I would like to conclude this section by giving one more example, which will show how both the technological means and historical content of a particular moment are preserved in the work of art. Contemporary Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky uses contemporary photography techniques and takes photos that express the contemporary relationship between *nature* and *industry*. In his artist statement he writes the following:

Nature transformed through industry is a predominant theme in my work. I set course to intersect with a contemporary view of the great ages of man; from stone, to minerals, oil, transportation, silicon, and so on. To make these ideas visible I search for subjects that are rich in detail and scale yet open in their meaning [...] These images are meant as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence; they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear [...] For me, these images function as reflecting pools of our times.⁴¹

Burtynsky's show *Oil* tells the story of oil, from how it is extracted, to how it is transported, and used. The exhibition culminates in images expressing the aftermath of oil from abandoned fields and surrounding communities in Azerbaijan to ship breaking in Bangladesh. Most important for this example, the exhibition also features many photos of the Alberta oil sands from pipelines to tailing ponds. True to his artist statement, the photos themselves express a vision

⁴¹ <http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/>

of the relationship between nature and industry. In blatant terms, the tailing ponds really do give the viewer the chance to reflect on this very relationship. Perhaps the most significant component of this example is that Burtynsky's *Oil* exhibition was mounted at the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton in 2010/2011, one of the communities most affected by the wealth that the oil sands has engendered. Moreover, the year-old gallery clearly has a lot of oil money in its foundations in that a lot of the corporate sponsors are companies affiliated with the oil sands, and even many of the individual sponsor's private wealth has increased greatly from the general prosperity of the region. Only an affluent community could afford such a gallery and such an exhibition. The community in question owes some of its wealth to the very thing being held up for contemplation in the photographs. The ambiguous experience of visiting these works in this place is something quite particular to this socio-historical moment. Thus we can say that both technological processes and social content are preserved in these pieces.

By being a *fait social*, the work of art expresses the technological processes and historical content of its day. This expression takes place in its *Zeitkern*. The actual socio-cultural phenomena of a particular moment pass into the artwork via mimesis. The mimesis and objectivation of these moments in the work of art is the first step in the process that transforms them into a dialectical image. The next step in the process closes the work of art and finalizes the preservation. This step creates a closed entity that Adorno describes as a windowless monad. The next section examines this entity.

It Conclusion: What is this new entity?

Adorno's use of the monad, according to Hohendahl and Zuidervaart, is drawn from both Leibniz's conception of the monad as the indivisible and harmonized unity of the *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, but more importantly from Benjamin's reading of Leibniz.⁴² Zuidervaart writes:

The concept of a monad is central to Benjamin's model of social mediation. Adorno inherits this Leibnizian concept from Walter Benjamin but replaces its parallelist connotations with an emphasis on contradictions. Whereas Benjamin posits an homology between artistic and economic modes of production and consumption, Adorno develops tensions within the work of art that give expression to tensions in society as a whole.⁴³

In this citation, Adorno's conception of the monad is shown to be characterized by its emphasis on tension and disharmony. In other words, that which makes it a unit is the impossibility of identity. The impossibility of identity in Adorno's conception relates to two fundamental disharmonies in the nature of the monadic artwork. Regarding the first disharmony, unlike with Leibniz, for whom the harmony of the *res extensa* and *res cogitans* gives the structuring logic of the monad, for Adorno, it is the tension and contradictions in society that are preserved in the artwork. Because society is the content of the artwork and because society and history are in a constant state of tension, the work of art cannot be in harmony. By preserving contradiction, an internal dynamic persists within the artistic monad. For example, while Homer's *Odyssey* is not in disharmony with itself or with society, it does express the disharmonious tensions of the time in which it was written. The second disharmony appears when considering the temporal dimensions of the work of art's *Zeitkern*. This disharmony echoes the argument I

⁴² Hohendahl, "Adorno: The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language," in Pensky, *The Actuality of Adorno*, 75. Also see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 237.

⁴³ Lambert Zuidervaart, "The Social Significance of Autonomous Art: Adorno and Bürger," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Winter, 1990), pp. 61-77, 63. See also Lambert Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17, 192-193.

introduced in my discussion of the dual temporalities found in the example of the hanging maids. While the artwork mimetically resembles itself and the socio-historical moment in which it was produced (time stands still; the maids' struggle is suspended), the artwork is located in history (time moves on; the maids' necks break). A dual temporality of the monadic *Zeitkern* ensues. The inner time of the artwork remains identical with itself, however, it is no longer identical with the changing time at its surface.

Once history and society are preserved and sealed in the artwork they constitute a closed and windowless monad. By preserving the past as its *Zeitkern*, the work of art participates in memory work by giving the past a presence. However, further examination regarding the nature and effect of this preservation is required. The second part of this chapter will look at the idea of negation as preservation. We will see that for Adorno, the socio-historical content of the work of art is the suffering of torment of a particular moment.

II Negation

In the previous section of this chapter, I argued that, for Adorno, the autonomous work of art preserves its socio-historical moment because it is a *fait social*. I also showed that it is a closed windowless monad where the tensions, contradictions, and disharmony of history and society are preserved. I must now delve deeper into the nature of this preservation. As was argued in the previous section of this chapter, for Adorno, the essential social relation of art is the immanence of society in the work

itself.⁴⁴ Upon closer inspection, we see that for Adorno, that which is social in art is actually its negative character. When taken up by the work of art, the socio-historical content becomes negative. Thus we can say that the primary social relation of art is the immanence of the negative in the work of art; the work of art preserves via its ability to negate. Adorno writes: “What is social in art is its immanent movement against society, not its manifest opinions. Its historical gesture repels empirical reality, of which artworks are nevertheless part in that they are things.”⁴⁵ The second half of this chapter is devoted to understanding this notion.

I will argue that the work of art preserves the socio-historical moment by negating it. As such, I will examine the idea of preservation by negation, first by establishing what is being negated, second, by looking at how it is negated, and finally, by analyzing the nature of this new entity.

IIa What is being negated?

The socio-historical moment is what is being negated in the work of art. For Adorno, the negation of the socio-historical moment manifests as the expression of suffering in the work of art. Adorno writes: “The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition for all truth.”⁴⁶ The work of art lends a voice to the expression of historical truth. However, the suffering expressed in art is not only historical. Even works that seem unrelated to historical suffering, still life paintings for example,⁴⁷ express an

⁴⁴ See note 19.

⁴⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 227. Also see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 225.

⁴⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2005), 25.

⁴⁷ Still life paintings often preserve an ephemeral moment when the subject of the painting is poised at the precipice of decay. The French translation of *still life painting* is *nature morte*. The idea of *nature morte*

existential suffering that relates to the fleeting, transient, and ephemeral nature of the human condition described by Hannah Arendt as a rectilinear path through a universe of cycles.⁴⁸ Adorno writes that: “Even in a legendary better future, art could not disavow remembrance of accumulated horror; otherwise its form would be trivial.”⁴⁹

Returning to Adorno’s focus on historical suffering, we see that the expression of the socio-historical content in the work of art is synonymous with the remembrance, expression, and accumulation of suffering.⁵⁰ While accumulation implies a build up or sedimentation of suffering in the artwork, a seemingly passive occurrence, remembrance and expression have two connotations. On the one hand, to express a condition is to manifest symptoms of that condition. On the other hand, to express is to actively communicate (to others, for example) this condition. Remembrance is very similar. An object or memorial can serve as a remembrance of something that is past, or that is no longer there. However remembrance is also active process. In order to understand this point, we can return to Picasso’s *Guernica*. Because of the suffering that occurred during the bombing of Guernica, the German officer, a historical agent, *made Guernica* without even consciously being aware of it. The soldier’s tools were weapons rather than paintbrushes, but these tools were as essential to *Guernica*’s fabrication as Picasso’s brushes. Adorno’s use of the *Guernica* anecdote shows how

evokes a nature that can die and is dying while being preserved in the painting. Still life paintings, Dutch *Vanitas* paintings for example, often contain symbols of time, death, and decay. They remind us of our mortality and our fleetingness. For a description of *Vanitas* paintings see:

<http://www.rijksmuseum.nl>

⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition, Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 18-19.

⁴⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 324. Adorno also writes that: “The expression of history in things is no other than that of past torment.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. Jephcott, (New York: Verso, 2005) 49. For commentary on this see Roger Foster, *Adorno, The Recovery of Experience*, (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2007), 24.

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 24, 260-261.

both active and passive expression and remembrance occur in the artwork: remembrance is active because Picasso consciously painted it, and passive because the German soldier was neither conscious nor aware of his implication in the painting.

In the context of the twentieth century, we see how, for Adorno, the presence of the past that manifests in artistic remembrance and expression is similar to that of a scar on a body: a scar is the trace of suffering left behind.⁵¹ *Guernica*, for example, is also battle scar. Like a scar expressing the story of a wound without necessarily or directly telling the story of the injury that caused it, the *Zeitkern* within work of art expresses the suffering of history without necessarily or directly recounting a historical narrative. This is salient for Adorno. As will be shown both in the next section of this chapter and in chapter three, Adorno privileges works that express suffering and thus offer an implicit critique at the expense of those that directly criticize.

Wellmer highlights Adorno's use of the scar metaphor and writes:

In the scars of disintegration and disruption, which according to Adorno are the marks of authenticity in modern art, the artwork expresses the truth that the world can no longer be understood as a totality of meaning. [...] [It] transform[s] the fragile, broken-off, and abysmal character of the world of meaning into aesthetic sense, the artwork illuminates this world, communicating the non-communicable. [...] by transforming the terror of what is unintelligible into aesthetic delight, it widens, at the same time, the space of communicatively shared meaning.⁵²

⁵¹ Adorno is particularly interested in how modern art expresses the suffering of the 20th century, see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 23. For commentary on modern art and the non-identity and how the work *illuminat[es] the darkness by articulating its contradictions* see Albrecht Wellmer "Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime," in Pensky, *The Actuality of Adorno*, 120. See also Hohendahl's comment that modern art *articulates* horror of 20th century in Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, 86-87.

⁵² Wellmer, "Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime," in Pensky, *The Actuality of Adorno* 130-131. See also "To say the unsayable is to give voice to meaninglessness to the wrong of society as a whole; to say that this is unsayable is to acknowledge that the conditions for so speaking are not themselves properly empirical conditions, not conditions that belong to the routine practices of society." Jay M. Bernstein,

Because the work of art exhibits the *scar of disintegration* of the modern world, it preserves the past as something that is *fragile*, and *broken*. Recalling the idea of Adorno's monadic *Zeitkern* as a disharmonious unity, what we see is that the nature of the preserved socio-historical content is fragmented and negative. It is only by preserving this accumulated suffering, in other words, the negative and fragmented content of both society and history that the work of art can be thought of as having a truth content. There are no 'positive' truths in Adorno's thinking; the only truths are fleeting, ephemeral, and contingent - and thus historical. In fact, Adorno conceives of the work of art as the unconscious writing of history. He writes both that works of art are "[...] the self-unconscious historiography of their epoch [...]"⁵³ and that history *speaks in them*.⁵⁴ As the unconscious writing of history, the work of art expresses that which may not or cannot be consciously expressed. In other words, the work of art expresses the unutterable.⁵⁵

The second point in the Wellmer citation, that the work of art mediates a relationship between the present and the past while having the possibility to transform *terror* into a space of *meaning*, is problematic. For Adorno the very possibility of finding or attributing meaning to suffering may render suffering instrumental. Instead, Adorno

"Fragment, Fascination, Damaged Life: 'The Truth about Hedda Gabbler,' in Pensky, *The Actuality of Adorno*, 164 -165.

⁵³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 182. For Adorno this is the anti-historicism argument. Hullot-Kentor writes that this notion is the key to understanding Adorno's aesthetics, see for example: "[a]rt because the unconscious writing of history through its isolation from society." Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 70.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 111-112, 114.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 205. Adorno is writing about Benjamin's concept of language as both conveying and concealing. Hullot-Kentor writes that "[t]he central thesis of Adorno's aesthetics is that art becomes the unconscious writing of history through its isolation from society." Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 70.

advocates for the possibility of turning this unconscious manifestation of history into a conscious interpretation of both history and the contemporary situation. This process will be discussed in the second chapter of this study.

This section has established that the socio-historical moment preserved in the work of art is negative. This negative content is the expression of the unconscious and incommunicable suffering of the past. The next part of this section will look at how this negative content becomes immanent in the work of art. What is the difference between simple preservation and preservation by negation?

IIb How does negation work?

To preserve something by transforming it into art is already a form of negation. Transformation is a form of negation because, by preserving the socio-historical moment, the artwork changes the temporal dimension of the moment. The moment is both liberated from its original context but frozen in a dynamic of perpetual presence. Adorno writes: “Art preserves [the socio-historical moment] and makes it present by transforming it: This is the social explanation of its temporal nucleus.”⁵⁶ A similar preserving negation transforms the non-communicable past into the negative social content of the *Zeitkern*. This transformation process must be looked at in greater detail. There are two main kinds of negative transformation: imprinting, and opposing.

⁵⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 229. Adorno also argues that the transformation takes place when the content of a particular socio-historical moment becomes the form of the work of art, see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 139-140.

Adorno's use of the metaphor of imprinting in his aesthetic theory has been picked up by several commentators. Hohendahl conceives of Adorno's concept of aesthetic imprinting as when processes and content are arrested in and imprinted on the artwork;⁵⁷ Ziarek writes that: "Adorno's idea of the non-identical in art, [is] of art as the negative imprint of social reality [...]."⁵⁸ To understand what Adorno means by imprinting and how it changes the temporality of the socio-historical moment I will look closer at this process.

The notion of imprinting suggests negation both literally and metaphorically. On a very literal level, an object may be pressed into warm wax giving a negative imprint of the original object. A plaster mould may be formed out of the impression an object leaves in the clay. Fingerprints may be taken when a finger coated in ink is pressed against a piece of paper. In all of these cases, it is the impression that is left behind rather than the object itself. The impression is always an inverse, or a negative image, of the original image. These particular impressions offer the possibility to take a new and *positive* print from the original imprint. The new print is a copy of the original object, but this copy could not have been taken without the negative mediation of the imprint. Perhaps the best example, and an example that leads us back to the context of the work of art, is a traditional etching. In order to make prints, a negative image is scratched or carved into a plate. An imprint of the image is created from which prints are made.

⁵⁷ Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, 171-172. See also Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, 152-153.

⁵⁸ Krzysztof Ziarek, "Radical Art: Reflections after Adorno and Heidegger," in Nigel Gibson & Andrew Rubin (ed), *Adorno A Critical Reader*, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc), 2002, 352. Adorno himself uses the word imprint to denote the way in which history is translated into the artwork. See for example Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 31. He is writing on Beckett.

In all of the examples in the previous paragraph, the impression is always the negative imprint of that which is being preserved. The negative imprint of the socio-historical moment in the work of art functions in a similar manner. By expressing the negative of a particular moment, for example its suffering, the work of art functions as a sort of etching plate: it preserves the past by a process of negation. Picture for a moment a battlefield. The footprints and other traces and scars left behind may very well tell more about the battle than any intentional and directed narrative that must pass through the filter of the teller's subjectivity. The work of art then, is like footprints left behind that convey the memory of that which has walked by.⁵⁹ Because the work is an imprint, it is also an instantiation of history and not merely a representation of history. While Picasso's *Guernica* is a representation of the suffering caused by the German bombing, as an imprint, it instantiates this socio-historical moment. Through the negative process of imprinting, the socio-historical moment is preserved and the past is given a presence.

The second process through which negation becomes preservation is that of opposition. Negation by opposition relates to the work of art asserting its autonomy. The form of opposition Adorno favours does not imply an explicit social critique. Rather, for Adorno opposition and critique are implicit in his concept of the

⁵⁹ The most beautiful expression of this idea that I have encountered comes from a work of art (*The Book of Recurrent Dreams*) within a work of art (Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*): "You will remember when a bird crashed through the window and fell to the floor. You will remember, those of you who were there, how it jerked its wings before dying, and left a spot of blood on the floor after it was removed. But who among you was first to notice the negative bird it left in the window? Who first saw the shadow that the bird left behind, the shadow that drew blood from any finger that dared to trace it, the shadow that was better proof of the bird's existence than the bird ever was?" Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 38.

autonomous artwork. If, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the essential social relation of art is the immanence of society in the work, and art's social character is negative, then we can understand what Adorno means when he argues that "[...] art becomes social by its opposition to society [...] What is social in art is its immanent movement against society."⁶⁰ The work of art engages in critique by virtue of the piece of society it contains within it; as an instantiation of the socio-historical moment, the *Zeitkern* can be seen as an expression of critique.

Huhn describes this Adornian phenomenon as follows "Art is then something that achieves autonomy rather than having its freedom bestowed upon it by something else [...]."⁶¹ Autonomy comes with the work of art's innate potential to critique the society of which is a *fait social*. However, what distinguishes the critique of autonomous art from that of other art (such as engaged art) is the immanent nature of the critique. Adorno writes:

The critical concept of society, which inheres in authentic artworks without needing to be added to them, is incompatible with what society must think of itself if it is to continue as it is; the ruling consciousness cannot free itself from its own ideology without endangering society's self-preservation.⁶²

Adorno is arguing two things in this citation: first, that the autonomous and authentic work of art is already an expression of critique without being overtly critical, and second, that there is often a schism between the image expressed in the artwork and, in Adorno's words, the *ideology* of the *ruling consciousness*. That art is already an

⁶⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 225-227. This is quoted in Huhn, *Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, 14. See also "Art is the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it" Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 8; and Adorno's comment that *art bears its opposite*, Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 344. For additional commentary Ziarek, "Radical Art: Reflections after Adorno and Heidegger," in Gibson & Rubin, *Adorno A Critical Reader*, 346.

⁶¹ Huhn, *Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, 14.

⁶² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 236.

expression of critique relates to the expression of negative socio-historical content (i.e. suffering) via the technological means and processes that pervade the socio-historical moment. The schism between the self-image of the socio-historical moment and its image in the work of art represents both the reciprocity and co-dependence of preservation and negation, as well as the dangerous potential effects of disconnecting preservation and negation. The work of art's autonomy comes from the fact that a negative and critical *fait social* is expressed in the work of art. Even though it is difficult for the socio-historical moment to perceive itself in the image held up to it by immanent critique, finding affirmation in the image held up to it by overt critique is far more dangerous, because it disconnects preservation from negation. Overt critique presents a critical standpoint within current logical and ideological structures rather than expressing these structures as instrumental and totalizing. Adorno notes that in order for society to *free itself from its own ideology*, it must recognize that *self-preserving* instinct of its logical structures even within overt critique. For Adorno, preservation and negation must be simultaneous. As will be shown in the third chapter, the inseparability of preservation and negation is one of the main reasons for which Adorno prefers the autonomous work of Beckett to the engaged work of Brecht.

In order to illustrate the work of art's ability to oppose via immanent critique, I will return to the example of the Burtynsky *Oil* exhibition. The photographs in the exhibition do not directly criticize the tar sands project. The photos are critical not because they engage in overt political or social critique. The act of simply showing the tailing ponds is a form of implicit critique. The photos are critical because they let the oil sands expose themselves as detrimental to the environment. The entire exhibition

is structured in a way that consciously avoids both the moralizing and the normative; the exhibition expresses the unconscious historiography of their epoch. As such, not only do the photographs preserve in a negative fashion, they open up a space for critique and interpretation during the aesthetic experience. When confronting the work of art, as will be discussed in greater detail in the final section of this chapter as well as in the following chapter, society confronts itself. Because the work of art is both a *fait social* and autonomous, and because it preserves society by incarnating its negative, the work of art fulfills its critical function.

IIc What is the function of the entity created by this preserving negation?

If the past is preserved in the artwork by negation, then what happens to this past? How does it become present and function within Adorno's conception of the memory work potential of the work of art? I would like to argue that the past is given a presence because the *Zeitkern* presents itself as an enigma and a cipher.

In his own words, Adorno claims: "All artworks – and art altogether are enigmas [...]"⁶³ In her reading of Adorno, Buck-Morss states that social reality is visible in the work of art as:

[...] a code language, 'ciphers' of sociohistorical truth, whose translation into the conceptual language of Marx and Freud provided their interpretation, making it possible to 'transform' them into a readable text [...] These optical puzzles are called *Vexierbilder* in German, which was how Benjamin described the fragments he published as *Einbahnstrasse* (1928). Adorno used the term in his own writings [...]⁶⁴

⁶³ *Ibid*, 120.

⁶⁴ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 102-103.

I concur with Buck-Morss's reading. As a cipher, the work of art figures as a text to be decoded.⁶⁵ If the work of art is a text to be decoded then the decoding reveals the work's immanent, contingent, ephemeral, and historical truth. Deciphering exposes the socio-historical moment that is preserved via negation in the artwork, or, in other words, the *immanence of society in the work of art* is revealed.

Adorno characterizes the work of art's text as enigmatic rather than clear. It is open to interpretation rather than closed in a univocal fashion. Adorno writes: "That artworks say something and in the same breath conceal it expresses this enigmaticalness from the perspective of language."⁶⁶ In arguing that the work of art, like language, simultaneously says something and conceals it, Adorno implies that they pose riddles to be interpreted. That which needs to be interpreted is the historical truth content.

In becoming a cipher of the past, where the past is preserved and negated, the work of art becomes a dialectical image. It is a dialectical image because the social-historical reality of the past is given a presence whose enigmatic nature invites interpretation. The enigmatic nature of the dialectical image is what, for Adorno, presents an opportunity for a working through of the past. This idea will be developed in the next chapter.

⁶⁵ In a similar reading, Miriam Hansen has described the text constituted by the work of art as *hieroglyphic*. See Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer," in Pensky, *The Actuality of Adorno*, 86. For commentary on Hansen's reading see Hohendahl, "Adorno: The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language," in Pensky, *Actuality of Adorno*, 77.

⁶⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 120.

III Conclusion to Chapter One

This chapter looked at Adorno's conception of the work of art's ability to preserve the past by negating it. I argued that the formation of the work of art's *Zeitkern* is due to its being both a *fait social* and autonomous. I also argued that, for Adorno, the work of art appears as a cipher whose historical truth content needs to be deciphered and can thus be considered a dialectical image. But the question is how do we read these ciphers? What do they tell us about ourselves? How does the work of art transcend its borders?

While I have shown how the work of art preserves and negates the past, and in so doing, I demonstrated the immanent character of society in the artwork, to see how the past is transcended through the artwork, I will need to examine the immanence of the artwork in society. The second chapter (on transcendence) will look at this relationship, while the final chapter (on Beckett and Brecht) will illustrate how the work of art engages in memory work.

Chapter 2: Transcendence: Interpreting the Cipher - How to Read the Work of Art as Dialectical Image

I Transcendence

My depiction of Adorno's conception of the *Zeitkern* in the previous chapter showed that once the past becomes immanent in the artwork two things happen: first, the past is permanently and irrevocably preserved and negated in the artwork, second, the entity created by this process may be considered to be a dialectical image. In order to

complete the analysis of how the work of art permits for a dialectical working through of the past we need to look at transcendence, the third part of dialectical sublation. A puzzling question arises immediately: how can something whose fundamental characteristic is its immanence (such as the socio-historical moment in the work of art) also have a form of transcendence? How does the past that is in the work of art go beyond its monadic limits?

In this chapter I will argue that, for Adorno, transcendence of the past occurs when the work of art, conceived as a dialectical image, becomes a *Zeitkern* in its own right and that this *Zeitkern* is lodged within history. Thus if the main argument of the previous chapter established both that the work of art *has* a *Zeitkern* and examined its significance, this chapter argues that the work of art *is* a *Zeitkern* whose significance is the role it plays in Adorno's conception of memory work. I will argue that while the past is preserved and negated in the work of art, for Adorno, its transcendence occurs through the work of art. In so doing, I will show how the work of art's immanent socio-historical moment remains intact while simultaneously being transcended via the place of the work of art in a larger and changing historical context

While the past is preserved and negated by the work of art, the past is transcended through the work of art. The difference between *by* and *through* will become apparent during this chapter as the work of art, with its *Zeitkern*, will be characterized as a vessel of mediation between the socio-historical moment when the work was created and the ever-changing socio-historical moment in which the work is interpreted. This chapter will analyze both how the work of art becomes a *Zeitkern*, and the dual

temporality of the artwork. I will therefore first examine what Adorno means by transcendence in the context of the work of art and the past. This will introduce the concept of duality where the past's immanence makes its transcendence possible. Second, I will examine Adorno's concept of interpretation. This chapter concludes the investigation into the structural elements of the work of art that permit it to engage in memory work.

Ia The Material of Transcendence: What is the nature of that which is involved in transcendence?

In the previous chapter I argued that the work of art has a *Zeitkern* that is comprised of the preserved and negated socio-historical moment. The work then becomes a dialectical image and thus a cipher. I would now like to argue that when the work of art becomes a dialectical image and a cipher, it also becomes a *Zeitkern*. I wish to draw the following analogy: just as the socio-historical moment permeates and remains sealed in the work of art, so too does the work of art become a closed piece of history that is set within a larger historical context. The dual use of the idea of the *Zeitkern* produces an interesting effect: the temporal core of the work of art remains intact and impenetrable while the work itself gets exposed to historical time. It is through this process, according to Adorno, that transcendence of the past through the mediation of the work of art occurs.

Adorno's approach to the place of the artwork within history is unique in that it is concerned with both the inner time and the outer time of the work. Unlike a historicist approach that stresses a contextual analysis, and a response driven approach that focuses on the history of the artwork's reception, Adorno's approach is

not historical. Instead, Adorno understands the place of artwork in history as one in which the inner time of the artwork conditions the outer response to it. The effect of this conditioning can be seen by examining Adorno's thoughts relative to both historicist and reception based approaches.

It is relatively easy to distinguish Adorno's concepts from those of a historicist approach to art. In a historicist approach, the emphasis is placed upon the *Zeitkern* within the work of art. The viewer and critics seek to establish a connection with the artwork by contextualizing it within a general historical narrative as well as within the history of art. For Adorno, while the work of art does contain a historical constellation, it is not the re-construction of this constellation that is the primary role of critique and aesthetic theory. Hullot-Kentor writes that in Adorno's conception of aesthetics: "[...] works are not studied in the interest of returning them to their own time and period, documents of 'how it really was,' but rather according to the truth they release in their own process of disintegration."⁶⁷ The idea of truth being released will be discussed in further detail in the second section of this chapter, in my analysis of Adorno's theory of interpretation. The key idea here is that perhaps outer time, or the work of art considered as a *Zeitkern* within a larger history, presents a more effective means of characterizing the possibility for the transcendence of the past in Adorno's concept of the work of art. However, this characterization brings Adorno's concepts into contact with reception-based approaches whose emphasis on the interpreters rather than that which is being interpreted seems, at first glance, close to Adorno's concept of the work of art as a *Zeitkern*.

⁶⁷ Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 83.

It is harder to distinguish Adorno's concepts from a reception based approach, because both are very interested in what happens outside of the work rather than strictly what is inside. Looking closer, the two conceptions of the work of art and the trajectory of the artwork throughout history differ because a theory focused on the reception of the work is interested solely in this trajectory while Adorno's theory is concerned with both the work of art's *Zeitkern* and the work as a *Zeitkern*. He is also interested in the relationship between the two entities. In order to look deeper at the significance of the difference between Adorno's theories and the response based approach, for example receptions theory,⁶⁸ I will examine one of Hohendahl's comments:

[Adorno] argues that the work of art, since it is not anything fixed or definite but something dynamic, shares its immanent temporality with both the whole and its parts by unfolding their relations through time. Just as artworks, given their processual nature, exist in history, they also vanish within the process of history (GS 7:266; AT 255). What Adorno suggests is more than the conventional notion that the reception of artworks changes with time, that the reception has its own history, instead, he makes the much stronger claim that the essence or spirit of the artwork, for which he uses the term *Geist*, is exposed to historical time. There is no timeless idea of the masterpiece; hence, it can expire like any other human product.⁶⁹

Here we see several important points. First Hohendahl states that there are two related dynamics at play: the immanent temporality (a constant interplay between the whole and the parts) and the exposure of this inner *Zeitkern* to history (a constant

⁶⁸ Reception Theory is a literary theory that focused on the importance of the reception of the work. The theorists analyzed and traced reader responses. Reception theory emerged in the 1960s but remained an influential school of thought for several decades. Much of the work was done in Germany. Hans-Robert Jauss is often considered the founder of reception theory. For an excellent introduction to Reception Theory, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Introduction to Reception Aesthetics," *New German Critique* No. 10 (Winter 1977): 29-63.

⁶⁹ Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, 198-199. For an excellent account of the difference between Adorno's aesthetic theory and receptions theory see Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. N. Solomon, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1998), 62.

interplay between the inner historical core and the history outside). The exposed dynamic is what I am calling the outer *Zeitkern*. Second, Hohendahl argues that Adorno has no concept of the *timeless masterpiece*. Hohendahl's comment suggests a concept of dual temporalities where one is inner and one is outer. Hohendahl argues that the simultaneity of the intact yet dynamic *Zeitkern* and the dynamism of the work of art as a *Zeitkern* accounts for the processual character of the work of art. There is thus an analogical relationship between the inner and outer dynamics of the work. These dual temporalities are also parallel to the dual temporalities introduced in my discussion of Adorno's interpretation of the hanging maids episode. The inner time of the artwork parallels the time preserved by the narrative (the maids perpetual struggle), while the outer time of the work parallels the time that moves on (the necks break, the story continues). The significance of the dual temporality concept will be discussed in further detail in the concluding section of this chapter.

From Hohendahl's reading, we see that for Adorno, two impossibilities present themselves: it is impossible to separate the reception of the work from the work itself, and it is also impossible to directly access the historical moment. The inner time, or more specifically, the past, cannot be taken out of the work of art but nor can it be ignored when discussing the truth content that is revealed by the work. The resolution of this tension is that for Adorno, the work uses the inner historical constellation of the work to illuminate the historical moment in which it finds itself.⁷⁰ The work of art may thus be considered a site of mediation; it mediates access to the inaccessible past. Returning again to the example of the *Odyssey*,

⁷⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 178. The idea of the artwork releasing truth in its decay (see Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 83) and illumination will be discussed in the second chapter of this study.

perhaps we could suggest that in suspending time in the brief moment in which the maids struggled against death, the work of art provides a moment for reflection. In this moment, it is not only the struggle of the maids that we contemplate. Instead, the struggling and suffering of the maids offers us the possibility to contemplate our own struggles against death. Not only are we given insight into the history and politics of ancient Greece, we are confronted by our own politics and history. The historical logic that created the work of art also creates the parameters of a changing but sustained response to it.

To understand Adorno's notion of how the work of art mediates our relationship to the past as well as how this differs from both a historicist and response based approach, consider a set of Russian *matryoshka* (nesting) dolls. The *Zeitkern* of the work is like the first indivisible figure, whose shape and character ultimately dictates the shape and character of the whole doll. The *Zeitkern* as the work is the stack of dolls whose layers represent the various incarnations the work has encountered during its historical wanderings. In this model, the doll itself, with its continually forming layers, is transcendent of its original context. Even the core, which remains completely intact and undisturbed in its unbroken immanence has a sort of transcendence. Looking at the example relative to my discussion of Adorno, the historicist approach, and the response based approach, I would suggest that: the historicist approach's focus would rest on the central figure; the response based approach's attention would be drawn to the layers; and Adorno would be most interested in how the innermost doll conditions the outer layers. No new layers can be added to the doll that do not respond to the shape and integrity both of the

innermost doll as well as the progressive layering of the whole. The work of art functions similarly: the preservation and negation of the past occurs by the *Zeitkern* at the core of the artwork, while the transcendence of the past occurs through the historical trajectory of the work of art when considered as a *Zeitkern*.⁷¹ Furthermore, just as Adorno's suggestion that the past lives on through *unbroken objective conditions*,⁷² the centripetal gravity of the whole stack of dolls is maintained by the persistent presence of the core doll. The notion of the innermost doll's centripetal gravity expresses both the inaccessibility and conditioning function of the historical moment. This relationship is the foundation of the work of art's ability to mediate the relationship of the present to the past.

To understand this mediation process we need to address the following questions: what happens to the *Zeitkern* that is the work of art as it finds itself in time? How is it exposed to history? How does the light of the inner historical constellation illuminate contemporary situations? To answer this question, the next section will examine interpretation, the process through which the past is transcended through the mediation of the work of art.

1b Interpretation: how does this transcendence function?

After having given an account of Adorno's concept of the work of art's transcendent character as that which mediates access to the past, this section will focus on the

⁷¹ For a similar idea see Adorno's comment "Benjamin once spoke of the traces that the innumerable eyes of the beholders have left behind on many paintings [...]" Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 193. The context of Adorno's comment is that the reception of the artwork cannot be neglected. For Adorno, the imprint of the eyes (the history of the reception) is fundamental to the aesthetic experience.

⁷² See note 4.

process through which the past is accessed: interpretation. I will examine the nature of Adorno's concept of interpretation in two steps. The first step looks at how the work of art needs interpretation. The second step uses Adorno's commentators to parse exactly what Adorno means by philosophical interpretation. What emerges will be a conception of interpretation of the work of art that is more akin to a form of self-reflection as opposed to a form of solving riddles.

First, for Adorno and his main commentators, the work of art itself is both in need of interpretation and calls for it. Adorno writes that the work of art is waiting for explication: "Artworks, especially those of the highest dignity, await their interpretation."⁷³ Amongst the most obvious example of this is a piece of theatre or music. A form of interpretation takes place every time a piece is played. While putting on a play gives a presence to the socio-historical moment in which the play was written and that is incarnated in the work itself, the interpretation of the play expresses more about the socio-historical moment in which the play is performed. Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, for example, are not to be considered as timeless masterpieces. Instead, these works of art are consistently and renewably timely in that they often offer the greatest insight into the contemporary socio-historical situation.

Not only does the work of art give the past a present as I argued in establishing the work of art as a medium of mediation, Adorno goes further and argues that it is the

⁷³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 128. For commentary see: Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 97; Max Pensky, "Editor's Introduction: The Actuality of Adorno," in Pensky, *The Actuality of Adorno*, 3-4; Albrecht Wellmer, *Versuch über Musik und Sprache*, (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2009), 151.

present that constitutes the past (rather than the past constituting the present).⁷⁴

Adorno is not talking about historical revisionism nor is he suggesting that the present is independent from the past. He is arguing that while the core of the artwork remains unalterable, at its surface level, the work of art may be interpreted in different ways. Similar to the way in which the innermost core of the *matryoshka* doll conditions all its subsequent layers, the historical core of the artwork ought to condition all of its subsequent interpretations. However, clearly a work of art may be co-opted for nefarious political purposes such as propaganda or the forging of a totalitarian founding myth. For Adorno, this is not just a misinterpretation of the work, but a rereading with a purpose beyond interpretation. As Adorno puts it, a work may become un-interpretable or, in perhaps the worst-case scenario, it may become ideology.⁷⁵

Even extreme instances of misinterpretation and rereading demonstrate Adorno's claim that we don't understand art, art understands us.⁷⁶ Our use and misuse of the work of art and the history immanent in the work of art express more about the way we understand ourselves than the way we understand the moment in which the work was created. Our self-understanding is conditioned by the historical core of the work. Moments in which the work is misinterpreted or reread without regard to the integrity of its core are dishonest and exploitative. Interpretation is thus the way in which we

⁷⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 41.

⁷⁵ See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 194 and 228.

⁷⁶ In his introduction to *Aesthetic Theory*, Hullot-Kentor cites Adorno's argument from his Beethoven work: "We don't understand music, it understands us." (See Hullot-Kentor, "Introduction," to Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, xii). Hullot-Kentor claims that this is analogously true for all forms of art. This is a point where Adorno's aesthetic theory differs from many other theories of art and interpretation of art.

understand ourselves by using the work of art and its *Zeitkern* as medium for self-reflection. Wellmer refers to this Adornian process as a *Reflexionspiel*.⁷⁷

However, performing a piece of theatre or music is only one kind of interpretation. More important for Adorno is the idea of philosophical interpretation.⁷⁸ The second point I want to explore is how philosophical interpretation works. Following several of Adorno's main commentators (Pensky, Foster, Bernstein, amongst others), I will argue that philosophical interpretation takes the form of critique and deciphering.⁷⁹ However, I will disagree with Pensky as to the nature of the riddles philosophical interpretation deciphers in Adorno's concept of the transcendence of the past through the work of art. This disagreement will ultimately allow me to finish my analysis of the work of art's temporal structures and show how these structures allow it to engage in memory work.

As Pensky argues, for Adorno interpretation is the principal task of philosophy:

[...] interpretation, - the only justifiable task left to post-idealist philosophy – was for the early Adorno the task of the revelation of historical truth, and this was to be had by the philosophical construction of historical images from out of the material of an inherently unstable, contradictory, and self-fragmenting text of the social world. To the interpreting gaze the social world appears not just as text but as riddle, as visual puzzle or *Vexierbild* [...]. The *solution* to textual puzzles however, must consist [...] [in] the inherently practical interpretation whereby the puzzle-like character of the real flashes into images which point indirectly toward the dissolution of the puzzle-like character of the real. Interpretation is thus the construction of historical constellations out of the waste products of social reality [...]⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Wellmer, *Versuch über Musik und Sprache*, 148-151.

⁷⁸ Commentators such as Hohendahl and Wellmer cite interpretation as key in terms of establishing the transcendent role of the artwork by situating it in a dialectical relationship with philosophy. See for example: Hohendahl, "Adorno, The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language," in Pensky, *Actuality of Adorno*, 78; Wellmer, *Versuch über Musik und Sprache*, 130, 151.

⁷⁹ See specifically Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 128-131.

⁸⁰ Pensky, "Introduction," in Pensky, *Actuality of Adorno*, 3-4.

While I agree with Pensky on the matter of the importance of philosophical interpretation of art, I disagree with him on three main points in his reading of Adorno's idea of this interpretation. The first point relates to Pensky's argument that philosophical interpretation constructs the dialectical images. My reading of Adorno has argued that the work of art becomes a dialectical image by virtue of its preservation and negation of the socio-historical moment at its inner *Zeitkern*. Philosophical interpretation, in my reading, involves the trajectory of the work of art as a *Zeitkern* throughout history. Pensky suggests that, for Adorno, the historical material of the social world is forged into historical images. I would argue that Bernstein's reading of the philosophical interpretation as a second reflection⁸¹ is closer to Adorno's conception.⁸² In siding with Bernstein over Pensky, I read Adorno's concept of the dialectical image to be made not during interpretation but rather during the creation of the work itself; creating these images is the role of art, while interpreting them is the role of philosophy. I would, however, take a key point from this aspect of Pensky's reading in that for Adorno, it is philosophy's role to read these images as coherent constellations in piecing together the *text of the social world*. This being the case, these texts are twice removed from the social world in that they are mediated first by art and second by philosophy.

⁸¹ Jay M. Bernstein, *Fate of Art – aesthetic alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 199. Bernstein argues that in using the *Zeitkern* as a medium for reflection, philosophical interpretation, for Adorno, may actually be considered as a form of second reflection on the socio-historical truth content that is immanent to the artwork. This reflection is considered to be a form of second reflection, because the work of art itself is a mimetic instantiation of the constituting socio-historical moment. In Bernstein's conception, the work of art, by its synthesis of various elements, functions reflectively in a philosophical manner. Philosophical interpretation of the work of art is thus a form of second reflection.

⁸² Please see notes 14 and 15 as well as my discussion of the dialectical image and how, for Adorno, its content is object from the introduction.

As second point that I want to make regarding interpretation contradicts Pensky's claim that for Adorno philosophy's role is to reveal historical truth. As I've already shown, in my reading of Adorno, the historical moment becomes inaccessible once it becomes immanent in the work of art.⁸³ I've also shown how for Adorno, interpretation of the work of art reveals more about the moment in which the work is experienced as opposed to the moment in which it was created. Philosophical interpretation works in the same way. We see this idea in the following citation where Adorno writes about the role of aesthetics:

History is immanent to the truth content of aesthetic. For this reason it is the task of historico-philosophical analysis of the situation to bring to light in a rigorous fashion what was formerly held to be the apriori of aesthetic. The aesthetic that is needed today would be the self-consciousness of the truth content of what is radically temporal. This clearly demands, as the counterpoint to the analysis of the situation, that traditional aesthetic categories be confronted with this analysis; it is exclusively this confrontation that brings the artistic movement and the movement of the concept into relation.⁸⁴

In a manner analogous to the interpretation of a theatre piece, philosophical interpretation does not open the *Zeitkern* and re-establish its truth content in a historicist manner. In order to understand Adorno's emphasis on the idea of *self-consciousness* of the *radically temporal truth*, I would again refer to Bernstein's depiction of Adorno's concept of philosophical interpretation as a form of second reflection that uses the work of art as a medium through which to interpret and critique contemporary culture.⁸⁵ Even though philosophical interpretation perceives the violence that was to come in European artwork of the 1920s and 1930s, the primary task of philosophical interpretation is to perceive the presence of this violence. The

⁸³ See note 28 as well as my discussion of the objectivation of the socio-historical moment in Chapter 1 section 1b.

⁸⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 357.

⁸⁵ See note 81.

presence of violence automatically relates to the *unbroken objective conditions* in which the past is still at large and through which any form of memory must work. The notion of being able to see the violence that was to come combined with the idea that art facilitates a self-reflection might allow us to perceive the violence that could come about within our own midst. This possibility will be examined in greater detail in the conclusion of this project when I discuss the temporality of the artwork and how this temporality relates to memory.

A third and final point that challenges Pensky's characterization of Adorno's concept of philosophical interpretation relates to the process itself. Pensky's asserts that interpretation provides a *solution* to the work of art's riddles. I find this to be problematic because for Adorno, while each work is a *nexus of a problem*,⁸⁶ a solution to these problems does not materialize in the interpretive process. The work of art maintains its enigmatic character because the historical truth content that is at its core—in other words, its *Zeitkern*—cannot be deciphered even though one can experience the artwork. Adorno gives the analogous example of a rainbow: “If one seeks to get a closer look at a rainbow, it disappears.”⁸⁷ When talking about the rainbow one recounts an experience of the rainbow; it is impossible to recount the rainbow itself. The answer to the riddle of the artwork does not lie in the artwork itself, but rather in the experience of the artwork.

However, as Foster notes, just because the riddle of the artwork cannot be *solved* doesn't mean that it cannot be *dissolved*. Foster writes:

⁸⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 358.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 122.

The model of philosophy that Adorno proposes in [*The Actuality of Philosophy*] is that of a form of interpretation, the aim of which is to dissolve what Adorno calls ‘riddles’ (1971a, 334-335) The interpreter of riddles, Adorno argues does not look at the riddle as the ‘image of being lying behind it,’ [...] ‘Genuine philosophical interpretation,’ Adorno claims, ‘does not come upon a persisting meaning that lies behind the question’; rather it ‘lights it up suddenly and consumes it at the same time.’” A response of the first sort would be one that *answered* the riddle rather than *dissolving* it.⁸⁸

I agree with Foster in his characterization of Adorno’s metaphorical concept of interpretation as dissolving rather than solving. In order to explicate the notion of interpretation as dissolving riddles, I need to continue with Foster. The continuation of the above citation takes his argument one step further and looks at the nature of the riddle itself. He writes:

Genuine philosophical interpretation [...] would reveal the riddle as a symptom; the riddle is used as the key with which to decode the life conditions that make the riddle appear in the first place. This is why interpretation both ‘lights up’ the riddle [...] and at the same time consumes it – it shows that the riddle cannot be answered on its own terms because its very appearance is dependent on certain features of the life context. The riddle is dissolved because its dependence is revealed.⁸⁹

These citations make three key claims relating to the transcendence of the past through the artwork. First, that the riddle is a *symptom* is another way of looking at the work of art’s *Zeitkern* as a manifestation of the non-identity. In this case we are drawn into the interpretation because of the symptom and we end up diagnosing our own condition. Second, and this point refers to why we end up diagnosing our own condition, not only is there no *image behind* the riddle for interpretation to light up in Foster’s reading of Adorno, interpretation neither *gives* the ‘meaning’ of the riddle, nor

⁸⁸ Foster *Adorno, The Recovery of Experience*, 48. For commentary on this see Hohendahl’s discussion of the difficulty faced when trying to decode the work of art. He compares it to a hieroglyph for which no code exists: “It is the peculiar nature of their linguistic code that they cannot be decoded; they are like hieroglyphs whose code is unknown or lost [...] [T]he late Adorno emphasizes the enigmatic character (*Rätselcharakter*) of the artwork, its incompatibility with discursive knowledge.” Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought*, 237.

⁸⁹ Foster, *Adorno, The Recovery of Experience*, 48.

does it expose a hidden meaning (*Hintersinn*).⁹⁰ Foster's reading of Adorno's concepts of riddles and interpretation as dissolution rather than solution works in the opposite manner. *Lighting up*, in Foster's reading is what philosophical interpretation does. The illumination of the riddle does not occur when the riddle is solved and a meaning is revealed. Instead, both the riddle itself and its "[...] dependence on socio-historical experience [...]"⁹¹ are illuminated thus revealing the riddle as its own solution. In other words, there is no fixed or determined solution to the riddle. The riddle becomes the perpetual key to unlocking the socio-historical moment in which it finds itself. It is for this reason that Foster reads Adorno's concept of interpretation as dissolution and illuminating. The riddle is continuously dissolved throughout history each time illuminating a different but connected response. The lighting up and dissolution of the riddle inside the work of art that occurs during interpretation accounts for the transcendence of the past via the work of art's mediation.

Foster's reading of interpretation as dissolving riddles is closer to Adorno's notion that the work of art releases truth content as it decays⁹² than Pensky's reading of interpretation as solving the riddles. In Foster's reading, Adorno's concept of interpretation is actually a self-reflective and critical exercise. For Adorno, the work of art's riddle, like the work itself, is both historically contingent and exposed to historical time, the dynamics of dissolution and decay are a better characterization than a static solution.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 49. Foster also draws parallels between Adorno and Wittgenstein on this matter.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 49.

⁹² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 178. Bernstein describes this *decay* as the *collapse of artwork in history* and argues that what is important is that which is revealed through art. See Bernstein, *Fate of Art*, 248-249. For Adorno, the task of philosophy is to confront this decay. See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 224, 236-237.

In order to illustrate this difference and conclude the discussion of riddles and interpretation, I want to look at the example of the riddle in two classical instances: Oedipus and Penelope.⁹³ Pensky's concept of philosophy solving the artwork's riddles is similar to that of Oedipus solving the riddle of the Sphinx; for the Sphinx, there is only one right answer. The singular response to the Sphinx's riddle claims to be eternal and universal: it is man who walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening. The Sphinx's concept of the riddle does not correspond to Adorno's concept of the riddle, because for Adorno the riddle of the artwork is a problem without a solution, let alone one particular response to it.

By contrast, Foster's conception of the riddle is more like Adorno's. This can be illustrated by examining another example of a riddle from antiquity: Penelope's riddle or testing of Odysseus. Penelope challenges the man claiming to be her husband by testing his knowledge of their intimate secrets. Penelope and Odysseus's bed, carved from an olive tree growing through their bedroom, is unmoveable without destroying the bed itself, and in so doing, the space that conditions their intimacy. When Penelope asks him to move their bed into the hall, Odysseus is enraged. His fury dissolves her doubt; the man before her can be none other than the only other person privy to the bed's secret.⁹⁴ Penelope's concept of the riddle does correspond to

⁹³ Please note two things: first that I'm using the term 'riddle' a bit literally. While the riddle of the Sphinx is undeniably a riddle, the 'riddle' that Penelope uses to ascertain the authenticity of Odysseus' identity claim is less a traditional riddle and more a test. I am using the idea of the riddle as a test in order to show how, for Adorno, the riddle or test does not have one right answer. Second, the riddle of the Sphinx is not fully articulated in Sophocles' work, though the riddle itself is well known and has come to us through many other sources such as Apollodorus.

⁹⁴ See Homer, *The Odyssey*, 447-448. The test is the main subject of Book Twenty-Three: The Trunk of the Old Olive Tree.

Adorno's concept of the riddle, because the dissolution of the riddle illuminates both the riddle (how do I know that you are who you say you are) and the solution (I will show you that I am myself). That Odysseus and Penelope's bed had its own particular secret makes the nature of the riddle different from the Sphinx's riddle that has one universal and eternal answer.

The juxtaposition of these two kinds of riddles demonstrates one fundamental point with regards to Adorno's concept of deciphering the work of art. When Oedipus gives the Sphinx the anticipated solution to her riddle, she opens the border of Thebes for him. He is thus unknowingly doomed to his own particular fate as the one who murders his father and sleeps with his mother. Even if other people solve the Sphinx's riddle they do not doom themselves to Oedipus's fate. The Sphinx's riddle has a universal solution that unlocks a particular condition. Conversely, when Odysseus dissolves Penelope's riddle thus exposing his true self, she opens the border of their bed for him. He thus knowingly assumes his own particular fate as her husband. No one else could have solved her riddle, however, while Odysseus and Penelope's bed has its own particular secret, it stands for the universal condition of all beds having their own particular secrets. Odysseus' riddle solving, and the riddle itself, illuminates the condition of secrets and trust in the sphere of the intimate. While interpretation cannot discern the secrets of this particular bed, interpretation can read this as a moment of intimacy that permits us to reflect on our own intimate experiences. Whereas the Oedipus example illustrates the idea of how solving a universal riddle can unlock a particular fate, the Odysseus example illustrates the idea of how dissolving a particular riddle can shed light on a universal phenomenon.

Adorno's concept of interpretation as the dissolution of the work of art's riddles is analogous to the Odysseus example. When interpreting the socio-historical truth in the artwork, we cannot get inside its *Zeitkern*. However, reflecting on this moment gives us insight into our own socio-historical context. As with Penelope's particular riddle that only Odysseus can answer illuminating the concept of intimacy, the historical suffering within the work of art helps us to see suffering in our own midst. Thus the work of art, like a riddle, invites a self-reflection that mediates our relationship to the past.

II Conclusion

This chapter has developed the idea that transcendence of the past via the work of art is linked with its privileged position that invites interpretation. The work of art's transcendent function is that of mediation between two temporalities, the temporality of the artwork (the past) and the temporality of the interpretation (the present).

Adorno's concept of interpretation offers a vision of a relationship between riddle and interpretation where by being impenetrable, the riddle itself casts light on the ciphers of the present world. For Adorno, the transcendence of the past through its immanence in the work of art has to do with its ability to illuminate the presence of the past in various institutions of contemporary culture. It is through this process of illumination that the past is transcended via the mediation of the work of art.

Furthermore, this interpretation takes the form of self-reflection. This transcendence depends upon Adorno's notion that the past is both preserved and negated in the

work of art thus allowing interpretation to occur without disturbing the work's original *Zeitkern*, by becoming a *Zeitkern* itself within history. Because the work of art has an intact *Zeitkern* and is a *Zeitkern*, in other words, because the work of art contains history and is in history, the work of art gives the past a presence. The past is not preserved as something sacred, static, or dead, rather the past is given the space necessary to be a dynamic force. Just as the preservation and negation processes utilize the dual character of the work of art as both autonomous entity as well as a *fait social*, our reactions to the work of art and interpretations of the work of art stem from both autonomous and socially constrained places. However, while we are conditioned by our respective socio-historical constraints, the work of art calls to the potential autonomous subjectivity within every individual engaging with the work.⁹⁵ In this way the work of art mediates memory work while both respecting the dynamic presence and continuous influence of the past, and fostering the sort of subjectivity that Adorno saw as the only possible way to prevent the continuous and perpetual return to barbarism.

The possibility of the work of art acting as the mediating third term in a temporal equation between the past and how it is worked through in the present is fundamental to Adorno's conception of memory. Because of its ability to preserve and negate the

⁹⁵ Adorno's identification of subjectivity as a problem (the weak *I*, the lack of an autonomous subject), remains an important social and philosophical question. One suggestion, recently posed by Iain Macdonald in his article "Cold, cold, warm: Autonomy, intimacy and maturity in Adorno," highlights the Adornian notion of *participation in the warmth of things*, or intimacy, as a condition of possibility for subjectivity. Macdonald cites a dialectical relationship between autonomy and intimacy in Adorno's work. I wonder if the objectivation of the past via the work of art might be an example of *participation in the warmth of things*. Perhaps the expression of the past in the work of art and the subsequent temporal presence it achieves fulfils Macdonald's description of expressivity in Adorno as "[...] objectively mediated subjectivity [that] can smash through the façades of the status quo." Iain Macdonald, "Cold, cold, warm: Autonomy, intimacy and maturity in Adorno," in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37(6), (April 2011), pp. 669-689, 679.

past, the work of art is an effective response to the question of memory as working through (*Aufarbeitung*) the past. In order to see how this transpires, we will spend the next chapter engaging in a reading of two works of art. Because it anticipates staging which means that the text is always brought to the reader by an interpretation, the piece of theatre is an ideal way of looking at interpretation because it must be interpreted. I will look at two plays, Beckett's *Endgame* and Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. Adorno wrote extensively on these authors and views them as polar opposites when it comes to *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*.

Chapter Three: “Denn wovon lebt der Mensch?” (What keeps mankind alive?): Adorno, Beckett, and Brecht

This chapter will examine Adorno's concept of how the sublation of the past in and by the work of art is a form of memory work by giving a reading of Adorno's reading of Beckett's *Endgame* and Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. The examination will allow me to conclude this project because it will evaluate both the philosophical framework I established in the previous two chapters and how it resonates when confronted with the aesthetic experience. The close examination of these two very different examples will show how art can engage in memory work when it preserves and negates the past and functions as a mediation for the past's transcendence. It will also show how dangerous the work of art becomes when it fails to meet the above criteria.

The hypothesis of this chapter is a reiteration of the thesis of this entire study: the work of art sublates the past and in so doing, works through it. This chapter will demonstrate that the more a work of art strives to engage critically with the socio-

historical moment in which it is created, the less it is able to attain its autonomy. So while the ‘engaged’ work of art can be thought of as a *fait social* and as critical, engagement precludes the kind of negation that is necessary to allow for the past in the work to transcend. Preservation without negation prevents transcendence from occurring. Taken into the context of this investigation: Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* leaves no room for interpretation and thus while the past has a presence, its presence is that of a relic that is closely aligned with the eternal return to barbarism. The piece that is effective when it comes to memory work, Beckett’s *Endgame*, is able to preserve and negate the past, and thus serves as a medium for its transcendence. The examination of the two pieces of theatre will give us final insight into the nature of this memory work. We will be able to see why it is imperative work for Adorno and why the work of art is the best means through which it can take place.

Clearly there are many difficulties with the examples I have chosen to investigate. As such, this chapter will not be a strict comparison or even an analysis of a general Brecht vs. Beckett scenario. Instead, I am focusing on several points Adorno makes about these two pieces. I have chosen these two plays for several reasons: first they are plays, second, Adorno writes about them, and third, these are the most performed, indicative, and cultural relevant of the authors’ works. On the first point, as already indicated in the previous chapter pieces of theatre and music both and necessitate a double form of interpretation. The way in which these pieces may be and are interpreted will prove to be one of the major differences between them. On the second point, Adorno’s writing on Beckett and Brecht partially anchor the larger engaged art vs. autonomous art debate that underscores much of his writing on art

and aesthetics. On the final point, because they are the most performed, we can assume a sort of contemporary cultural resonance. Audiences sat down to these pieces when they were respectively written and continue to sit down to these pieces today. The very different ways in which *Endgame* and *The Threepenny Opera* function exemplify why one piece is a successful sublation of the past and the other fails in this regard to dangerous effect.

In fact, it is the very reasons why these pieces are difficult to compare that allow me to argue that Beckett's *Endgame* performs a sort of Adornian memory work and Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* does not. I consider these main differences to be three caveats that I must announce before launching into the chapter: first, the particular socio-historical moment in which the pieces were written (one in Weimar and one post-World War II France); second, the material of the pieces (one is a collaborative musical re-working of John Gay's *The Beggars' Opera*, while the other is a sparse play); and third, interpretation (one encourages being set in different times and contexts and the other has very strict stage directions and eschews all variations). Looking at these caveats will allow me to structure this chapter along the following lines: preservation of the socio-historical context, negation and critique, and transcendence as interpretation.

I Preservation: Saying (Engagement) vs. Expressing (Autonomy)

The contexts in which *The Threepenny Opera* and *Endgame* were written are utterly different and yet not entirely at odds: in *The Threepenny Opera*, one can read echoes of the catastrophe in whose aftermath *Endgame* is set. Brecht and Weill wrote *The*

Threepenny Opera in Berlin in 1928. It was the height of the *roaring twenties* during the decadent years of the Weimar Republic. There was hyperinflation, the American stock market was about to crash, and the Nazis had begun their rise to power and prominence. Beckett's *Endgame* premiered in London in 1957. Like *The Threepenny Opera*, *Endgame* was written between and during wars. The Second World War had finished with the dropping of Fat Man and Little Boy over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, The Cold War was in full swing (though it clearly hadn't reached its zenith), and further nuclear war certainly loomed as a possibility. This section will look at how the two works of art preserve the socio-historical moment that imbues their particular *Zeitkern*. The concept of preservation takes us into Adorno's discussion of engaged art vs. autonomous art.

While Adorno's main target in his 1962 *Commitment* piece is Sartre,⁹⁶ he does level heavy criticism at Brecht. The crux of Adorno's critique of Brecht's *commitment* relates to how his work preserves the socio-historical moment, or, using the terminology I have been developing, how the work preserves the *Zeitkern* of the work of art. I want to look at two things that Adorno says relating to the question of how the past is preserved in the committed work. I will give both of the citations and then analyze them. First:

⁹⁶ See Adorno, "Commitment," in *Notes to Literature Volume Two* (the page references are in parentheses). The first half of the essay verges on the polemical against Sartre. Adorno claims that political engagement in art is either ambiguous or propaganda (77). He attacks Sartre specifically on several grounds: first the contradiction between his scepticism in literature's ability to effect change and the overtly pedagogical tone of his work (80), second the appropriation of Sartre's *philosophical* works and phrases like "Hell is other people" by the culture industry (81), third the banal and dangerous nature of these phrases that could be co-opted by any regimes including *his mortal enemies* (81). Though Adorno does not directly make the point in this essay, the schism between what Sartre said and what he did resulting in an incoherent life could also be grounds on which to condemn him and his work. See for example: "The rough-and-tumble adolescent masculinity of the young Brecht already betrays the false courage of the intellectual who, out of despair about violence, short-sightedly goes over to a violent praxis of which he has every reason to be afraid." (86-87)

What weighs heaviest against commitment in art is that even good intentions sound a false note when they are noticeable; they do so all the more when they disguise themselves because of that. There is some of this even in the later Brecht, in the linguistic gesture of wisdom, the fiction of the old peasant saturated with epic experience as the poetic subject.⁹⁷

Second:

In Germany commitment in art amounts primarily to parroting what everybody is saying, or at least what everybody would like to hear. Hidden in the notion of a ‘message,’ of art’s manifesto, even if it is politically radical, is a moment of accommodation to the world; the gesture of addressing the listener contains a secret complicity with those being addressed, which can, however, be released from their illusions only if that complicity is rescinded.⁹⁸

This criticism of Brecht and committed art can be summed up by the following statement: the more a work tries to show an audience a particular reflection of itself, the more the image ends up either coming across as precious, or showing the viewers exactly what they want to see. In both cases the image is affirmative, either one already agrees or one will never be convinced.⁹⁹ Also in both cases, the image fails to inhere and subsequently to reflect the subtleties of what is really going on in a particular socio-historical moment.

The citations above convey two of Adorno’s two thoughts on committed art: the first is that good intentions ring false, and the second is that committed art tells the audience what they want to hear. Both of these thoughts lead to the conclusion that the committed work of art misses the point. In telling the audience what it wants to hear, or, by holding up an image of society that is a projection rather than a piece of society, the preservation taking place in the committed work of art’s *Zeitkern* actually

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 87.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 93.

⁹⁹ See Adorno’s comment: “The demeanour of the didactic drama recalls the American expression ‘preaching to the saved.’” Adorno, *Notes to Literature Volume Two*, 84.

works against the intention of the artwork. The more the artist tries to force or engage the audience with images of the socio-historical moment, the more this depiction becomes a projection rather than an instantiation. The art image then becomes an exaggeration or a caricature. Even more importantly, the image *The Threepenny Opera* holds before the audience is one where they do not find themselves implicated. In this image the capitalists are the bad guys, the murderers are the heroes, and the system is to blame for all of this. In other words, the audience does not see itself reflected in the image of the piece. This is an example of the danger resulting from the incomplete negation I discussed in chapter one. The danger is that it becomes easy for the audience to respond by saying *they* are evil, and *I* am exonerated from the possibility of evil because *I* agree with this play. This *I* is an example of what Adorno meant by the idea of the weak subject, a theme that is everywhere in his work, but very specifically referenced in *The Meaning of Working Through the Past*.¹⁰⁰ From this reference we can infer that Brecht's didactic plays only exacerbate this problem. Put in the context of Adorno's theories surrounding the *Zeitkern*, we see that what is preserved about the socio-historical context of the Weimar Republic is in fact its failure. In hindsight and retrospect we can clearly read the traces of what was to come but the question is could those in the audience anticipate the catastrophe?

If *The Threepenny Opera* provides an example of the ability of engaged art to preserve the socio-historical moment only in its failure, then *Endgame* provides an example of how autonomous art preserves the socio-historical moment in its success. Adorno argues that rather than saying what everyone wants to hear and thus ringing somehow

¹⁰⁰ See Adorno, *Critical Models*, 91, 94, 111.

false, Beckett's *Endgame says the unsayable* by expressing the socio-historical moment about which nothing can really be said, because there is nothing to say. He writes: "[...] everyone shrinks from [Beckett's work] in horror, and yet none can deny that these eccentric novels and plays are about things everyone knows and no one wants to talk about."¹⁰¹ Adorno sums up the difference between Beckett and Brecht in the following passage:

Beckett's *ecce homo* is what has become of human beings [...]. All commitment to the world has to be cancelled if the idea of the committed work of art is to be fulfilled, the polemical alienation that Brecht the theoretician had in mind, and that he practiced less and less the more he devoted himself sociably to the human. This paradox, which may sound too clever, does not require much support from philosophy. It is based on an extremely simple experience: Kafka's process and Beckett's plays and his genuinely colossal novel *The Unnamable* have an effect in comparison to which official works of committed art look like children's games – they arouse the anxiety that existentialism only talks about. In dismantling illusion they explode art from the outside, hence only illusorily. Their implacability compels the change in attitude that committed works only demand.¹⁰²

The difference between the work of art incarnating and then reflecting what everyone wants to hear and what everyone knows but cannot or won't say is profound and cuts to the heart of the confrontation between engaged and autonomous art. While both engaged and autonomous art preserve their particular socio-historical moments as their *Zeitkern*, whereas the autonomous work expresses this moment via a mimetic process, the engaged work only expresses the moment indirectly. The moment is expressed in the schism between the simplified and normative vision of reality espoused in the piece and its placid reception by the audience.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 90.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 90.

In one sense, the post-catastrophic world that is the *Zeitkern* in Beckett's *Endgame* and the pre-catastrophic world that echoes in the *Zeitkern* of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* are linked by their relationship to the catastrophe. In another sense, these two pieces of theatre function completely differently. While we can retrospectively see the catastrophe to come in *The Threepenny Opera*, we read it not in the blatant intention of Brecht's text but rather in its miscalculation. In attempting to simultaneously alienate and educate the audience by telling them what they wanted to hear he only managed to implicate them without their knowledge or acceptance. Beckett's *Endgame*, on the other hand, preserves the past because it is both of and, as we shall see in the next section, against the socio-historical moment. Whereas the autonomous art cannot but preserve, that which is preserved in and by the engaged work is its failure. In the next section of this chapter I will examine the nature of this failure by looking closer at the question of negation in the works.

II Negation: Critique of Critique

The previous section looked at how the past was preserved in *The Threepenny Opera* and *Endgame*. This section looks at how these two theatre pieces negate the past via critique. I will show that while both pieces manage to preserve the past, only *Endgame* negates it when judging the works by the criteria of Adorno's concept of critique. On the flipside, *The Threepenny Opera* could be criticized using this criterion because in not achieving what it sets out to achieve, Brecht's engaged art ends up reproducing the very logic that it is trying to criticize. One of the ways in which to examine how the work of art criticizes and in so doing, negates the socio-historical moment that it preserves is to look at the fundamental question it poses and how this question is

posed. I would like to conduct this examination in the cases of *The Threepenny Opera* and *Endgame*.

Recalling how Adorno claims that Brecht's work *preaches to the saved*¹⁰³ and tells the audience what they want to hear¹⁰⁴ we can look at the two main claims Brecht makes in *The Threepenny Opera*. Brecht's main claims take the form of questions. Both questions (and responses) come during the finales of various acts of the opera. The first question comes at the second act with the *Ballade Über die Frage wovon lebt der Mensch*, usually translated as *Ballad About the Question: What Keeps Mankind Alive*. The second question comes towards the end of the third act ends when a soon-to-be-executed Macheath asks: "What's breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank?"¹⁰⁵ Both questions have implicit and contained answers. The first question is answered in the ballad when Macheath and the Chorus describe how man lives first by eating and then later comes *die Moral*. Furthermore, since there really isn't enough to eat, or rather because of social organization so many people do not get enough to eat, mankind does not live by morals. In response to the question "Denn wovon lebt der Mensch" (What keeps mankind alive?) the Chorus' response is: "Ihr Herren, bildet euch nur da nichts ein,/Der Mensch lebt nur von Missetat allein!"¹⁰⁶ (Gentlemen, don't fool yourselves, mankind lives by evil deeds alone). The answer to

¹⁰³ See note 99.

¹⁰⁴ See notes 97-98.

¹⁰⁵ Macheath also asks: "What's a jemmy compared with a share certificate? [...]What's murdering a man compared with employing a man?" Bertolt Brecht, *Collected Plays: 2*, ed. J. Willett and R. Manheim, (London: Methuen Drama World Classics, 2010), 166.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 145-146. This is usually translated as follows: And now for once you must try to face the facts. Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts" – this is not a particularly accurate translation. The translators were charged with finding a way of rendering the sentence and sentiment that matched the flow and rhythm of the music. I think that a more appropriate translation would be something to the effect of: "Gentlemen, don't fool yourselves - mankind lives by evil deeds alone." Thanks to Agata Lisiak, Florian Duijsens, and Kathrin Bimesdörfer for help with the translation.

the second question is implicit in the structure, characterization, and content of the play: clearly the capitalists are the most evil criminals.

Putting these two questions and answers together demonstrates how Brecht's text fails to meet Adorno's criteria of critique and negation. Brecht's work poses rhetorical questions whose answers are obvious and almost catechistic. This is not the negation and critique that Adorno deems necessary for the creation of the dialectical image and the sublation that must take place in order for the past to be worked through. Similar to his critique of Sartre's "hell is other people,"¹⁰⁷ Adorno claims that the hybrid formed by the conflation of philosophy and didactic art in Brecht cannot negate because it actually affirms its particular socio-historical order. In celebrating the poor and creating new and glamorous working class heroes out of shady underworld figures, Brecht does not go far enough in his critique of the system. Instead, he finds and confirms new figureheads for a new world order. This is because Brecht's cast of characters, whether they are beggars, murderers, prostitutes, or the aristocracy of the underclass, perform the roles of heroic archetypes. Even if these characters are not traditional heroes, they are still heroes; they follow the logic of heroism even if their nature appears at first to subvert it. Brecht's text misses a point that Beckett makes very eloquently, there really are no heroes. For example, even though Brecht's Macheath is clearly not the dapper bandit from Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, caught in the sway of his *Morität*, famously added days before opening night at the request of lead

¹⁰⁷ Adorno writes about how Sartre's plays essentially masquerade as weakly argued philosophical arguments which could by their very nature be consumed as any other cultural product: "The conjunction of readily graspable plots – and distillable ideas has brought Sartre great success and made him, certainly against his own intentions, acceptable to the culture industry." Adorno, *Notes to Literature Volume Two*, 81.

actor Harald Paulsen, the audience cannot help but be on the side of Macheath and experiencing relief when the Gilbert and Sullivan-esque messenger rides in with his pardon after being announced by the disappointed but unfazed beggar king Peachum.¹⁰⁸ Alex Ross characterizes Brecht's Macheath as a mixture of Doyle's Professor Moriarty and Lang's Dr. Mabuse. However, he also argues that Macheath represents an underside of the Weimar Republic, that which he calls the *fascination with masterminds*.¹⁰⁹ Ross argues that Hitler's use of the image of the plotting Jew, could easily be read in Brecht's Macheath.¹¹⁰ The audience remains firmly on the side of Macheath, while clearly the political mechanism of Germany in the 1930s was not on the side of the seeming conspirator. Why this schism?

As already mentioned in the discussion of how the work preserves the past, *The Threepenny Opera* presents the audience with an affirmative image even though it pretends to present a form of critique. In suggesting that the real criminal is the one who founds the bank and the real enemy is the capitalist social order, the work is merely preserving and affirming a particular engaged response to a socio-historical moment. This moment is not *impressed* upon the work in the manner in which Adorno argues takes place in negation. Instead, the work is an obvious construction of social reality. Because it feeds them what they want to hear, the result does not shock the

¹⁰⁸ At the beginning of the scene Peachum ironically says: "Since this is opera, not life, you'll see Justice give way before humanity." Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, 168.

¹⁰⁹ Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: listening to the twentieth century*, (New York: Picador Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007), 209.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 209.

audience into seeing what is really going on and thus *The Threepenny Opera* cannot be said to meet Adorno's criteria for negation.¹¹¹

What I have been arguing both in the previous section and in the beginning of this section is that *The Threepenny Opera* preserves the failure of the Weimar Republic by its own failure to negate the past because it is an engaged work of art. What I want to show now is that only an autonomous work of art actually succeeds in negating the past. Adorno's reading of Beckett's *Endgame* will provide the material for this argument. The end results will show how important negation is in terms of the work of art's ability to sublimate and thus work through the past.

If the main reason why *The Threepenny Opera* does not meet Adorno's criteria for negation is that in attempting to engage critically with the socio-historical moment it actually affirms it, in other words, it is purely a *fait social*, the main reason why *Endgame* does meet these criteria is that it is both a *fait social* and autonomous. The work's autonomy manifests in how it uses questions. Unlike in the case of Brecht's two main questions, Beckett's text is filled with mundane seeming questions such as:

What's the weather like?/Same as usual¹¹²

¹¹¹ Shock or shudder is an important aspect of creating a critical response to the work of art (see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 245). However, if Adorno finds consummate fault with Brecht on this matter, he is less dogmatically against Weill. In his 1929 piece on *The Threepenny Opera*, Adorno writes about interesting things that take place in the music itself. While the music seems at first glance to be hummable and easily consumable, it actually does attempt to subvert the culture industry. See Hinton's translation of Adorno's article on *The Threepenny Opera*: "Weill, who sees things from here and now, from the other side and from a three-dimensional perspective, against the background of things past, must, as it were, composed out in full what time has sketched on the face of those things in our consciousness. The bygone melodies are broken, and we hear their metrical regimentation as the piecing-together of fragments; in order to interpret old melodies, Weill composes his new ones, fragmentarily pieces together the debris of the empty phrases shattered by time." Stephen Hinton (ed), *Kurt Weill: The Threepenny Opera, Cambridge Opera Handbook*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 131. Much of the short article is devoted to exploring these aspects of the work.

How are your legs?/Bad¹¹³
 It isn't a ray of sunshine I feel on my face?/No/Am I very white? [...] Not more
 so than usual¹¹⁴

Unlike the inbuilt responses to Brecht's grand questions, there are no real profound and meaningful responses to Hamm and Clov's questions. Adorno focuses on the particular example of Hamm asking Clov when he looks out the window through his telescope if it is *already night* to which he responds *no*. The follow up question is *then what is it*. Clov's response, including Beckett's stage directions, is: "Grey (Lowering the telescope, turning towards Hamm, louder.) Grey! (Pause. Still louder.) GRREY."¹¹⁵ Grey seems to stand in for a sort of non-answer, and ambiguity, a void in which there is no meaning. This void of meaning underscores the ontological and empirical realms.¹¹⁶

For Adorno, this void accomplishes what the affirmative and engaged work cannot accomplish: it preserves the socio-historical moment by negating it, or in other words, in negatively expressing the inexpressible. I am using the concept negative expression that I developed in the chapter on negation whereby artistic expression is a *negative imprint* of the social world. In comparing *Endgame* with engaged art, Adorno writes:

¹¹² Samuel Beckett, *Endspiel. Fin de partie Endgame (Dreisprache Ausgabe)*, trans. S. Beckett and E. Tophoven, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 1974), 42.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 52.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 90.

¹¹⁵ Adorno references this in his essay "Understanding Endgame," *Notes to Literature Volume One*, trans. S. Weber Nicholsen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 199), 247. Please note that the page reference he gives, 31, is for another edition. Ross suggests that Weill's music expresses the tension of the Weimar Republic in the following manner: "Mack the Knife' is a song chained to one chord. It's a pop tune with no exit." Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 209.

¹¹⁶ For Adorno's discussion regarding the lack of meaning in ontological realm see Adorno, *Notes to Literature Volume One*, 247. For Adorno's discussion regarding the lack of meaning in the empirical realm see his discussion on Beckettian *situation* as the: "[...] the photographic negative of a reality referred to meaning." Adorno, *Notes to Literature Volume One*, 253, This notion is conveyed in the following sequence from *Endgame*: "Hamm: We're not beginning to...to...mean something? Clov: Mean something! You and I mean something! *Brief laugh*. Ah that's a good one!" Beckett, *Endgame*, 48

Playing with elements of reality without any mirroring, taking no stand and finding pleasure in this freedom from prescribed activity, exposes more than would taking a stand with the intent to expose. The name of the catastrophe is to be spoken only in silence.¹¹⁷

Adorno also writes:

The violence of the unspeakable is mirrored in the fear of mentioning it. Beckett keeps it nebulous. About what is incommensurable with experience as such one can speak only in euphemisms, the way one speaks in Germany of the murder of the Jews.¹¹⁸

Endgame's void both expresses the inexpressible, and says what everyone knows but no one can or will say. This expression is the preservation by negation that is fundamental in terms of the creation of the dialectical image. Art that engages directly and attempts to speak the name of the catastrophe cannot express it negatively because it attempts to fill the void; *Endgame's* questions do not have answers in the same manner in which *The Threepenny Opera's* questions do. The piece is a part of our inability to answer these questions and the impotence the audience feels when faced with the unfathomable catastrophe expressed in the play expresses our general sense and condition of impotence. There is no happy ending.¹¹⁹ In fact there is no ending at all even if the piece itself is called *Endgame*. The play can never really finish, just *because* there is currently no answer to the questions it raises.

The negation that is necessary for the creation of the dialectical image involves a void, a sort of negative space and the ultimate inability to fill it. As was argued in the previous chapter, philosophy and interpretation is needed in order for the past that is

¹¹⁷ Adorno, *Notes to Literature Volume One*, 248-249.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 245-246.

¹¹⁹ One might consider the ending of *The Threepenny Opera* to be *happy*, Polly Peachum expresses this sentiment: "Reprieved, My dearest Macheath is reprieved. I'm so happy." Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, 169. Though this sounds like a happy sentiment the somewhat grand and then truncated melody with which it is sung suggests otherwise. Furthermore, Polly has just abandoned Macheath earlier on in the scene with all his money safely in a Manchester account.

immanent in the work to be transcended via the work. In his reading of the oncoming catastrophe in *The Threepenny Opera* and the fallout of the catastrophe in *Endgame*, Adorno does not reduce the fundamental problem to the question: who is worse, the bank owners or bank robbers? For Adorno our participation and implication in the logic of capitalism and exchange means that the problem is that we are all robbers and that we cannot recognize ourselves as such. Also problematic is Brecht's suggestion that the bank robber might in fact be a hero because the bank robber is as much a tainted by capitalism as the bank owner. For Brecht, the escape from the logic of the capitalist system is made possible by way of the bank robber. On the other hand, there is really no escape from *Endgame*, as made even more clear by the man in the desert in *Acte sans paroles*. For Adorno, Beckett's critique is real negation and Brecht's is only another manifestation of the same logic that structures the capitalist system.

In the previous section, I argued that *The Threepenny Opera* preserves the failure of the Weimar republic by its own failure and that *Endgame* preserves the sense of meaninglessness that pervades a post-catastrophic situation. In this section I showed how only *Endgame's* preservation is actually a form of negation because Brecht injects his play with affirmative meaning. As we shall see in the final section of this chapter, there is a danger when the injection of meaning fills the void where interpretation and transcendence ought to take place in order for the past to be worked through.

III Transcendence: Interpretation

This final section looks at the last element of sublation, transcendence, and will allow

me to show how *Endgame* engages in memory work and *The Threepenny Opera* does not. Essentially, I will show how because Brecht's work does not actually negate the socio-historical moment, it fails to mediate dialectical transcendence. Beckett's work does not have this problem and is therefore successful.

Recalling the chapter on transcendence and the introduction to this chapter where I stated that the main differences between the pieces in question are also the main reasons why one successfully mediates the sublation of the past and the other does not, leads me to the final difference between them: interpretation. On the one hand, Brecht's pieces are constantly interpreted in the sense that every production is set in a different time, with a different look, using different translations, and directorial choices. However, given that the piece has built in answers to its questions, no real interpretative work can be done. As already discussed there is only one answer – evil deeds - to the question: what keeps mankind alive. Either we accept this (as Brecht wants us to) and we say, yes, in general mankind does, or we say no. The way we choose is not really that relevant to any sort of philosophical interpretation of the piece as there is really nothing to interpret.

On the other hand, while Beckett's piece has rigid stage directions and can only be played in one manner,¹²⁰ *Endgame* does not have one philosophical meaning. In fact, as already discussed, it has no identifiable, specific meaning at all. The world outside

¹²⁰ Part of obtaining the rights to a Beckett play is to guarantee that one will not make any changes to the script including artistic choices. For example, the first renowned production to successfully cast women as Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* took place in 2006. It was challenged and contested by Beckett's estate. (see Guardian article <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/feb/04/arts.italy>)

the room in which Hamm and Clov are suspended is grey. There are no black and white absolutes, there are neither heroes nor archetypes (not even in seemingly reversed forms as with Brecht), there is no way out and there is nothing outside. The suspension and inability to re-cast the piece in particular temporal or aesthetic space gives it the sense of being frozen. In a manner analogous to Adorno's concept of the *Zeitkern*, it is this frozenness and impenetrability that allows for *Endgame* to act as a mediating entity. Mindful of the grey post-catastrophic time in which it was written, the viewer uses the artwork to reflect on the catastrophes in which we currently find ourselves.

It is the ambiguity and the half-light that draws the viewer into the suspension and invites philosophical interpretation. In this manner, the riddle of the artwork is close to Penelope's riddle for Odysseus: it challenges every audience member to read the concept of meaninglessness for themselves in the work. As with Penelope's asking Odysseus to move the bed, the questions posed during the play are quotidian, fairly universal, and simple. However, there are no universal answers. Whatever response the play solicits is neither embedded nor implicit. The response is ephemeral and contingent. *Endgame* will always challenge us to try to understand it. Conversely, the riddle of *The Threepenny Opera* is similar to the riddle of the Sphinx: there is one eternal universal solution to this problem. There is neither room nor space for the audience to engage with the engaged art because their minds are filled with dogmatic, totalizing images that obliterate the capacity and need for interpretation. The varying artistic interpretations of the play simply confirm this Brechtian pronouncement to continuously be true. Imagine for a moment someone standing at the front of the

stage and saying *the atomic bomb was bad*, or *Auschwitz was bad*. All people can say is “yes, it was,” or, worse, “no, it wasn’t.” But frankly, if one didn’t hold this point of view when the curtain rises, there is no way that Brecht’s work will change any minds.

The difference between the two works of art where it comes to solving riddles and interpretation is critical when considering how the work of art mediates our relationship to the past. Even though there is artistic, sociological, and historical work to be done on *The Threepenny Opera*, no serious philosophical interpretive work is possible. As such, the past does not have a mediated presence. In interpreting *Endgame* Beckett’s past manifests itself as still present; we see it in our own unfathomable institutions, our prejudice, our totalities, and our moments of hopelessness. We have to name it for ourselves. There are no characters standing at the front of the stage doing our mourning and our work for us. The play gives us neither solutions nor meaning. There is more meaning to be found in the meaninglessness, and more work to be done. The real response to the catastrophe for Beckett is not that mankind lives by evil deeds, but rather than mankind does not, and perhaps cannot, live at all. In fact this corresponds more closely to Adorno’s epigraph to *Minima Moralia*: “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”¹²¹ For this reason, *Endgame* fulfils Adorno’s criteria as a means through which the past is worked through and sublated.

Conclusion to Chapter Three:

¹²¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 39.

This chapter has taken a look at how two pieces of art about which Adorno comments extensively work through the past. The successful piece, *Endgame*, manages to sublimate the past because in preserving the socio-historical moment via negation, it mediates transcendence by inviting interpretation. The failing piece, *The Threepenny Opera*, does not sublimate the past because, while it preserves the socio-historical moment, it does not really engage in negation. This causes a lack of interpretive possibility. The past that is trapped inside the piece is doomed to be repeated as artistic interpretations of *The Threepenny Opera* continue to effect audiences in a similar manner: they both preach to the converted, and do not convert the non-believers.

Engaged art does not actually facilitate engagement with the work's *Zeitkern*. The lack of space for engagement is due to the inability of the work of art to mediate transcendence and act as a temporal fulcrum which gives the past a respectful presence but also facilitates the means for its eventual being worked through. Autonomous art furnishes these means. It is for this reason that Adorno continuously argued for the possibility of and for art.

Conclusion:

In concluding this study, I would like to consider the meaning and significance of the work of art's ability as a dialectical image that both has and is a *Zeitkern* to sublimate the past. The meaning and significance stems from the complexities of the work of art's particular temporality. Revealing the presence of the past, un-forgetting *per se*, allows for the possibility to predict possible futures. This is due to the work of art's double

temporality where time is immanent to the work and the work is transcendent in time, accounts for Adorno's enigmatic characterization of the work of art as where the possible future may be seen in the past. He writes:

The reality of artworks testifies to the possibility of the possible. The object of art's longing, the reality of what is not, is metamorphosed in art as remembrance. In remembrance what is qua what was combines with the non-existing because what was no longer is. Ever since Plato's doctrine of anamnesis the not-yet-existing has been dreamed of in remembrance, which alone concretizes utopia without betraying it to existence [...] Yet art's image is precisely what, according to Bergson' and Proust's thesis, seeks to awaken involuntary remembrance in the empirical, a thesis that process them to be genuine idealists. They attribute to reality what they want to save and what inheres in art only at the price of its reality.¹²²

This complex citation goes to the heart of how the work of art engages in memory work by both giving the past a presence and by facilitating the interpretation of this presence. It also expresses the complexities of the work of art's temporality. I will conclude this study by analyzing this citation.

First, the remembrance of the *not yet existing* being *dreamed* and the *possibility of the possible* combined with the idea of Plato's *doctrine of anamnesis* effects an interesting tension. For Plato, knowledge is imprinted on the soul, to learn is a sort of process of remembering what one already knows cumulatively.¹²³ Taken analogously to the level of the city or the collective, an analytical process in which Plato engaged in dialogues such as *The Republic*, we can see that the past is present in the topography of the city as well as its institutions. Adorno would most likely agree on this point. However, the challenging thing about the notion of the *not-yet-existing* is both the *yet* and the *possibility*. For Adorno, because the work of art preserves and negates the past, and

¹²² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 132.

¹²³ See example of the slave boy in Plato's *Meno*, who knows geometry but never actually learned it. Plato, *Five Dialogues*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2002).

because the past is transcended through the work of art by its illumination of the present and interpretive potential, the possible and even likely future may be revealed. While Adorno is not attempting to imbue the work of art with an esoteric clairvoyance, unlike the souls in Plato's doctrine who *wake the happy words*¹²⁴ already enciphered within them, Adorno's critique wakes us to the *possibility of the possible*. We see the idea of the *possibility of the possible* manifest in Adorno's concept of the present constituting the past,¹²⁵ which, in turn is permeated by the past's continuing objective conditions.¹²⁶ The work of art's dual temporality allows for the socio-historical moment to remain intact because of its immanent *Zeitkern*, and it permits the past's transcendence in both utopian and dystopian possibilities by virtue of the interpretation process. This is the essential role of remembrance. It has to do with the past but not the past in a fixed and static way. Remembrance engages with the past as it is found within the institutions and images of the present. Remembrance then, is both aesthetic and political.

However, the second point that needs clarification regarding temporality is the constant constitution and re-constitution of the past from the perspective of the present as well as the continuation of the past within the present is suggestive of a form of repetition. This relates to the Freudian aspect of Adorno's work and it could be asked whether or not this continuation is similar to the repetition that is so important in psychoanalytic thought.¹²⁷ Is the transcendence of art merely another

¹²⁴ See poem "The Last Class," in Theodore Roethke, *On Poetry & Craft*, (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2001).

¹²⁵ See note 74.

¹²⁶ See notes 4 and 72.

¹²⁷ While Freud wrote about this a lot as it served as one of the foundational concepts of psychoanalysis, his 1914 essay "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-through" outlines his thoughts

incarnation of repetition? Is it a seeming eternal return of the same, or if not the same then the similar?

I think that for Adorno, the memory work that is made possible by the work of art might be able to break this cycle. In order to respond this I would like to go back to the figure of Penelope. Adorno refers to Penelope's weaving as *the unconscious allegory of art*.¹²⁸ Even though it may appear as though we are trapped in an eternal return of weaving and unweaving, the possibility for intervention and newness still exists. Penelope is ultimately forced to finish the funeral shroud. Her final stalling technique, the bow stringing challenge is ultimately the way in which Odysseus, in disguise, announces his presence. This sets the scene for the riddle whose dissolution illuminates the entire work of art from standpoint of the moment in which the riddle is posed (the present constitutes the past): in establishing and reclaiming his identity, Odysseus claims his destiny to die on Ithaka's rocky shore. However, looking at the example of *Endgame*, the question of whether or not the play can ever really end lingers after the curtain falls. Clov does leave. The effect of his departure is unknown as is whether or not there is anywhere for him to go. Nevertheless, his departure breaks the series of questions and answers, feedings, moving chairs around that constitute the course of the play. The questions of whether or not the shroud can actually be finished and what happens after the play finishes are at the heart of

on working through trauma. See Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XII*, trans. J. Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press, 1958, pp. 147- 156. Adorno links Freud and Proust on the subject of memory both in *Notes to Literature Volume 2*, 108, and when he writes about the *smouldering collective unconscious* in *Critical Models*, 96. For commentary on this and further connections between Freud and Adorno on the concept of remembering see Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 68-69, and *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 102-103.

¹²⁸ See Hullot-Kentor's description of this in *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 43.

Adorno's concept of memory. These are not questions that can be answered by the artists. Rather they can only be addressed during the aesthetic experience and the interpretation of artworks as posing social and historical questions in a way that 'denaturalizes' them and debars them from being identified with the existing order.

Returning to the citation that is being discussed at present, we may think of *art's images* as dialectical images. The first two chapters of this study argued that works of art are dialectical images in which the past is preserved and negated and through which the past is transcended. Adorno states that these images *awaken* us both to the past and to the present by prompting involuntary memory. This involuntary memory both saves the past from oblivion but also interrupts the present. It exposes and renders visible the past within the present. For example, we find this notion in Adorno's comment: "Art desires what has not yet been, though everything that art is has already been. It cannot escape the shadow of the past."¹²⁹ It seems on first glance as though the past both already was and will be. The reason for this lies in the *possibility of the possible*. However, as the riddle whose solution is not contained within the riddle, the future is not contained within the presence of the past even if its *possibility* and even perhaps its probability and likelihood may be read when interpreting the work. The interpretive findings express the condition of simultaneous possibility and constraint. The work of art is thus not only a cipher of the past, but also a cipher of the potential of what is to come, or rather what could come.

¹²⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 134.

In any case, while the work of art cannot show us what is to come, it does retroactively show us what was coming before it arrived. Similar to philosophy's tendency to arrive too late, for Adorno both art and the interpretation of art seem to happen too late. He writes that "Hegel's dictum that the owl of Minerva begins its flight at dusk is confirmed in art."¹³⁰ Only in hindsight do we see the traces of what has been when it was in its 'to come' phase. As a means of illustrating this notion, Adorno gives the example of cubism anticipating "[...] the aerial photographs of bombed-out cities during World War II."¹³¹ The idea of being too late is also present in *The Odyssey*: the suitors discover Penelope's ruse too late, it is too late for the maids to explain their actions or atone for their crimes.

I do, however, think that between the too late and the not-yet-existing, the work of art offers space. This space is that which is between the weaving and the unweaving, and in the moments where the maids kicked but not for long. Penelope stalls because she is hopeful as Odysseus could always return *tomorrow*. At one point, the possibility of his return tomorrow became an actuality of his return yesterday. The maids struggle but surely in their minds some intervention could have saved them as they struggled. Interestingly enough, the maids struggle takes place exactly between the possibility of tomorrow and actuality of yesterday. Regardless, in both instances there is a space. This space is the *possibility of the possible* and the sort of remembrance that is mediated by the work of art, according to Adorno, causes this space to be characterized with hope. Because the past transcends via the work of art, interpreting the work of art gives us clues to the past that is to come. It is for this reason that it is

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 296.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 301.

right to characterize Adorno's thinking with hope: there is still time and space to work through the past to stop it from happening again. While solving the Sphinx's riddle with its embedded answer propels Oedipus into his unique destiny, it is only by remembering and venerating the secrets of the past that Odysseus is able to move his life forward.

Returning to what I indicated in the introduction, for Adorno the past is present until its objective conditions are worked through. If these conditions are not worked through, and according to Adorno the conditions that led to the barbarism of the 20th century remained (and he would probably argue still remain) at large, then the work of art, and all dialectical images, offer a strange reading of history: they are ciphers of negative utopia, of the catastrophe to come. He calls them cryptograms of the new, but the new is in fact merely another incarnation of what already has been.¹³² In a sense, the work of art casts the shadow of the past into the future. It is not that the work of art predicts the future, but for Adorno, the truth that is revealed through the work of art by deciphering its *Zeitkern* pertains to what is to come. In terms of reading the possible future in the work of art, Adorno writes: "In the image of catastrophe, an image that is not a copy of the event but the cipher of its potential, the magical trace of art's most distant pre-history reappears under the total spell, as if art wanted to prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image."¹³³

¹³² Adorno links the idea of cryptogram of past/new with image of collapse. See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 32-33. For another example see Adorno's description of Kierkegaard's concept of the work of art's temporality as *posthumous*: "If the history of sinful nature is that of the collapse of its unity, it moves toward reconciliation even while collapsing, and its fragments bear the fissures of collapse as propitious ciphers." Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 139.

¹³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 33.

The strange temporality of the work of art, as a cipher of the new in the old, expresses a temporal presence. When sealed in the work of art and read as a cipher of what is to come, the past appears to present itself simultaneously as part of an eternal return and as something that is frozen and always the same. This temporal concept of the artwork fits in with other notions of temporality contemporaneous to Adorno such as can be found in Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.¹³⁴ The complex temporality of presence results in the call to decipher the work of art's truth content. Deciphering this truth content is a philosophical task, the kind Žižek calls a sort of philosophical detective work.¹³⁵ Žižek, interpreting Hegel, claims that the authentic work of art re-writes the history of art, and that the contingent becomes necessary after the fact. A similar notion is at work in Adorno's theories of the work of art and it comes into play when thinking about memory: By looking at the traces of history in the work of art, the philosophical detective is able to predict (and theoretically to counter) crimes that have yet to happen.

¹³⁴ See Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*.

¹³⁵ Žižek quotes Chesterton and identifies policemen who go to books and anticipate crimes that *will be committed*. See Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, (London: Verso, 2008), 98.

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