Adorno's Aesthetics Today

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Adorno in the Present

In many respects, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* seems to belong to a past that is moving away from us at increasing speed. Adorno himself acknowledges this belatedness, for instance when in the draft introduction he says that already the very term philosophical aesthetics "has an antiquated quality".[1] In this particular passage his suggestion is tied to what he sees as the nominalism of modern art, whose emergence he locates in Croce and Benjamin, but we may also think of Duchamp's "pictorial nominalism", which would render the observation even more acute.[2] But while aesthetics must acknowledge that it no longer can subsume its objects, it can just as little opt for mere particularity; there is an inescapable antinomy between empty universality and the contingency of particular judgements. And from the vantage point of the present, this seems only to have been exacerbated: no theory appears to be able to delimit a priori what counts as artistic practice, as a work, and as an aesthetic experience—an emptying out that, at the same time as Adorno's reflections on art were drawing to a close, was registered both in the arts themselves and in many strands of philosophy, notably in institutional art theory, although without the historical depth and socio-political urgency that we find in Adorno.

If we add to this his infamous resistance to popular art, his highly selective canon of works drawn from an equally selective idea of tradition, and the fact that as time went by he became increasingly remote from the avant-garde of his own present, his obsolescence seems to be confirmed. Furthermore, while

[1] Theodor W Adorno, AT, 493/422. Page references given directly in the text are henceforth to Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), followed by *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997): AT German/English; *Negative Dialektik*, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main; Suhrkamp, 1997), vol. 6, followed by *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973): ND German/English.

[2] Marcel Duchamp seems to have eluded Adorno, no doubt because the decisive role he is ascribed today is a retroactive phenomenon that occurs from the late 1950s onwards. His "pictorial nominalism" (*nominalisme pictural*) relates to painting, which he declares to be a thing of the past while yet affirming it, when he suggests that the readymade should be seen as a painting precisely because it negates everything that painting has ever been. The expression "pictorial nominalism" appears in a note in the White Box; see Marcel Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe: Écrits*, ed. Michel Sanouillet (Paris: Flammarion, 1976), 111, and Thierry de Duve's detailed tracing of this idea in *Nominalisme pictural: Marcel Duchamp, la peinture et la modernité* (Paris: Minuit, 1984).

the integration of art into the culture industry since the 1960s, which transformed both in a way that some time ago could be theorised as "postmodernism" and the "cultural logic of late capitalism",[3] was acutely perceived by Adorno, his own philosophical and artistic preferences made it difficult for him to discern the positive features of what was emerging.

And yet, in spite of all these caveats, he wrote an aesthetic theory, summarising decades of intense engagement with the arts. In a certain way it is obviously a retrospective work, looking back at the experience of modern art, and especially at his far-reaching involvement with the musical avant-garde between the wars and in the post-war period. On another level, he refuses to look back: what art *is*, its limits and potentials, must be determined in the present, and with a view to its future transformations. As Adorno often stresses, it is present works that unlock the past, that prise open the smooth surface of masterworks; it is the critical power of Schönberg that renders the inner tensions in Beethoven visible, and any aesthetic theory that settles for merely regretting the loss of traditional works lacks binding force.

The relation between past, present, and future is thus anything but linear, as seems to be presupposed when critical theory is sometimes understood as an impediment to emerging practices. We should rather see it as a recursive loop: it is present works that make it possible to approach the monuments of the past beyond mere passive admiration, just as it is such a reinterpreted past that in turn strikes back at the present, because both of them, in their respective ways, come towards us from the future. The activity of critique, in keeping with the Greek etymology of the term, would be a *splitting* that tears apart the three dimensions of time; it is an unhinging of time from its axes, which I think was there in Adorno's understanding of how contemporary works burst open past ones and let us glimpse that which did not add up in them, but was concealed underneath their seemingly unbroken surfaces.

Our question, then, must be: what is our present, from which we look back at Adorno? To what extent are his problems still ours, and in what way could they be rethought? In the following, I will present some of the key concepts at

[3] It must be noted that neither of the two most influential theories of the postmodern, Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard, ends up disavowing Adorno. See: Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), where it is argued that it is precisely today, at the moment where all pockets of resistance seem to have been emptied out, that Adorno acquires his full relevance. Lyotard's comments shift from his early phase, where Adorno is mostly seen as the quintessential enemy, to the later writings from the mid-eighties onwards, where Adorno becomes an ally in the project to resist an all-embracing idea of communication. For a discussion of Lyotard's different readings, see Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, *Spacing Philosophy: Lyotard and the Idea of the Exhibition* (Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2019), 99–103, 100f.

stake in Adorno's two main late works, *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, and then suggest four points I think may be fruitful to consider further, and where a continuation of Adorno's line of thinking in the present might require a rethinking that, once again, in fact remains loyal to him.

The Claims of Negative Dialectics

First, the claims of *Aesthetic Theory* must be seen in conjunction with his other major work, *Negative Dialectics*. The two books are, he writes to Rolf Tiedemann, "what I have to throw in the scale" ("was ich in die Waagschale zu werfen habe").[4] But how are they linked? We must avoid seeing the first book as proposing a general theory that then would find an application, categories that subsequently could be projected onto a certain type of objects called artworks; rather, the two books are the mutually implicative sides of the same project—and yet they remain apart, and cannot be brought together into a whole. Perhaps, paraphrasing Adorno's famous letter to Benjamin commenting on the latter's Reproduction essay, and substituting "philosophy" for "freedom", we might say: Both are the torn halves of an integral philosophy, to which, however, they do not add up ("beide sind die auseinandergerissenen Hälften der ganzen Freiheit, die doch aus ihnen nicht sich zusammenaddieren lässt").[5] The true is not the whole—a figure that Adorno will constantly elaborate from his dense formula in *Minima Moralia* onwards, that the whole is the *untrue*—but the *whole as differing from itself*, split in two halves that can just as little be reconciled as one of them can be simply discarded in favour of the other.

The first claim, then, is to show the priority of the object (*Vorrang des Objekts*), how it escapes subsumption while still not being simply independent of it. If there is always something more in experience than what can be captured by our categories, then at first sight this might be construed as a traditional empiricist or nominalist claim.[6] But, for Adorno, there is no immediacy to be

[4] Cited in Rolf Tiedemann's postface, AT 537/459.

[5] Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 171.

[6] The idea of nominalism is dealt with differently in *Negative Dialectics* and in *Aesthetic Theory*. In the first, nominalism is somewhat of a philosophical temptation that must be resisted, but also given its due; in a note from an earlier lecture series on ontology and dialectics, Adorno writes: "Not jump over nominalism. Transcend it from out of itself". See *Ontologie und Dialektik (1960/61)*, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, 4/7, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), 425. In *Aesthetic Theory*, nominalism forms the ineluctable condition of modern art, and it bears on the relation between artistic conventions and genres, and individual works, and while the two sides of the problem are obviously related, they cannot be treated in the same way.

regained outside of conceptual mediation, just as the subject itself would be nothing without an exterior that eludes it. The two sides form a non-identity, which he opposes to idealism's claims about the priority of the subject; idealism and empiricism are, as it were, played against each other, each infiltrating the other without achieving a stable third position.

The second claim is that we must use the power of the subject to dispel the illusion of a constitutive subjectivity. This involves all the dimensions of the subject that cannot be absorbed by its rationality, and yet remain indispensible for knowledge in its fullest extent. Here Adorno retrieves crucial features of psychoanalysis, but also elements from anthropology and the study of religion: in the formation of the subject and its rationality there are always vestiges of magic and mimetic relations to things, an archaic indiscernibility of subject and object, which are features that can never be fully eradicated, just as little as they can be opposed as an alternative to instrumental rationality and its domination over nature.

Subject and object can thus neither be sublated into a higher unity nor posited as merely external, but form a mutually implicative, historically changing constellation. Both sides correct each other; there is something more in the object than what can be held in cognition, and something more in the subject than cognitive acts, even though to make this present in the form of philosophical theses would be to betray it, which is, as we will see, one of the reasons why negative dialectics and aesthetic theory presuppose each other. The truth that philosophy demands is something other than the truth of art, and yet it is not entirely without it.

Both of these sides, the objective and the subjective, are implied in what Adorno calls the non-identical, which is the key to the negative moment in negative dialectics. This however immediately poses a problem: in what way can we think or speak of the non-identical, if thinking, as Adorno stresses, always means to identify ("Denken heisst identifizieren")? On the theoretical and discursive level this can only be done indirectly, through a critique of the insufficiency of subsumption, otherwise it would once more turn the non-identical into something identical, absorbing it into its concept—which might have been Hegel's critique *avant la lettre* of the very idea of a negative dialectic: to speak and to make *sense* is already to enter into the movement of sublation. Adorno too emphasises the necessity of linguistic mediation, but his task is rather to make the non-identical felt in language without becoming an object, like a trace; it is, we might say, the *limit* of sense, not its simple cessation or fall into non-sense. It is what makes sense possible. At least in this respect, the influential critique directed against Adorno by Habermas and his followers

seems unwarranted: he does not advocate a different rationality of an aesthetic kind that would lack clear criteria and eventually end up embracing irrationality, but instead proposes to explore a tension within rationality itself, without which it would not be fully rational. It is to this inner difference and incompletion that aesthetic experience testifies, even though it too, as Adorno always cautions us, must be thought by philosophy in order for it to unfold as an internal unrest in reason itself, rather than just remaining an exterior force. Philosophy in this way places itself at the margin of rationality, and if it wants to transcend the concept, it must do so through the concept, so that it constantly pushes up against its own inner limit.

This is also why philosophy's own form of presentation—its *Darstellung* in the Hegelian sense—must reflect something of the non-identical, which for Adorno implies a writing composed of "constellations" that bring together terms and concepts from many fields, and for which Benjamin's Arcades project is the great model (even though Adorno was far from uncritical of what he perceived in Benjamin as an undialectical "magical positivism"). Philosophy can never settle for pure *a priori* concepts, but is always related to the matter at hand, the specific content of the thing; it is *sachhaltig*, which means that no singular method can be specified in advance. However, this stress on empirical content and historical givens does not mean that epistemological questions would simply vanish and be dissolved into any of the sciences. Adorno holds onto the truth content of idealism and, I would argue, in spite of some of his comments, to the analysis of transcendental conditions, even though—and this is the precarious balance he has to strike—they can never be pure. The transcendental itself has a history, to be sure not one reducible to empirical events, but more like a movement separating and articulating the empirical and the transcendental in the inherited Kantian sense; they are like the two sides of history, neither identical nor simply separate.[7]

Hegel's critique of Kant, which introduces movement in thought on all levels, is obviously decisive here for Adorno, with the difference that negativity must have the last word, and no identity of subject and object can be achieved. This non-identity is however not just a theoretical claim, but fundamentally practical: what motivates philosophy is *suffering* as the condition of all truth.

[7] These formulations may seem simply wilfully paradoxical, but here – as well as elsewhere – Adorno is moving the same direction as many French philosophers of the period. So, for instance, both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault in their respective ways attempted to rethink the transcendental as situated and historical, as a "concrete a priori" (Merleau-Ponty) connected to the body, and then, in a more expansive fashion, to the "flesh of the world", or as a "historical a priori" (Foucault) located in the rules of discourse that determine what counts as a meaningful object of knowledge in a particular historical epoch.

But at the same time, in order for this practical side not to relapse into mere hopelessness, thought must be guided by the possibility that here beyond the ubiquity of suffering would exist another state, neither negative nor dialectical: utopia as free relation between the particular and the general, or the "being together of the diverse" (*Miteinander des Verschiedenen*) (ND 153/150) in knowledge as well as in society, for which thinking at present can only be a "placeholder" (*Platzhalter*). This utopia at present remains impossible to determine, it is outside of direct linguistic expression, and it even evades the language of negative dialectics, which can be no more than the "ontology of the false state" and thus always needs to remain vigilant so as not to fall into the trap of becoming yet another metaphysical system.

The Claims of Aesthetic Theory

As we know, *Aesthetic Theory* was by the time of Adorno's death far from having arrived at a definitive form, and the text that was published is the result of the efforts of the editors, Rolf Tiedemann and Gretel Adorno, to provide the manuscript with a systematic order. In this way, the book is not a work in the same sense as *Negative Dialectics*, and yet it has achieved the status of a philosophical testament.

But even though much of the actual structure of the book is due to the editors, there are important comments by Adorno himself with respect to the compositional problems that occupied him to the end. If *Negative Dialectics* obeys a fairly recognisable philosophical architecture, taking us from general reflections on the character of philosophical experience, via a series of "models", and up to the concluding meditations on what remains of metaphysics today, at the moment of its downfall, then *Aesthetic Theory*, as Adorno writes in a letter to Rolf Tiedemann, in a more radical fashion would have accepted that there is no "first principle" from which the rest would follow. Thus, he continues, one can no longer "build an argumentative structure that follows the usual progressive succession of steps, but rather one must assemble the whole out of a series of partial complexes that are, so to speak, of equal weight", so that the book must be written in "paratactical parts that are arranged around a midpoint that they express through their constellation" (AT 541/462).

In this way, *Aesthetic Theory* can be said to integrate something of aesthetic experience into its own composition, without thereby ceasing to be a philosophical reflection on art. The theory bears on the aesthetic sphere, but it can no longer dominate its object from the outside, which always entails the risk of

the "pseudomorphosis" that he rejected in the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*.[8] Thought must find a way to think *in* and *through* artworks—which also means coming back to them from a certain outside, a place that is neither that of the artworks themselves nor a readymade philosophy, and which *Aesthetic Theory* not only needs to locate, but must also invent.

In order to at least circumscribe this place, I will extract three concepts (many others could no doubt be selected) from the book: *autonomy*, *mimesis*, and *truth*.

Autonomy, Adorno proposes, must be understood as a social fact, which does not entail that it would in any way be illusory. Rather, it is a concept that names a constantly shifting relation, and it must be seen in relation to the circulation of commodities, services, rationalities and forms of information in society at large, which always condition art, while the latter works over them, reflects on them, and displaces them. Autonomy is always double-edged, and in the section that the editors have subtitled "Art's double character: *fait social* and autonomy; on the fetish character", Adorno stresses that the modern phenomenon of art's emphatic opposition to society is what gives it a social content, not its use of technologies or the empirical stuff that enters into it: art is something "crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself" (AT 335/296), and yet its seeming asociality is in fact the determinate negation of a determinate society. On the other hand, this opposition requires that art partake in the structures that it questions, not least fetishism, which is both a force that threatens to overtake art, and something that it itself needs to deploy in order to have a critical purchase on reality.[9]

This doubling leads to a series of paradoxes: art's only function is to be functionless, its enchantment is disenchantment, and its essential quality is to contradict itself. While it is true that works seal themselves off from what they truly are, i.e. determinate negations of society, and this turns them into ideology to the extent that they inevitably are led to posit something spiritual

[8] So Rüdiger Bubner, who argues that this places Adorno in a position that allows the theory of aesthetics to itself become aesthetic; see Bubner, "Kann Theorie ästhetisch werden?" in Burkhardt Lindner and W. Martin Lüdke (eds.), *Materialien zur ästhetischen Theorie: Theodor W. Adornos Konstruktion der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980). This objection is then echoed in Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), vol. I, 489ff. The aesthetic dimension, as Adorno often notes using a musical analogy, lies in philosophy's need to be *composed*, even though this is not carried out in the same way in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*. The best study of Adorno's mode of writing is still the remarkably overlooked thesis by Antje Giffhorn, *In der Zwischenzone: Theodor W. Adornos Schreibweise in der "Ästhetischen Theorie"* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999).

[9] For a discussion of the various sense of fetishism in Adorno, see my "The Necessary Fetishism of the Work of Art", in Anders Burman and Anders Bartonek (eds.), *Hegelian Marxism: The Uses of Hegel's Philosophy in Marxist Theory from Georg Lukács to Slavoj Žižek* (Huddinge: Södertörn Philosophical Studies, 2018).

outside of society, at the same time, this spiritual dimension—*Geist* now understood not as a sphere outside of the material, but as the *facture* of works, the interplay of their constituent parts that takes them beyond the world of *facts*—is what gives them their critical power. Their distance from the real opens a space for freedom that still remains unreal, imaginary, and even compensatory, which is why autonomy is just as much false as it is true.

If art, as Adorno famously suggests against a long tradition of Marxist theories of art, does not relate to society by depicting its contents, but by internalising its antagonisms as tensions and contradictions in its inner form—linguistic, musical, painterly etc.—then the concept of autonomy needs to invoke a certain formalism, though not at all in terms of aestheticism or a doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* (or better, it requires the extraction of a truth content from aestheticism, as is indicated when Adorno in his letter on Benjamin's Reproduction essay calls for a study of Mallarmé as a "counterpoint" to the claims about the decay of the aura in mechanical reproducibility). Art addresses society at the deepest level where its own "logicity" (*Logizität*) intersects with the instrumental rationality that permeates the social world, grafting itself onto it while also twisting it around, parodying it, and in this opening up towards a different, free order, or a "violence-less synthesis", as Adorno sometimes says.

Mimesis is the movement by which art internalises, reflects and transcends the given. Mimesis is for Adorno not primarily imitation, depiction, or any kind of mirror relation between an original and a copy, but first of all has its roots in an archaic and magic relation to the object that characterises prehistory, and remains as a trace in art after it has disconnected from myth. Mimesis thus precedes the movement of spiritualisation; it is absorbed into it, which does not mean that it is repressed, but that it is preserved as an inner tension in artistic form. This relation to something that precedes history in a structural sense—as is indicated by the prefix "*Ur-*", the domain of the originary, the *arche* in the archaic—is one of the aspects that gives art its *methexis*, its participation, in redemption, although Adorno stresses that there is no way of returning to a state that would have preceded rationality, otherwise than through regression to myth.

At the other end of the historical spectrum, in the modern world of enlightened rationality, the mimetic relation bears on the developed antagonisms of society. Antagonisms relate to particular social forms and are as such always historically specific. Beyond this, the fundamental antagonism, I think, is the one that also echoes the archaic origin, i.e. the tension between mimesis as a moment of dispersion and a descent into affective and corporeal impulses, and the need for rational construction. In the administered world, from which art

cannot escape by some magic trick, its rational constructions are nevertheless permeated by something else—as we have seen, their logicity is a doubling both of the social logic and the logic of identifying, discursive ordering, turning them back on themselves in order to set something else free; it prefigures something of the non-identical. The artwork in this shows something to philosophy, in its way of letting particulars come together without subsuming them, and yet creating a unity, although of a different kind.

Here one must once more note the important criticism that has been levelled at Adorno's claims, specifically by Habermas and his followers, and which has become almost a standard objection in the literature. In this line of reasoning, the concept of mimesis must be rejected, since it allegedly sets itself up as an alternative to discursive rationality without being able to supply any normative criteria for its application.

These criticisms, first of all, seem to me misguided in relation to Adorno, but, furthermore, they lead in a direction opposed to what I am proposing here: to push Adorno's idea even further. Mimesis, Adorno often underlines, can just as little replace instrumental reason or identity thinking as it can be suppressed by it. Rather, as I have suggested, it is better understood as an inner corrective, a reminder of what this thinking can never exhaust, since its conceptual domination is built upon the repression of the mimetic, which nevertheless leaves scars or traces in experience that art and philosophy register, each in their own way, without being simply mapped onto each other.

This criticism of Adorno's use of mimesis is then connected to the second and more far-reaching claim to which Adorno would have remained oblivious, i.e. the turn from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language, and thus would have remained trapped in "metaphysical thinking". This we see in, for instance, Albrecht Wellmer, who speaks of Adorno's failure to attain a "post-metaphysical aesthetics of modernity"[10] that shifts the focus to the communicative role of art, and suggests that he remained entrenched in late modern strategies of refusal and negation, which in turn would be based in unnecessary paradoxes derived from an outdated philosophy of consciousness.

Now, it seems clear that the idea of art as communication, which this argument takes as the solution, is what in fact *Aesthetic Theory* opposes from beginning to end, rather than being something Adorno would have overlooked or failed to grasp. Communication is what is demanded of art not only by the culture industry, but also by those who opt for a culinary highbrow aesthetic,

[10] See Wellmer, "Adorno, die Moderne und das Erhabene", in Franz Koppe (ed.), *Perspektiven der Kunstphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 190.

precisely because they defuse art and turn it into a specific sphere of experiences to be placed alongside the other spheres, eventually endowing it with a compensatory function. In addition, while Adorno in many contexts insists on the constitutive resemblance of art to language, its *Sprachähnlichkeit*, he adds that language becomes art precisely as "writing", i.e., through a moment of self-reflection, opacity, and refusal of meaning that transforms it into an enigma and calls for a particular type of interpretation—the basis also for his (perhaps unjust) rejection of hermeneutics as a theory that claims to simply dissolve the enigma. "The task of aesthetics", he writes, "is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended." (AT 179/157)

Furthermore, and most generally, there is the assumption that a philosophy of consciousness would be metaphysical, whereas a philosophy of language would somehow escape this condition, and constitute an unequivocal and assured progress, since it would once and for all solve the problems posed by its predecessor. Irrespective of how one understands the term "metaphysics", it seems obvious that none of this can be taken for granted. Finally, regardless of whether refusal and negation are sufficient concepts to grasp artistic work, other means are equally available that just as little give in to the idea of communication, which probably is, as Heidegger once said of the notion of *Erlebnis*, "the element in which art dies".[11]

Third, then, the idea of *truth*. What Adorno calls the "truth content" (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) of a work is not a propositional content that can be extracted (or communicated), and cannot be identified with intentions or themes; truth belongs to movement of the "intentionless" (*das Intentionslose*), which passes through the subject, and is neither simply without it, nor can it be reduced to it. Truth is mediated through all of the work's particular sensuous moments, whose transcendence in relation to the factually given occurs through their facture, how the work is put together and organised through artistic technique; its objectivity or quality as a thing or object (*Sachlichkeit*) and its truth are inextricably intertwined, Adorno writes.

The relation to truth is not simply historical in a straightforward sense, as in the claim that a work provides us with the truth about an epoch or a social formation, but above all, and more profoundly, it is a relation between the historical and the *Ur-* or archi-historical, the threshold that separates and joins the archaic repetition of myth from the movement of history; the moment of

[11] *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, in *Holzwege*, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), vol. 5, 67. In a handwritten marginal note (b) Heidegger adds that the true task is to "attain a wholly different element for the becoming of art" ("ein ganz anderes Element für das Werden der Kunst zu erlangen")

natural beauty in art echoes this, at once a reified image and the bearer of a hope of reconciliation. Because of its mediated distance from this first nature, art is able to recollect it, it can preserve the "shudder" that belongs to the archaic without ceding to regression, by transposing it into the parallel world of imagination. Art is in this sense a critique of myth and as such always part of the enlightenment, but also a way to save its truth content and turn it into a corrective against a thought that aspires to seal itself autonomy. In modernity, this is played out as the tension between mimesis and construction, which includes all those technological means that have been absorbed into art, without as such having a direct causal influence, as Adorno often objects to Benjamin.

This utopian moment has often, together with mimesis, been understood as the main problem with Adorno's aesthetics, and it has been suggested that the idea of redemption, which holds artworks hostage to a preconceived theory, must be left behind if Adorno is to be saved from himself. Just as in the case of mimesis, I would like to follow a different direction. First, the problem with this salvation is, as I see it, that it saves Adorno by cutting off his head, i.e. it evacuates his basic claim, without which the different elements that are disengaged from the redemptive horizon would appear as a set of perhaps interesting remarks on formal problems in modern art, but in the end run the risk of saying the opposite of what was intended. If art is deprived of its capacity to internalize, reflect on, but also point beyond the administered world, then it becomes little more than an object of judgements of taste in the Kantian sense, and the relation not just to truth, but also to the enigma of truth, simply disappears.

It is true that there is a constant risk that artworks become merely a mirror that philosophical thought holds up to itself, and in which it sees its own unity and fulfilment achieved, although in a form that yet lacks the kind of conceptual reflection that philosophy is called upon to supply. "The truth of discursive knowledge", Adorno writes in a compressed sentence that summarises the force of this logic, "is unshrouded, and thus discursive knowledge does not have it; the knowledge that is art, has truth, but as something incommensurable with art" (AT 191/167). This chiasma (neatly expressed in the semicolon that splits Adorno's sentence into two reflecting parts) just as much embraces a certain "aestheticising" of philosophy—for instance when Adorno claims that philosophy must always refer to the singularity and monadic dimension of the work as the "*organon* of truth" (AT 338/298)—as it implies a becoming-philosophy of art, when he claims that the "progressive self-unfolding truth of the artwork is none other the truth of the philosophical concept", and that [a]esthetic experience is not genuine experience unless it becomes philosophy"

(AT 197/172). On the one hand, this sets up a tension that surely can become immensely productive, as Adorno's own detailed analyses of musical works show abundantly, but, on the other hand, it obviously also entails a risk of reductionism and a violence done to the singularity of the work. The allegation that this generally blocks the approach to the individual work of art is however not warranted in the case of Adorno. It is true that his aesthetic would collapse (or at least would have to be substantially rethought, as for instance Albrecht Wellmer proposes) if the idea of reconciliation was dispensed with; and yet this idea would mean little were it not ceaselessly developed out of the actual substance of works from Beethoven to Schönberg's dodecaphony, Webern's proto-serialism and beyond, and it can hardly be argued that Adorno would remain indifferent to musical detail or formal analysis, only that these empirical features, for him, as a *philosopher* (and not a musicologist) must always be related to a philosophical task.

Four Points

Finally, there are four points I would like to make. Rather than conclusions, they are guidelines for future thinking, with and against Adorno.

The first concerns the status of *interpretation*. We noted above the ambivalence of Adorno's take on this concept: on the one hand, he insists on reception as a "freedom towards the object" (*Freiheit zum Objekte*), in which the subject abandons itself to otherness, and on works as "things of which we do not know what they are" (AT 174/149); on the other hand, he sometimes claims, as we have seen, that the truth of art is nothing but the truth of the philosophical concept. In fact, I would argue, interpretation should be seen as a second work of a particular kind, rather then something merely grafted onto the first object. If the object embodies contradictions, and these can be read out of it by an interpretation, the latter nevertheless remains an invention of theory. While these contradictions do originate in society, which for us inevitably means the world of contemporary capitalism, and are reflected in the work, this reflection is not a simple mirroring that has a bearing on content or the "objective moment", as Adorno says, but occurs through an act of mimesis that in turn generates tensions and contradictions within the construction, form, or immanent structure of the work. Teasing out these contradictions from the object is itself a different form of mimetic creation, neither superior nor inferior to the first work, and in this sense interpretation produces a second work alongside the first, which cannot avoid embodying contradictions that it, in turn, itself cannot master. Thus, neither work nor interpretation is the key to

the other; instead, both have multiple intersections in common, although without being reducible to a third underlying matrix. This inevitably entails a crumbling of the hierarchy between the muteness and opacity of the work and the eloquence of interpretation that Adorno, notwithstanding his many precautions, sometimes ends up reproducing. If artworks, as he sometimes writes, appear to be saying something, but that it is impossible to say what they say, we should not believe that philosophical interpretation succeeds in saying it, only that it provides a different take on this impossibility as such, traversing the divide between language and "resemblance to language" without ceasing to be language and concept.

Second, our concept of *autonomy* must be articulated differently from the articulation of the concept available to Adorno, since the idea of closure that guided him is no longer the same as ours. This does not mean that it has simply evaporated, but rather that it has been transformed along with the development of technologies of both production and distribution. These shifts are indicated by, for instance, the inverted constellation of concepts and particulars in conceptual art and everything that would follow in its wake, or by the open or processual artwork that Adorno indeed glimpsed but attempted to enclose within the negative concept of the "informal",[12] by the incessant interrogation (both theoretical and practical) of the status of the art object that understands it as more of a product of discursive conditions than a perceptual given, and a host of other shifts, all of which belong to a phase of aesthetic reflection that emerged in the sixties just as Adorno's work was drawing to close. Autonomy is more like a result of the "knight's move" of the work, its "swerve", to use a term borrowed from Shklovsky and Russian formalism.[13] The work's distance from reality is itself conditioned by reality, it is the way in which reality is taken up and deflected, which does not make the distance that it sets up any less real; conversely, the work could be said to inject this distance into the real itself (which could also allow us to glimpse a different sense of *realism* in Adorno than the petrified forms of nineteenth-century art and their continuation in socialist realism).[14] If in Skhlovsky's view the sideways move of the knight occurs because the direct road ahead is blocked, then this move is itself not just a leap into the imaginary, but rather introduces a different spacing of the board

[12] See Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle" (1961), in *Quasi una fantasia*, *Gesammelte Schriften* 16; *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992).
[13] Se Viktor Shklovsky, *Knight's Move*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Norma, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005).
[14] For further discussions of realism in Adorno, see my "Adorno's Realism", *Baltic Worlds* Vol. IX, no 4 (2016).

itself. Autonomy must not be taken as an objective property that some things may have while others simply lack, but as a kind of limiting or framing condition that determines what belongs to the inside of the work and what to its outside. Autonomy is the effect, the *work*, of a *beside-the-work*, a *parergon*, or a *frame*, as Derrida noted already in Kant's aesthetics,[15] and in this sense it cannot be eliminated without the work ceasing to exist. The process underway since Adorno's time might be analysed as the gradual introjection of such framing conditions into the work itself, so that they now can become its explicit and thematic material instead of passively assumed outer boundaries.

Third, *contradiction* must be rendered more fluid so as to incorporate a more expansive sense of difference. This need to rethink the idea of contradiction signals that negative dialectics, in its dependence on the Hegelian legacy, ought to be loosened from its fixtures (which obviously does not rule out that this could also be carried out through a more attentive reading of Hegel himself, which Adorno sometimes sketches). It needs to confront other traditions that understand difference in another fashion—the task could be to cross-read Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* with, say, Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, a task that I here, by way of conclusion, will briefly indicate. Two years after *Negative Dialectics*, Deleuze points to Heidegger's ontological difference, structuralism, the *nouveau roman* and role of repetition in language, in the unconscious, and in art, and suggests that "[a]ll these signs may be attributed to a generalized anti-Hegelianism: difference and repetition have taken the place of the identical and the negative, of identity and contradiction. For difference implies the negative, and allows itself to lead to contradiction, only to the extent that its subordination to the identical is maintained".[16] For Deleuze this points to a "transcendental empiricism" that, notwithstanding the

[15] See Derrida, "Parergon", in *La vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974); *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Derrida starts out from the legal distinction that organizes Kant's critical philosophy – the difference between *quid facti* (what are the facts relevant to the case, the actual features of our experiences and judgments) and *quid juris* (by what right can they lay claim to their respective places in reason's general architectonic) – and shows that this in the aesthetic sphere entails an entanglement of both sides. Kant's attempt to frame aesthetic judgment cannot avoid having recourse to instruments drawn from theoretical reason, which are always foreign to and yet related to the aesthetic, and when he needs to establish the connection to the critical system at large, this produces a movement of (de)framing, a frame that continually breaks up and opens an intermediate zone of undecidability. It is in this zone that Derrida locates the parergon, something beside (*par-*) the work and yet essential to its working, to the *energeia* of the *ergon*. Derrida's analysis of the frame in many ways intersects with Adorno's comments on the logicity of the work and on how it mimes yet distances itself from instrumentality.

[16] Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: PUF, 1968), 1; *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 1994), ix.

differences in vocabularies, in many respects intersects with Adorno's negative dialectic.[17] Both of them address the question of how to approach the singular or the "monadic", of difference as the limit of the non-identical and the sensible as a differential, of the limits of conceptual subsumption, although they reach results that at first may seem opposed to each other, or perhaps just simply unrelated. Both of them could in fact be taken as the heretic heirs of Hegel's logic of essence, where the movement of difference (*Unterschied*) leads from diversity (*Verschiedenheit*) via opposition (*Gegensatz*) to contradiction (*Widerspruch*), and then returns to the ground (*Rückgang in den Grund*), but also founders (*zu Grunde gehen*). Both want to intervene in the first step of this movement, but then take off in different directions: Adorno wants to halt the dialectic, or rather force it to ceaselessly return to a ground that it can never master; for Deleuze, difference is a dispersal that occurs already within the sensible as such, and antedates all ordering in opposites, and the ground that is reached is an un-grounding (*effondement*),

Now, while a reconstruction of a space in which such different claims could communicate might seem like an excessively abstract and even abstruse proposal, it will have an impact on the very vocabulary of critical theory. For Adorno, it was necessary to retain traditional concepts like subject and object, self-consciousness, identity, etc., and he always insisted on their double nature. As sediments of a reified tradition, they also contain petrified mediations that could once more be set free; just like artworks, concepts have an inner historicity that does not seal them within the confines of the past, but rather makes it possible for them to take on new meanings in other contexts. It may be the case, however, that the unquestioned presuppositions that many of these terms carry with them today may block thought rather than open it; the passage from the language of critique to the critique of language—which, to stress this once more, is not the same as a linguistic turn towards communication—is however always a tenuous one. The antinomy between philosophy as a "creation of concepts" (Deleuze) and as a de-sedimentation of older ones is no doubt as such too simplified, and yet it cannot be simply dismissed: the creation of concepts does not take place in a void, but presupposes a matter that it transforms; negative dialectics wants to be a memory of that which has always resisted integration, but it can only do this by creating something that has never been fully said or thought.

[17] The connections between *Difference and Repetition* and *Negative Dialectics* are still largely unexplored. The only systematic treatment seems to be Wu Jing's thesis *The Logic of Difference in Deleuze and Adorno: Positive Constructivism vs. Negative Dialectics* (Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, 2009, online).

Fourth, *the critical and utopian work of the work must be pluralised*. Because the work is not simply a reflection, but fundamentally a working over or working through (and in this it is akin to Freud's *Durcharbeitung*), it liberates a singular transcendence that allows us to perceive particulars in a way that releases them from conceptual subsumption without simply bypassing it—the being-together or togetherness of the diverse, which for Adorno was the moment of utopia or reconciliation, albeit veiled, ungraspable, and only accessible in a negative mode. For Adorno, the possibility of a togetherness that escapes identificatory binding together in oppositions and contradictions would be the *utopian limit* of negative dialectics where it ceases to be both negative and dialectical; for Deleuze, this state of a free difference in the sensible need not rely on a projection of the future, but determines the place to be reached as a site constituted in a now-and-here that is also a *now/here*, or, if we read this term backwards, as Samuel Butler once proposed (with a minor transposition of letters to reflect the backwards pronunciation), as an *erewhon*. The ideas invented by philosophy—which here seem almost indistinguishable from artworks—are, Deleuze suggests, "neither universals like the categories, nor are they the *hic et nunc* or *now here*, the diversity to which categories apply in representation. They are complexes of space and time, no doubt transportable but on the condition that they impose their own scenery, that they set up camp there where they rest momentarily: they are therefore the objects of an essential encounter rather than of recognition. The best word to designate these is undoubtedly that forged by Samuel Butler: *erewhon*. They are *erewhons*."[18]

While the moment of utopian reconciliation cannot be simply erased, as some would like to do,[19] if the entire edifice of Adorno's aesthetic theory is not to mutate into a series of formalist analyses of modern art, perhaps it is possible to break it up, spectrally, in the sense of refraction as well as that of a haunting. From Adorno's point of view, the spectralisation of reconciliation might suggest that its basis in an interpretation of natural history needs to look different in the age of modern technology: how can we think a philosophy of nature when the difference between nature and the artificial has, as Deleuze once proposed, disappeared?[20] In what sense would a non-coercive, non-violent rela-

[18] Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, 364f; *Difference and Repetition*, 285.

[19] So for instance Wellmer, who suggests that Adorno's failure to recognise that he already possesses all the elements of a post-metaphysical aesthetic is due to the fact that he sees them in the "distorted" optic of reconciliation; see Wellmer, "Adorno, die Moderne und das Erhabene", 190.

[20] See the interview with Raymond Bellour and François Ewald, on the occasion of the publications of *Le Pli: Leibniz et le baroque*, "Sur la philosophie", *Pourparlers* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), 212: "On Philosophy", *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 155.

tion between inner and outer nature be possible in a world that on one level seems to have erased the last vestiges of otherness, while on another level reproduces it as immanent "risks" that proliferate precisely because of the domination of nature?

Interpretation, autonomy, difference, and utopia—to these four points others could no doubt be added. To pursue the task of critical theory as bequeathed to us by Adorno means to think through them, with and against him, in order to come back to him from a vantage point that belongs to the future.