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ADORNO, THEODOR WIESENGRUND. [*This entry comprises five separate essays that clarify and contextualize Adorno's aesthetic theory:*

Survey of Thought
Adorno's Dialectic of Appearance
Adorno and Mimesis
Adorno's Philosophy of Music
Adorno and Kant

The first essay is a survey of Adorno's philosophy in general and the Frankfurt school (Germany) of critical theory that he helped to establish in the 1930s. The other essays treat "appearance" and "mimesis," key concepts of Adorno's aesthetics; music, the art form he discusses most often; and Kant, one of the main philosophers in dialogue with whom he developed his aesthetic theory. For related discussions, see Marxism, article on Marxism and Materialism; and Sublime, article on The Sublime from Burke to the Present.]

Survey of Thought

Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) was a German philosopher, aesthetic theorist, and social theorist in the Western Marxist tradition, as well as a leading member of the first generation of critical theory. It is the combination of a modernist aesthetic sensibility with rigorous philosophical theory and biting social criticism that make *Aesthetic Theory*, his uncompleted *summa aesthetica*, as provocative and significant as it has proved to be.

Adorno grew up in Frankfurt am Main, where he attended the university and entered the professoriate prior to being expelled along with other Jewish scholars. During the Nazi era he resided in Oxford, New York City, and southern California, writing in exile several of the articles and books for which he would later become famous, including *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Max Horkheimer), *Philosophy of Modern Music*, *The Authoritarian Personality* (a collaborative project), and *Minima Moralia*. From these years come Adorno's landmark critiques of popular culture and the culture industry.

Returning to Frankfurt in the early 1950s, Adorno quickly established himself as a leading theorist and critic of high culture as well as a central figure in the Institute of Social Research. Founded in 1923, led by Max Horkheimer since 1930, and reopened in 1951, the institute was the hub for what has become known as the Frankfurt School. Adorno became the institute's director in 1958 and in that capacity supervised a number of pathbreaking interdisciplinary studies of contemporary social issues. During the 1950s he published *In Search of Wagner*, an ideology-critique of the Nazis' favorite composer; *Prisms*, a collection of social and cultural studies and the first of his books to be translated into English; *Against Epistemology*, an antifoundationalist critique of Husserlian phenomenology; and the

first volume of *Notes to Literature*, a collection of essays in literary criticism.

The last decade of Adorno's life was marked by conflict and consolidation. A leading figure in the "positivism dispute" in German sociology, Adorno was also a key player in debates about restructuring German universities. He continued to publish at an astounding rate, including numerous volumes of music criticism, monographs on the composers Gustav Mahler and Alban Berg, two more volumes of *Notes to Literature*, books on Hegel and on existentialism, and collected essays in sociology and in aesthetics. *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno's magnum opus on epistemology and metaphysics, appeared in 1966. *Aesthetic Theory*, on which he had been working for most of the 1960s, appeared posthumously in 1970.

Although a torso, *Aesthetic Theory* marks the culmination of Adorno's multifaceted scholarship. In it are found all the conflicting impulses said by Martin Jay to make up the historical "force field" of Adorno's writings: "Western Marxism, aesthetic modernism, mandarin cultural despair, and Jewish self-identification, as well as the more anticipatory pull of deconstructionism" (1984, p. 22). Adorno's links to Marxism and his sophisticated dialectical critique of twentieth-century culture make him, in the words of Fredric Jameson, a "philosopher for the nineties," a crucial figure for these postmodern, post-cold war, postcolonial, poststructural, postanalytical, and, some would say, postaesthetic times.

Four topics in Adorno's writings are of particular relevance to contemporary aesthetics and cultural theory: (1) his critique of the culture industry, (2) autonomy in the arts, (3) the aesthetics of nature, and (4) the status of philosophical aesthetics.

The Culture Industry. Adorno's critique of the culture industry arose in part from his debate with Walter Benjamin in the 1930s over the implications of film and radio for the democratization of culture. Whereas Benjamin had suggested that film has a progressive impact on ordinary experience and can serve to politicize the masses, Adorno's 1938 essay "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" argues that the broadcast and recording industries resist musical innovation, make a fetish of commercial success, and promote the regression of both musical and political consciousness.

Adorno expanded his argument to include all the mass media in "The Culture Industry," a chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Under capitalist conditions, he says, artworks and other cultural artifacts are produced as commodities. According to Marx, commodities are products whose use value (their ability to satisfy human wants) is dominated by their exchange value (their ability to command other products in exchange). Capitalist commodity production also obscures the facts that human labor power is the source of value and that laborers must be exploited to

generate the surplus value from which capitalists make their profit.

Building on this Marxian analysis and on György Lukács's theory of "reification," Adorno argues that a new level of sophistication and obfuscation characterizes commodity production in advanced capitalism and both directs and hides within the culture industry. Under such conditions, cultural artifacts are mass-produced without regard for their use value, and their exchange value is presented as use value, as something to be enjoyed for its own sake. The culture industry pushes people to consume films, recordings, broadcast concerts, and the like, not so their filmic or musical qualities can be appreciated, but so they can become a commercial success—a "hit" or a "star." In this process, the consumer is a willing contributor. Twentieth-century capitalism has become, as it were, a self-celebrating system in which the cultural industry proves indispensable. Consequently, concerns about artistic quality become harder to raise, and the "masses," whose exploited labor keeps the system going, become less conscious of their genuine and unfulfilled needs. Both of these consequences, together with the "standardization" of culture in the service of economic and political power, are the target of Adorno's critique of the culture industry.

Critics of Adorno frequently describe his approach as elitist and monolithic, and not without reason. His published essays on jazz, for example, betray a failure to comprehend the ways in which African-American music has arisen from conditions of oppression and served emancipatory purposes. Yet the central theoretical claims in his critique remain relevant at a time when new mergers and globalization have swept the entertainment, telecommunications, and information industries. Without a theory of their economic underpinnings and cultural impact, such trends cannot be properly understood or evaluated.

Autonomy. According to Adorno, the emergence of advanced capitalism, with its ever-tighter fusion of state and economic power, does not leave the arts unaffected. Where these do not provide fodder for the culture industry apparatus, they become all the more alienated from mainstream society. Increased alienation does not lessen their social significance, however, for it gives them the distance needed for social critique and utopian projection. Moreover, the alienation of the arts from society is itself socially produced. Arts that resist the culture industry are, in a phrase from *Aesthetic Theory*, "the social antithesis of society" (1984, p. 11).

Adorno's account of artistic autonomy is highly complex. On the one hand, the independence of the arts from religious, political, and other social structures, as institutionalized and theorized in Western societies, creates a space where societal wounds can be exposed and alternative arrangements imagined. On the other hand, because such independence itself depends on the division of labor, class conflict, and the dominance in society of the capitalist "ex-

change principle,” the space of exposure and imagination serves to shore up the societal system even as that space becomes internally problematic and externally irrelevant. As Adorno puts it at the beginning of *Aesthetic Theory*, referring to the modern art movements, absolute freedom in art stands in a contradiction with the abiding unfreedom of society as a whole. Yet it is only because of autonomy that certain works of art can achieve a critical and utopian “truth content” (*Wahrheitsgehalt*), in the absence of which a fundamental transformation of society would be even more difficult to envision.

This complex position puts Adorno at odds not only with formalist approaches, which either assume or ignore art’s social significance, but also with the socialist realism of Marxism-Leninism and the political commitment (*engagement*) promoted by Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, and much of the New Left. The controversial claim in his 1962 essay “Commitment” must be situated in that polemical field: “This is not the time for political works of art,” he writes; “rather, politics has migrated into the autonomous work of art, and it has penetrated most deeply into works that present themselves as politically dead . . .” (*Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, pp. 93–94).

Both societal structures and cultural contexts have shifted in the intervening years. The rise of new social movements such as feminism, ecology, and gay and lesbian liberation has helped turn the focus of cultural theory from autonomous works to emancipatory practices; postmodernism has challenged the normative assumptions built into modernist legitimations of high art; and the institutions of the art world—museums, publishers, symphony orchestras, and the like—have increasingly acknowledged and exploited their symbiotic relations with corporations, foundations, and the culture industry. Such developments cast doubt on the validity of Adorno’s dialectical autonomism.

At the same time, however, concerns about the need for artistic autonomy have arisen within the new social movements, particularly in response to moralistic and antimodern pressures from a revitalized right. The increasing dependence of arts organizations on business strategies and corporate generosity has also raised questions about the future of alternative modes of artistic expression. Although Adorno’s approach needs to be rethought in this environment, it nevertheless provides a crucial counterweight to prevailing assumptions about the social significance of the arts and their institutional frames.

Natural Beauty. Adorno himself was a master “thinker.” Much of the *Aesthetic Theory* can be read as a modernist reconceptualizing of philosophical aesthetics, especially the writings of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Nowhere is this project more provocative than in Adorno’s return to an aesthetics of nature. On the one hand, Adorno rejects Hegel’s dismissal of natural beauty as inferior to the humanly produced beauty of art.

On the other hand, he also rejects Kant’s reduction of natural beauty to an indefinite object of taste. Yet he also refuses either to celebrate natural beauty as such or to define its independent nature. Rather, he sketches a genealogy of the modern discourse of “natural beauty,” and from this he identifies the referent in question as the trace of the non-identical, which the arts seek to rescue, with unavoidably mixed results.

Initially, such an approach does not seem promising for the recently developed field of environmental aesthetics. Adorno does not so much theorize the aesthetic dimension of nature and daily life as challenge the assumption that these “have” an “aesthetic dimension.” What is important about Adorno’s approach, however, is his insistence that such matters are socially constructed within a political and economic system, and that any discourse of “natural beauty” must be linked to contemporary artistic practices.

More specifically, Adorno describes natural beauty as the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity. Amid its social construction as a category of alterity, that which is experienced as natural beauty reminds us that not everything is exchange value, not everything submits to the control of instrumental reason, not everything fits the grid of our definitions and categories. Contrary to Hegel, natural beauty is not deficient because it is indeterminate, but rather natural beauty is indeterminate because discursive thought is deficient. Among the various ways in which Western societies “relate” to “nature,” only art has the capacity to preserve this trace of indeterminacy while giving it definite contours. In that capacity art not only challenges the dominance of exchange value and instrumental rationality but also raises the trace of the non-identical into a hint of reconciliation between nature and culture, a reconciliation that would presuppose an end to class domination in society.

Closely related to this figure of art’s “rescuing” natural beauty from sheer indeterminacy are Adorno’s notions of “mimesis” and “expression” in art, which he usually pairs with “rationality” and “semblance” (*Schein*) as their dialectical opposites. Mimesis, a truly protean concept, refers to an archaic openness to the other, to the disparate, diffuse, and contrary. Such openness lives on in artworks whose form accommodates the conflicting impulses of their content. Successful artworks embody a mimetic rationality and thereby provide a crucial alternative to the control and reduction characterizing the instrumental rationality that prevails under capitalist conditions. Similarly, expression refers to a capacity to register that which impresses itself upon human experience despite the various control mechanisms set up by society and the psyche. In artworks such a capacity is mediated by the mimetic behavior that goes into artists’ productive activity. The more expressive artworks become, the more their semblance of self-sufficiency is shaken, even though this semblance is required if artworks are to be ex-

pressions of something more than what society and the individual psyche permit.

Playing throughout such polarities is a continual reversal of the subject-object relation, such that the supposedly rational and controlling subject becomes an accomplice of the object, and the supposedly controlled and meaningless object begins to speak for itself. For Adorno, such a reversal—common in modern art—holds open the possibility that the alienation of subject and object, a central fissure within the dialectic of enlightenment, can itself be alienated, not only in art but also in other modes of social labor. In other words, a reconciliation between culture and nature, together with the lessening of social domination, is not out of the question. This is the underlying issue that an Adornoesque “environmental aesthetic” would have to address.

Aesthetic Theory. In some respects the reception of Adorno’s aesthetics in Anglo-American philosophy has yet to begin, despite the many translations of his writings and the abundance of secondary literature from scholars in literature, music, cultural theory, religion, and the social sciences. In philosophy, and especially among Anglo-American philosophers, there has not been a serious engagement with Adorno’s aesthetics on the scale of, say, the reception of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*.

Many factors might account for this, not the least of which is the Habermasian turn in critical theory away from Adorno’s traditional, albeit explosive, subject-object paradigm toward a theory of communicative and intersubjective rationality. The rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism have also made Adorno’s dialectical method and paradoxical modernism seem outmoded. Then, too, the theme of a possible “end” of philosophy does not bode well for an author who unrelentingly rewrites the philosophical tradition. Add to this some unreliable translations, analytical philosophy’s avoidance of difficult German thinkers, and the long ascendancy of Martin Heidegger among so-called continental philosophers, and the relative neglect of Adorno becomes understandable.

Yet few philosophers have been as well versed in contemporary art forms as he, and even fewer aestheticians have written so much of interest to the social sciences. Perhaps as aesthetics itself becomes ever more interdisciplinary and shades into cultural theory, Adorno’s multifaceted aesthetics will receive the attention it so manifestly deserves.

An unavoidable topic in this connection is the status of what Adorno called, ambiguously enough, an aesthetic theory. Clearly, he does not intend to give a theory of the aesthetic. If anything, his book by that title provides what has been described as “a paratactical and dialectical phenomenology of (modern) art” (Zuidervaart, 1991, p. 45), where “phenomenology” is understood in a modified Hegelian and not Husserlian sense, and where the parentheses indicate that Adorno tries to derive insights into the entire field from the peculiarities and dilemmas of modern art.

Adorno refuses to posit an essence to the arts or to treat normative notions such as beauty or meaning as timeless universals. Yet he retains the assumption, derived from Hegel, that philosophical reflection is crucial for the proper reception of art. To do justice to the artistic phenomena, such reflection must itself be aesthetic, in the sense of incorporating that openness to the other that successful artworks embody. Hence the theory in question cannot take the form of straightforward analysis or deduction, but must construct constellations of concepts, hoping that their continually shifting light will illuminate the subject matter and do justice to its alterity. For this sort of writing, there is hardly any precedent, nor can there be an imitation. *Aesthetic Theory* is a singular achievement, which, although cut short by Adorno’s untimely death in 1969, will continue to challenge well into the twenty-first century.

[See also *Autonomy*, *article on Critique of Autonomy*; Benjamin, *survey article*; Hegel; and *Truth*.]

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