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The Cruelty of Form? Notes on the Social-Theoretical Aspects of Adorno's Aesthetics

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Abstract. In this paper I draw attention to the social-theoretical underpinnings without which Adorno's views on modern art and the nature of aesthetic experience cannot be understood. These underpinnings are crucial to Adorno's aesthetics, a fact that is often overlooked by his critics. At the same time, fleshing out the premises that Adorno's aesthetic theory rests on provides a starting point for more thorough and valid criticisms of his views. More specifically, this starting point consists of questioning the idea of "domination of nature" as the pseudo-transcendental foundation of societies and, by mediation, of artistic labour.

1. Introduction

Adorno's aesthetic theory has received rather constant attention since the end of the 1990's. This newest wave of reception has moved away from the influence of post-structuralism, but still considerations on Adorno's social theory, an *a priori* condition of his theory of art, remain largely marginal. Paying attention to this social-theoretical background helps to clarify our understanding of the conditions, and hence of the scope and actuality of Adorno's aesthetics. Bringing forth some of these underlying assumptions at the same time reveals certain limitations of Adorno's theory of art. These limitations, however, do not so much call for a replacement or dismissal of his view of the essence of art in modern society as a continuation of it, and in any case offer useful points of departure for rethinking the sociality of art.

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2. From Social Theory...

Before writing *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the joint work with Horkheimer where the modern condition is put into a speculative historical perspective, Adorno's views on social reality emerge as part of his sociological essays on music. The texts from this period, beginning with "On the Social Situation of Music" of 1932, are worth paying attention to because their social-theoretical insights explain the direction that Adorno's analytic relationship to society and sociology came to take.

2.1. *"On the Social Situation of Music"*

Adorno begins "On the Social Situation of Music" by providing a picture of society as a totalized closure and music's position in it. The bourgeois practice, still alive in the 19th Century, of "domestic cultivation of music" has been swallowed by "the dialectic of capitalistic development" which has ended up, on the one hand, in a total rationalization of music and, on the other, in the complete social alienation of modern music. In other words, music in the present is either a direct extension of the social order without the mediating effect of home and family or so autonomous that it has the character of complete asociality. The alienation of autonomous music, a "social fact", "cannot be corrected within music but only ... through the change of society."[1] That is, it is not modern music that is to be, in a sense, "blamed" for being so impenetrable, but this contradiction is caused by a society that is hostile to genuine individuality, experience and expression. Society, in short, is so unsatisfactory that autonomous artistic expression necessarily retreats into a state that seems one of hibernation.

However, Adorno does not address the stated change of society, the essay's positive pole contra "capitalistic development", in political terms, as a concrete, positive possibility. Rather, he presents societal change only as a regulative idea that is gained through a negation of what exists, as a form of liberating non-communication. This, indeed, is what autonomous musical composition is about: societal change is a non-concrete utopian possibility, an experience that seems to be open somewhat exclusively to and within art. The present pinnacle of autonomous music for

[1] Adorno 1932/2002, pp. 391—2.

Adorno is Schoenberg's twelve-tone system, through which he articulates the performatively critical power of music as non-communication and non-expression. By this Adorno means that only the "immanent problems" of the musical "material" – meaning both the concrete sounds and their mediation through musical tradition, especially the diatonic principle – are worth bringing into a piece of music.[2] It is through such an immanent, self-enclosed and riddle-like existence that music can create a reflective experience where a subject can see its alienation and unfreedom in society. The outcome of such artistic experience is not a model for social change but an upheld possibility of such a thing.

Because true societal change is only conceived by Adorno as a regulative idea, he categorically rejects both the artistic intention and possibility of the rise of a proletarian "class-consciousness" through music. The proletariat itself is so thoroughly "suppressed" that any music produced on the terms of its consciousness would simply reproduce the proletariat as it is under the present condition of "class domination".[3] Against this tendency, Adorno's insistence is to uphold the gap between autonomous music and the proletariat so long as the proletariat remains ideologically tied to the capitalist order, i.e. well into the foreseeable and imaginable future. Interestingly, use of the term "class domination" with reference to the social sphere seems rather rudimentary in light of what follows in the text: an equivalence drawn by Adorno between bourgeois and proletarian satisfaction in the aesthetic sphere. There is a quick shift from "class domination" to capitalism as a total system of domination that, in a sense, forms the economic base of fascism just as much as that of "light music" which "satisfies immediate needs, not only those of the bourgeoisie, but of all of society."[4] In other words, Adorno assigns this totalized context of light satisfaction – both of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie – to the dialectic of capitalist production, which is ideologically internalized by both and thereby controls the fulfilment of their desires from above, allowing no escape.

After this, Adorno introduces terms like "bourgeois rationalization"

[2] Adorno 1932/2002, p. 399.
[3] Adorno 1932/2002, p. 410.
[4] Adorno 1932/2002, p. 425.

and "bourgeois rational society"[5]. He uses them to refer to the process by which liberal capitalist competition necessarily leads to monopoly capitalism, and the equivalent phenomena of this process in the sphere of music. Adorno claims that it "is the decisive factor in the history of recent vulgar music that the ... growing vacuity and banalization of light music corresponds exactly to the *industrialization* of production" and that the "authors of light music were forced into mass production by inconceivably intense competition".[6] This, Adorno claims, ended in a trust system, typical of monopoly capitalism, creating a technologically superior production procedure that eliminated, together with competition, the last aesthetically progressive remains from light music. The same is true of jazz, which Adorno thinks is perhaps even more standardized in its levels of production.[7] The general argument here is that it is essentially the relations of production (capitalist competition) accelerated by the mode of production (industrial techniques) that is the origin of light music's totalization into vulgar music.

All in all, Adorno paints the picture of a highly developed, increasingly rationalized capitalism that, as inherently proto-fascist, controls the desires of both the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat. In the field of music this control can be resisted only by the musical avant-garde and those who are able to appreciate this avant-garde properly as a specific relationship to the social present, articulated through the immanent problems of musical form that open up an emancipating space of non-communication and non-identity. However, the "dialectic of capitalistic development" that Adorno presents as the root of the social totality seems to be subordinate to a larger historic-philosophical context that provides a certain silent backdrop of the essay. Especially the introduction of "class domination" appears close to redundant, because the larger context is in any case viewed as a self-enclosed totality, where the bourgeois is just as much unconscious as the proletariat. Although Adorno presents some valid and interesting observations about the negative effects of modern capitalism with regard to music, especially the other pole – a genuine form of aesthetic experience – seems to presume something more as its justifying backdrop than capital-

[5] Adorno 1932/2002, p. 427.
[6] Adorno 1932/2002, p. 428; italics in the original.
[7] Adorno 1932/2002, p. 430.

ist development and indeed has a theological tinge to it. Because of what is hereby still left unsaid, the essay is a sharp, if rather one-sided, verdict about the social situation of light music, but the social situation of progressive music and especially the driving motivation of the text, the aim and hope of social change, remain vague. In short, due to his strong sense of society as a closed totality, Adorno presents the unsatisfactory aspects of music as a social force with much greater clarity than the progressive ones. The progressive force of music as a possibility for social change – the only valid justification for the practice of art – is more akin to idealistic vagueness.

2.2. *"On Jazz"*

In important respects, "On Jazz" from 1936 repeats the argument in a similar way, but the essay is more detailed in its musical analysis than "Social Situation" and focuses more on the aspect of subjective experience. It can, therefore, be understood as an elaboration on the formal qualities of light music presented in the 1932 essay.

Of these formal qualities, Adorno especially emphasizes the appearance of different rhythmic gimmicks that wish to appear raunchy while still remaining absolutely tied to the eight-bar period. However, he also detects "the same simultaneity of excess and rigidity"[8] in harmony, melody and sound, too. He analyses these features as parts of the "marketability" and the overall commodity-character of jazz and views it in a quasi-Bourdieuan light, as a sort of social capital for both "the well-trained upper class, which knows the right dance steps" and the "proletariat" that identifies with its oppressors: both share the same "mutilated instinctual structure" that jazz appeals to.[9] This amounts to jazz being "pseudo-democratic", in which it is a reflection of "the current political sphere"; it is obvious that Adorno has fascism in mind when he states that "the more democratic jazz is, the worse it becomes."[10] Throughout, the view that marketability and commodification have a fascist tendency is implicated. This is to be understood against that fact that Adorno was writing from his exile in

[8] Adorno 2002/1936, p. 471.
[9] Adorno 2002/1936, p. 474.
[10] Adorno 2002/1936, p. 475.

Oxford, England because a shift from capitalism to fascism is essentially what had just happened in his home country. Not surprisingly, then, Adorno repeats the basic claim of his "Social Situation" essay by connecting jazz *qua* capitalist commodity to a totalized order that subjective experience is doomed to repeat. He implicitly grounds the "mutilated instinctual structure" of the proletariat on the presumably sado-masochistic character of the workers who wish to identify with their oppressors. This Oedipal loop is offered to explain the ensuing musical totality of a thwarted democracy, and the popularity of jazz among the working class. In this situation, Adorno claims, the "primordial", or bodily-instinctual, effect of jazz is merely a calculated moment of modern commodity production, and the result is: "With jazz, a disenfranchised subjectivity plunges from the commodity world into the commodity world; the system does not allow for a way out."[11]

Further, Adorno sees the pseudo-democratic nature of jazz also exemplified in the production process of a song with its division of labour into the composer(s), the author of the text, the arranger and the band. This, Adorno claims, is not testimony to a systematic and thoughtful attitude to musical production, but rather to an amateurish procedure which "merely outlines the parody of a future collective process of composition."[12] Here, a specific social-theoretical stance is present. Fascism is essentially treated by Adorno and his peers as a false reconciliation of the contradictions of capitalism, a spectacle of a revolution; and some years later Adorno writes that the "rising collectivist order is a mockery of a classless one."[13] This omnipresence of token forms of a right state of spontaneity, freedom and collectivity testifies, on the one hand, to the utopian longing present in people's subjective structure and, on the other, its realization in a form distorted by the relations of production or, more generally, by social reality. This echoes Horkheimer's view on the progressive potential of egoism that was distorted by a corrupt process of civilization.

By appealing to a mutilated, unfree instinctual structure, jazz, according to Adorno, not only closes the way to a utopian future, but it is also a way of forgetting the past through watered-down treatment of its own mu-

[11] Adorno 2002/1936, p. 478.
[12] Adorno 2002/1936, p. 481—82.
[13] Adorno 1974, p. 23.

sical influences such as impressionism: "Even yesterday's music must first be rendered harmless by jazz, must be released from its historical element, before it is ready for the market."[14] Jazz, that is to say, allows nothing else but the present, just like it allows nothing to escape from its rigid idioms regarding rhythm, harmony, melody and sound. It is a mockery of true happiness and instinctual freedom.

Finally, jazz is for Adorno both pseudo-archaic in its appeal to a "primitive" or "natural" side of subjectivity and pseudo-modern or pseudo-individual in its simultaneous mobilizing of formalist experimentation and a completely ossified structure.[15] This general insight of a false reconciliation of two musical traits remained important for Adorno; in 1963 he writes that the basic strategy of popular music is "a mixture of streamlining, photographic hardness and precision on the one hand, and individualistic residues, sentimentality and an already rationally disposed and adapted romanticism on the other".[16] At this point of the jazz essay, Adorno proceeds to point to the march-like elements in jazz's rhythmic and instrumentation and refers to its popularity both in Italy and Germany.[17] Here the logic is crystal-clear: jazz is a phenomenon of consumer capitalism and commodification, from which it follows that it is prone to quasi-military elements, which again makes it usable to fascism. The commodity form, then, is always already violent, militaristic and fascist.

However, an important point is that the historical implications go much further back than the capitalist commodity form, to the archaic mankind, and this sheds light on the unstated aspect of the "Social Situation" essay, too: "Insofar as dancing is synchronous movement, the tendency to march has been present in dance from the very beginning; thus jazz is connected in its origins with the march and its history lays bare this relationship."[18] Adorno detects a similar, archaic element of social control in the verse-chorus structure, in which "the single lead singer or principal dancer" first makes their individual observations about the world "in order to be con-

[14] Adorno 2002/1936, p. 484.

[15] Adorno 2002/1936, p. 485. Only the "more advanced" elements of jazz that "the layman cannot understand", Adorno points out, were banned by the Nazis (ibid.).

[16] Adorno 1975, p. 15.

[17] Adorno 2002/1936, p. 485.

[18] Adorno 2002/1936, p. 486.

firmed and socially objectified in the chorus", a structure which expresses the identification of the individuals in the audience with the social whole. Indeed, Adorno's anthropological conclusion here is that the principal dancer or lead singer is "nothing other than a – perhaps superseded – human sacrifice."[19] Adorno thinks that "the subject of jazz" has taken onto itself this function. This subject wants to be an "eccentric" and abandon the social norm, be "potent", but realizes that the only way to be potent is actually to "be castrated", assimilated into the community – in other words, the subject ostensibly rejects exterior censorship but internalizes the exact same censorship in order to "be 'able'".[20] In short, jazz is the music of "oppressed peoples" and stands for "a mechanism of identification with their own oppression", an "amalgam of a destroyed subjectivity."[21]

One of the common denominators of these early essays is how they constantly hint at the fascist essence of capitalism and, vice versa, the nature of fascism as an appendage of capitalism. This is illustrated both on the level of social structures and on the more micrological level of experience (like that of a jazz enthusiast) and subjective positions (like the status of the composer in "New Objectivity"). There are, of course, fully justified reasons for drawing such connections – the connections between omnipresent entertainment, capitalism and fascist tendencies, is very clear in our time as well. However, those of the essays' elements that remain more definitive for Adorno's later work are of an anthropological sort. For instance, "On Jazz" reveals that which is left between the lines in the "Social Situation" essay by adding into the mixture archaic barbarism, with human sacrifices and assimilation into the collective. Here the question arises what, exactly, is the role of capitalism for Adorno's views. There is a logic that appears to suggest that capitalist production brings no qualitative difference into the practices and socio-psychological mechanisms that jazz embodies and animates. Rather, it is the quantitative enhancement of moments that have characterized human communities all along. Accordingly, the relationship of social classes is not carefully addressed. It is merely stated that the classes' forms of enjoyment converge in that they are mutilated and controlled by the forces of production, and, with the

[19] Adorno 2002/1936, pp. 487—8.
[20] Adorno 2002/1936, pp. 490—1.
[21] Adorno 2002/1936, p. 491.

help of Freud, that the dominated identify with the dominators. Again, both the ones in control and the dominated seem to have no hope since everyone, and the whole that they form, is somehow kept together by its own immanence, the source of which Adorno does not at any point claim to be capitalism specifically. This brings with it the question whether the power of the commodity form is really so strong, and where does this form originate.

2.3. *Dialectic of Enlightenment and After*

Considering this generalizing anthropological tendency, it is not surprising that the Marxist language of these early essays waned with the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), where seemingly socio-political analysis gives way to the writers' famous and much discussed anthropological perspective on the condition of humanity.[22] This condition is not viewed by Adorno and co-author Horkheimer to be a matter of specific societies and politico-economic organization, but a matter of the corruption of reason in the history of civilization. Reason, as the attempt to identify that which is non-identical, is the common factor that runs through mythical constructs and organized religion all the way to modern science, and this has been reflected in human praxis, too, which has developed towards ever more rigid domination of both the inner and the outer world. More precisely, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, reason is equivalent with the domination of nature, both that within and outside subjects, and this is the immutable, anthropological matrix connecting all of humanity.

Here a short but illustrative historical excursion is in place. Namely, the moment when Adorno explicitly distances himself from Marxist critique of capitalism seems to be precisely the editing process of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. James Schmidt compares the early 1944 version of the book (printed as a mimeograph for internal use at the Institute for Social Research) with the 1947 Querido print version, which Adorno prepared for publishing without Horkheimer. Adorno's editing boils down to switching specifically Marxist concepts and references to capitalism to more general concepts and references to modern social structuration. Schmidt's itemization is revealing:

[22] Horkheimer and Adorno 2002.

> '[E]xploitation' becomes 'enslavement' ... 'capitalism' becomes 'the economic system' ... 'exchange value' becomes simply 'value' ... 'class society' becomes 'society' ... 'exploitation' becomes 'injustice' ... and 'capital' becomes 'economy' ... The 1947 text is making a claim that applies to all societies at all times. The 1944 text is making a rather specific claim about class domination.[23]

Schmidt's conclusion is correct, but an addition must be made: such a mechanic move in terms of the object of criticism could not have been possible in the first place had the original text not inherently enabled it. (The process is ironically close to what Adorno and Horkheimer scorn the culture industry for, namely, the switching of details while holding on to the same standardized structures.)

After the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the writers' intention of producing another book that would provide both a more detailed material theory of the post-war, administered exchange society and a positive concept of enlightenment was never acted upon. Rather, Adorno concentrated on cultural critique and aesthetics. Further, in his sociology lectures he precisely made a point of *not* attempting to define the concept of society, lest the concept become undialectical.[24] With this, Adorno gave up the task of formulating a material theory of society.[25] Moreover, Adorno never backed away from the view that the essential condition of modern humanity is defined by a form of reason that has developed since the dawn of civilization. Regarding the positive concept of enlightenment, there are only hints in Adorno's writings to one notion: reconciliation with nature. Adorno never defined this notion clearly, but it is obvious that such a notion entails the concept of nature as *good* nature; in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) he speaks, for instance, of "the impulse before the ego", the "archaic" in the subject that is distorted by reason.[26] Herbert Marcuse was perhaps merely more open about his romanticism when he, in *Eros and Civilization*, defined the concrete possibility of utopia in terms of reconciliation with the drives.

[23] Schmidt, 1998, 813—14.
[24] Adorno 2000, 38.
[25] Wiggershaus 1994, 599—600.
[26] Adorno 1973, 221—22.

Hereby, the social-theoretical background of Adorno's cultural critique and negative aesthetics is foregrounded only provisionally. It remains more a negative anthropology under the topos "domination of nature" than a theory of, say, high capitalism. Reading *Aesthetic Theory* with this in mind, many of its seemingly obscure notions become more tangible.

3. ... to Aesthetic Theory

This anthropological background indeed haunts *Aesthetic Theory*. Examples, again, are many, but maybe the most interesting section in these terms is the one where Adorno addresses the concept of the ugly. For Adorno, the presence of the ugly in modern art is inherently tied to the cultic and archaic origins of art. However, it is not the case that the archaic simply returns in modernity as a forgotten, positively redemptive form of life and being. This would imply a form of anti-modernism that calls for a "return" to an imagined past as a nostalgic connection with (human) nature. Rather, it is the negativity and violence already present in the archaic itself that makes its way into modern art's consciousness as something inherent to aesthetic production. In Adorno's Marx-derived understanding, aesthetic production never got rid of the antagonist, violent relationship of nature and social labour, and this consciousness silently shakes the basis of classical beauty and finally makes classicism flip into modernity. That is, the past haunts modernity, not as something suffocated and suffering in the iron grip of modern rationality (like a new age-explanation might run), but as itself already something suffocating and indeed a prologue of reason. Here *Aesthetic Theory* repeats the logic of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: there is no hope in the past other than in remembering it as a prelude to, and a cause of, the present.

Before explaining Adorno's stance in more detail, it is useful to make an initial distinction between three levels of ugliness that are implied in his treatment. First, there is ugliness as something represented, in the object that the artwork portrays – for example, the frightening deities and demons of tribal art. Second, there is ugliness on the level of the formal configuration of the artwork, such as dissonance in music. Third, there is the domain of artistic labour itself. As peculiar as it may sound to consider the very category of aesthetic labour from the perspective of aesthetic con-

cepts, this is Adorno's route, because he is interested in the large question of art's validity and role for humankind: what can be achieved by aesthetic labour in terms of the very fate of humanity? Part of his answer is that there is something ugly and barbaric in aesthetic labour as such, and that art therefore must criticize itself – but this should be done immanently, through the categories of autonomy and aesthetic experience because they represent a valid but, in view of history, failed ideal.

Adorno begins the section on ugliness by claiming that, obviously, the category of the ugly cannot anymore be conceived of as merely the negation of beauty. This challenge to aesthetic theory is not put forward only by modern art and its tendency toward ugliness but, Adorno points out, "[a]rchaic and then traditional art, especially since the fauns and sileni of Hellenism, abound in the portrayal of subjects that were considered ugly."[27] The presence of this ugliness should be understood, and as a true dialectician, Adorno's method is to look at the present – modern art – in order to understand the past. There is a link, a historical continuity, that connects the ugliness of modern art to archaic ugliness, and Adorno regards them as essentially the same ugliness, only transformed and reconfigured by the progress of civilization.

If this is to hold true, Adorno must explain the position of ugliness within classicism – the reign of beauty – as well. Indeed, he illustratively underscores that Hegel, as a representative of classicism and the ideal of beauty, does not equate beauty with harmony.[28] Rather, Hegel thinks that a beautiful work must include an underlying tension by hinting at its other, at what the aesthetic appearance conceals by its very appearance. Beauty is not a static relationship of perfect forms but a tension, or a distance; implied here is a materialist perspective, from which spirit can only be understood to be present as an absence created by the work. Adorno proceeds to point out that the ugly is even more deeply seated in artistic creation than as a moment of beauty or moment of form in general. In a sense, ugliness is present in the very labour that initiates the artwork. Here, Adorno refers to the relationship of humans and nature as a violent one: "The impression of ugliness of technology and industrial landscapes cannot be ad-

[27] Adorno 2004, 46.
[28] Adorno 2004, 46.

equately explained in formal terms, and aesthetically well-integrated functional forms, in Adolf Loos's sense, would probably leave the impression of ugliness unchanged. ... In technique, violence toward nature is not reflected through artistic portrayal, but it is immediately apparent."[29] That is, for Adorno ugliness is inherent to technique as such, and hence to artistic production insofar as it shares on a very basic level the same principles as other forms of production. The very act of forming material into something that it is not, something whose aim is not reconciled with nature, is violent. This, and only this, is why modern artworks and industrial landscapes are tied to ugliness in Adorno's view: human praxis *qua* violence radiates through both (and in artworks as self-conscious). "Domination of nature", therefore, is art's "original sin"[30]. At the beginning of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno indeed claims that aesthetic production and production in the social sphere both share in "the dialectic of nature and its domination", and artworks, although they are "windowless monads", "resemble [the dialectic of nature and its domination] without imitating it."[31] More specifically,

> [t]he aesthetic force of production is the same as that of productive labour and has the same teleology; and what may be called aesthetic relations of production – all that in which the productive force is embedded and in which it is active – are sedimentations or imprintings of social relations of production.[32]

Such an account of course implies that if the aims, the underlying teleology, of the social sphere does not change, art will necessarily carry with it ugliness, and the more social reality is alienated from nature and violent toward it, the more insistent the presence of ugliness will become. Art cannot be redeemed of its guilt, of its ugliness, without the redemption of the whole that it is part of, i.e. there is no emancipation without that of society.

So, if this element of violence-as-ugliness is at the very root of the artistic process, modern art is art that constantly brings itself to ques-

[29] Adorno 2004, 46.
[30] Adorno 2004, 50.
[31] Adorno 2004, 6.
[32] Adorno 2004, 6.

tion. It does not make ugliness an aim in itself, a juvenile gesture of shock against bourgeois aestheticism, but lets the inherent ugliness of the artistic process and the immanent problems of artistic labour unfold and become part of the work. Regarding this objective status of ugliness, Adorno is very clear-cut: "Ugliness would vanish if the relation of man to nature renounced its repressive character, which perpetuates ... the repression of man."[33]

Immediately after this, Adorno connects ugliness to what is historically older, the archaic. As stated above, for him the historically older is part of the very anthropological context and historical continuity of the domination of nature that led to the present. In this theory, consciousness and civilization have from their very beginning been preconditioned by alienation from nature, first through a fear of nature, which was dealt with by mimetically re-enacting the terrifying otherness of nature in rituals. Then, as humans through technical innovation were enlightened about their own prevalence over nature, art began to depict the mythical forces as something to be negotiated and tarried with, even fooled.[34] That is, art became a vehicle for the enlightening transition whose message is that humans are the masters of nature, that ideas understandable to humans precondition *fysis*, and not the other way around. Beauty, again, became possible only as a form of this mastery. However, this mastery, according to Adorno's modulation of materialist history, is illusory. Nature is still the master of humans as inner nature, as the impulse toward freedom that animates subjectivity, and underneath all socially mediated distortions it really aims at the reconciliation of inner and outer nature. Aesthetic labour is, for Adorno, the most obvious and powerful way to momentarily realize or at least anticipate such reconciliation of the inner nature of subjects with outer nature. But in social reality the older, mythical consciousness is preserved as the fear of inner nature. The aesthetic parallel to this is that ugliness cannot be left behind as long as such fear and domination are the guiding forces of social reality as a system of identities, language, meaning and subjective intention. Ugliness remains alive at the most basic level, as the founding principle of the labour in aesthetic production, as the myth-

[33] Adorno 2004, 47.

[34] Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, 35—62.

ical flipside of beauty. At this point, it becomes clear that Adorno thinks of beauty as in fact the negation of ugliness – both in the historical development of culture and in the genesis of subjectivity. Beauty is gained as domination of nature.

To illustrate his point, Adorno refers to the myth about the birth of Pegasus, in which Perseus (the male representative of humanity) slays Medusa (representative of the Other, the non-identical, raw existence), whereby Pegasus (representative of beauty) is born.[35] Adorno interprets the myth as revealing something essential about civilization's relationship to beauty. The moral, according to him, is that Pegasus cannot forget its origin in this act of killing. Therefore, "[c]ruelty steps forward unadorned from artworks as soon as their own spell is broken"[36], that is, as art itself destroys its self-proclaimed autonomy that constitutes the possibility of beauty. Modern art, in other words, shows that in its heart of hearts, beauty was ugly all along:

> As Nietzsche knew, art's own gesture is cruel. In aesthetic forms, cruelty becomes imagination: Something is excised from the living, from the body of language, from tones, from visual experience. The purer the form and the higher the autonomy of the works, the more cruel they are. ... What art in the broadest sense works with, it oppresses: This is the ritual of the domination of nature that lives on in play.[37]

In short, for Adorno a modern artwork is a way of remembering the violence present in aesthetic labour and, thereby, in human labour *in toto*. Hereby a subject can, through an overwhelming experience that reverberates "with the protohistory of subjectivity, of ensoulment"[38], recall both its own subjective genesis and history as something violent, recall the blind spots of socialized subjectivity that have not been enlightened. Artworks initiate such experience by turning the instrumental reason of society into aesthetic labour and thereby reflect society's contradictions in their forms. Ugliness is part of artworks in that they become ever more technical and

[35] Adorno 2004, 65.
[36] Adorno 2004, 65.
[37] Adorno 2004, 65.
[38] Adorno 2004, 112—3.

rationalized together with society and thereby dialectically negate what Adorno terms "the mythical terror of beauty"[39].

This is why artworks appear as instances of sensually mediated reason throughout *Aesthetic Theory* and therefore must become auto-critical assemblages of disintegrating forms; this is how they emphasize their own corruptness and anticipate redemption as reconciliation with nature, the non-identical. For instance, reinterpreting Stendhal's definition of art as a *promesse de bonheur*, Adorno claims that, as opposed to the products of the "culture industry", art "must break its promise in order to stay true to it."[40] Following this line of Adorno's paradoxical formulations, it could be said that aesthetic experience is the experience about the impossibility of aesthetic experience, of something that is legitimately and only aesthetic. Artworks are saying: *I am not free, and your freedom is possible through an experience of the unfreedom in my appearance of freedom*. Artworks appear for Adorno as suffering, and through an experience of this suffering, as the end-product of the aesthetic spectacle, the formal possibility of freedom for the experiencing subject is maintained. Essentially, the redemptive aspect of artworks hinges on the instability of artworks' formal configuration, the appearance of their wholeness. From this perspective, for instance, Mark Rothko's monumental late works cannot be taken as positive reminders of the eternal, where all is reconciled; rather, they must be turned against themselves and viewed as wholly human and valid but failed attempts to articulate such a state, which must remain utterly other. The same would go for, say, Ernesto Neto's recent works with their comforting, womb-like spaces crafted solely from soft, natural materials. As peaceful and tranquil they can be, from Adorno's perspective they should be experienced through their un-truthfulness and seen as painful reminders of how far we are from having the right to dwell in such inertia. This change of perspective follows precisely from Adorno's view that form is inherently an element of cruelty, of forcefully imposing coherence, meaning and spirit where there in fact is nothing but mediation. This is the aspect of the "domination of nature that lives on in play". Logically, then, if artworks are to be justified with regard to their function to the fate of humanity,

[39] Adorno 2004, 65.
[40] Adorno 2004, 311.

there must be in them a negative relationship to this cruelty, and this cannot be achieved positively but only by going through the suffering present. If, as Adorno claims, form is the element that makes artworks part of the present social reality, then the dissolution of form, or at least cracks in it, represent hope, that which is beyond the present.

4. Conclusion

From what has been presented above, it should be clear that Adorno's theory of modern art holds on two conditions. One, if we accept that the fundamental condition of modern social reality is a structure of reason that predates and transcends different forms of modern societies; and two, if we accept that the yardstick for the ethical progress of human thought and praxis is reconciliation with nature. This basic structure in Adorno's thought brings forth specific possibilities for reassessing the sociality of art. First, if one questions the prevalence of dominating reason as the pseudo-transcendental foundation of societies, it becomes arguable that the principle of artistic labour is always-already compromised as a form of domination. Second, if one doubts the implicit link between a reasonable social reality and nature (for example, why not think about utopia as a technologically advanced state) then the negativity of artworks becomes undermined and their discursive aspects can be appreciated more delicately. In both cases, Adorno's emphasis on the formal organization of artworks becomes arguable, and representation is allowed more space as a valid aspect of art's social character.

However, this does not completely undermine a possibility, or even a need, for a dialectical understanding of an artworks' autonomy, its essence as a shaky construction. It is just that there is no need to ground this shakiness on a concept of aesthetic labour as domination of nature, as Adorno does. But it is indeed doubtful that even the most heteronomous art, like straightforwardly political art – such as Banksy's graffitis depicting missing Latino women – could be conceived without a certain element of sadness about the justification of the work. It is, after all, only a representation, only a symbolic configuration. This does not mean that the work in question is unambiguously corrupt, but it does immanently pose the question about art's essence and its right to exist – the very question that opens

Aesthetic Theory. After all, if we simply consider pictorial art to be, in an unambiguous way, a depiction of an idea, we might lose the paradoxality, evasiveness and self-awareness that make art art. Here, we might find help from taking Adorno's challenge seriously.

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