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*Aesthetic versus Functional: Overcoming their Dichotomy in T. W.
Adorno's Functionalism Today*

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ABSTRACT. The considerations that this paper proposes aim to investigate Adorno's critique of functionalism, starting from his essay *Functionalism today*. More precisely, my intent is to show that Adorno's argumentation moves towards an overcoming of the dichotomy between the aesthetic and the functional, which is conversely one of the functionalist theory's key assumptions. More significantly, on the basis of his specific approach, I will take it a step further asserting that such position opens up some more general reflections on the possibilities of aesthetics and of the aesthetic in his philosophy. In particular, I regard *Functionalism today* as a fitting example of Adorno's attempt to concretely expand the boundaries of aesthetics beyond art. For this reason, I believe that the stereotypical image of Adorno as a mere apologist for the autonomous art needs to be revised.

1. Adorno in Front of the *Werkbund*

The considerations that this paper proposes aim to investigate Adorno's critique of functionalism, starting with his essay *Functionalism today*, of which I will offer a brief contextualization in the first section. While in the second one, my intent is to show that Adorno's argumentation moves towards an overcoming of the dichotomy between the aesthetic and the functional, which is conversely one of the functionalist theory's key assumptions. More significantly, on the basis of Adorno's specific approach, I will take it a step further in the third and final section, asserting that such position opens up some more general reflections on the

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possibilities of aesthetics and of the aesthetic in his philosophy. In particular, I regard *Functionalism today* as a fitting example of Adorno's attempt to concretely extend the boundaries of aesthetics beyond art. So, in light of this, I believe that the stereotypical image of Adorno as a mere apologist for the autonomous art needs to be revised.

First of all, it is worth mentioning that the text I am about to discuss was originally conceived as an intervention at the Berlin conference of the Deutscher Werkbund in 1965, written down as an essay the following year and finally included in the collection *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica*, which was published by Adorno himself in 1967. This essay offers thematizations on architecture and functionalism that are otherwise very sporadic in the whole of his *œuvre*, among which we count only a few short passages in *Aesthetic Theory* and some considerations on dwelling in *Minima Moralia*. Therefore, *Functionalism today* is a precious source of constant interest especially for architects and architectural theorists who want to engage with Adorno's thought.³⁸⁶ Furthermore, to better understand the context of the conference, it is not of secondary importance to underline that Adorno was widely aware that his audience was constituted exclusively by experts, i.e., members of the Werkbund, founded in 1907 in open contrast with the exhausted aestheticism of the *Jugendstil*. Faced, therefore, with the extremely technical attitude of his audience, Adorno does not hesitate to admit *a priori* his complete lack of specialist knowledge in architectural matters. Thus, the nature of his contribution is, if anything, theoretical: he develops his main theses reacting to the position of Adolf Loos (Adorno, 1997, p. 5), namely by choosing as his topic one of the most controversial issues in twentieth century- design theory, namely the opposition between the allegedly "fine" and the so-called "applied" arts.

Consequently, my commentary as well will transcend a purely specialist- disciplinary discussion on the status of architecture, focusing instead on Adorno's configuration of a dialectical relationship between the functional and the aesthetic. The inclusion of the paragraph

³⁸⁶ See among many others: A. Benjamin, 'Allowing function complexity. Notes on Adorno's "Functionalism today"', in *AA Files*, 41, 2000, pp. 40-5; H. Heynen, "Architecture between modernity and dwelling: reflections on Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory" ", in *Assemblage*, 17, The MIT Press, 1992, pp.78-91; B. M. Katz, "Functionalism Yesterday, Functionalism Tomorrow: Thoughts Inspired by Adorno's Address to the Deutscher Werkbund, "Funktionalismus Heute," Delivered in Berlin on October 3, 1965 "; in A. Khandizaji (ed.), *Reading Adorno. The Endless Road*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 233- 245; N. Grabar, "Architecture and the Distribution of the Sensible", in *Filozofski vestnik* vol. 42 (2) (2021), pp. 259-80; Y. Hürol, "Can architecture be barbaric?", *Science and engineering ethics*, 15 (2009), pp. 233-258.

Dialectic of Functionalism (Adorno, 2002, pp. 60-1) in his *Aesthetic Theory* already points in this direction, making the functional becoming an integral part of the aesthetic reflection. As a matter of fact, the interest aroused by the above- mentioned paragraph is due to the very reference to a dialectic of functionalism that already hints at Adorno's conviction that one can and should grasp a dialectical movement even in the apparent purity of the functional. So much so, that if the mimetic moment of the latter, namely the "aesthetic mimesis of functionality" (Adorno, 2002, p. 61), were to be suppressed, decaying into a mere adaptation to purpose, then the critical resistance that even functionalism may hold would be entirely dissipated (Heyen, 1992, p. 84). This happens precisely when the architectural functionalism is understood as a blind adherence to the strictly practical and to the efficiency demands of the administered world. To prevent architecture and functionality to collapse into a confirmatory role towards the existing, they have to acknowledge their mimetic implications, i.e., that necessity that arises from below, from the material stratum, always inscribed within social antagonisms (Adorno, 2002, p. 61). In such awareness dwells the truth content of functionalism.

These same opinions expressed in *Aesthetic Theory* manifest themselves with exasperated radicality in *Functionalism Today*, as paradigmatically outlined by its last lines:

Beauty today can have no other measure except the depth to which a work [*Gebilde*] resolves contradictions. A work must cut through the contradictions and overcome them, not by covering them up, but by pursuing them. [...] Beauty is either the resultant of force vectors or it is nothing at all. A modified aesthetics would outline its own object with increasing clarity as it would begin to feel more intensely the need to investigate it. Unlike traditional aesthetics, it would not necessarily view the concept of art as its given correlate. Aesthetic thought today must surpass art by thinking art. It would thereby surpass the coagulated [*geronnen*] opposition of purposeful and purpose-free, under which the producer must suffer as much as the observer (Adorno, 1997, p.17).

In these few lines Adorno concentrates a dense concatenation of essential elements that constitute the core of his reasoning. Therefore, in order to fully understand the meaning and power of this final quotation, I will try to retrace the general argumentation of the text in a nutshell.

2. Aesthetic and Functional: a Dialogue Attempt

Indeed, Adorno opens his contribution by emphasizing the *Werkbund*'s constant mistrust of aesthetics as an abstract discipline far detached from the object and its materials (Adorno, 1997, p. 5). And yet, as we shall see, Adorno develops throughout the essay his belief that “[t]he time is over when we can isolate ourselves in our respective tasks” (Adorno, 1997, p. 16). That is to say that, as the paragraph quoted above puts it, Adorno strongly affirms the need for an intrinsically philosophical aesthetic reflection for architecture as well. Nevertheless, the former should be conceived differently from the traditional and academic positions, for, following Adorno, they have proven to be somewhat antiquated, taking refuge either in a trivial and abstract universality or in arbitrary judgments (Adorno, 2002, p. 333).

Nonetheless, in the present situation even every craftsman's creation demands him to go beyond his craftsmanship, in order to be entirely fulfilled. Thus, the twofold path Adorno envisages for the former is, firstly, to take into account the inherent link between architecture and social reality and, secondly, to commit to a constant aesthetic reflection. Those indications are perceived by Adorno as coercive urges and, what is more, perceived with an increased intensity today. This precise temporal reference plays a crucial role in Adorno's argumentation, since it keeps appearing all over the text, not to mention the occurrences in the title and in the passage cited above. The meaning of the term “today” goes beyond the narrowness of the day identified by the single date, embracing rather the intricate historical and social dimension of the present. In this sense, Adorno's essay takes its starting point from the immediate preoccupation with the process of denazification after the Second World War and the annexed reconstruction of Germany (Benjamin, 2000, p.40), which has found its tangible realization in the monotony and squalor of the architectural manifestations of the 1960s. Thereby, it becomes tighter and tighter the intersection between architecture and ideology in the mark of a constant alienation process (Kurir, 2018, p. 38). Nevertheless, the contingency of that concrete state of affairs offers itself as an impulse for Adorno's philosophical considerations, which thereby open up to broader socio-historical observations, acquiring an ineradicable critical-theoretical aspect. The depth of such an interweaving nourishes Adorno's dialectical approach that takes the moves from the concreteness of a particular occasion to then proceed speculatively beyond it, gaining a critical penetration of reality.

In this case, as already mentioned, the reconstructions of the post-WWII Germany and the *Werkbund*'s profound suspicion towards aesthetics serve as constitutive background for

Adorno's reasoning. In particular, he discusses the present matter by addressing the theory of Adolf Loos, one of the most famous architects and cultural critics in the functionalist context. Loos owes his fame above all to his well-known essay *Ornament and crime* (1908), where he fiercely criticizes the ornament in favour of function, since the former is guilty of masking the authenticity and integrity of materials (Bell, 2011, p. 113). Accordingly, Adorno explores Loos' argumentation by illustrating pairs of contrasting moments, which in the latter's theorization are thought of in a logic of inescapable and reciprocal exclusivity: handicraft or imagination; functional or aesthetically autonomous; purposeful or purpose-free; function or ornament. Conversely, the core of Adorno's proposal lies in grasping them in their intrinsically historical dynamic, without remaining unilaterally fixed on one of the two poles. Hence, even between what is purpose-free and what is affected by it there can be no surgical separation: both moments dwell within the creation itself, whose formal law historically shifts from one extreme to the other. Analogously, the struggle against the ornament pertains thus to the applied arts as well as to the fine ones. As Adorno remarks, the critique of the ornament does not represent the aversion towards something ornamental *per se*, but rather towards what has become historically superfluous, namely what "has lost its functional and symbolic signification" (Adorno, 1997, p. 7).

At the root of such unwillingness to absolutizing one single pole, there is always Adorno's crucial theorem, namely philosophy's radical rejection of reducing thought to an absolute first principle. This prohibition also extends to aesthetics: within an aesthetic object, it is perceivable an interconnection of interdependent moments, where none of them plays the founding role of a *primum*, of an original phenomenon. For this reason, it is not a coincidence that the relational instance is precisely what Adorno attributes to the aesthetic itself. In order to explain this key point, he skilfully elaborates the issue through a comparison between architecture and music (Grabar, 2021, p. 292). As a matter of fact, music is a perfect example to give an account of the relational principle that shapes an aesthetic object. Accordingly, Adorno points out that in the musical phenomenon a single tone is never given as an atomic element, so much so that the latter cannot acquire meaning in itself but only in the manifold connection of functions and components within a creation, to the extent that "superstition alone can hope to extract from it [primary element] a latent aesthetic structure" (Adorno, 1997, p. 13, mod. transl.). The same interactional instance informs architecture too, articulating its moments

of purpose, space and material, so much so that “[n]one of these facets makes up any one Ur-phenomenon to which all the others can be reduced” (Adorno, 1997, pp. 12-3).

Furthermore, to prove that there is indeed a certain tendency in Adorno’s reasoning to expand the category of the aesthetic beyond the artistic domain, it is important to remark that on several textual occasions he does not use the term “*Kunstwerk(e)*”, but rather the more generic “*Gebilde*”. This last expression undoubtedly encompasses the work of art, but also something else equally created, for example objects of use [*Dinge des Gebrauchs*]. Following Adorno, they too, if properly experienced, might be able to manifest a stratum that exceeds the crude utility. To such an extent that,

Childhood perception of technical things promises such a state; they appear as images of a near and helpful spirit, cleansed of profit motivation. Such a conception was not unfamiliar to the theorists of social utopias. It provides a pleasant refuge from true development, and allows a vision of useful things which have lost their coldness (Adorno, 1997, p. 15).

Hence, although Loos does not recognize it, through a determinate experiential modality, it is possible to detect a dialectical tension that operates even in the objects of use between their constructive-objective moment and their mimetic- expressive one. Loos’ strategy of relegating the latter to art in order to distance it from the objects of use is, according to Adorno, an abstract operation, successful only in appearance: with their efforts to deny the mimetic-expressive pole, they pay tribute to it all the same. The allergy against the latter is directly proportional to the harshness of the battle waged against ornament. As a synonym for the accessory and the superfluous, Loos attributes it primarily to autonomous art, leading to an abstract conception of aesthetics, which becomes inadequate to understand the functional and, therefore, mistrusted.

On the contrary, Adorno insists on emphasizing the problematic nature of the absolutization of the purpose in itself and of the ideal of the utility at all costs, released from its correlate. And that is because the celebration of functionality as ultimate goal, dominated by the “here and now” (Adorno, 1997, p. 14), fatally culminates in an apology for the existing. Nonetheless, even though function is surely linked to utility, Adorno does not give up the possibility of an interaction between function and alterity, which essentially reminds of human potential. Overcoming this caesura means attributing a more dialectic and nuanced position to functionality, whose field of action can thereby expand beyond and against that which is

demanded of it (Benjamin, 2000, p. 44). With this in mind, one might grasp a subtle, but still decisive difference in meaning between the occurrences of “today” and “here and now”. Referring to the immediate needs of the existing, the latter occludes any chance for the otherness, which is embedded in the moment of dialectical relation, and for its critical potential. Consequently, Adorno admits the possibility of recognizing in the functional too an intrinsic complexity, articulated according to a logic different from profit (Benjamin, 2000, pp. 44-5), i.e., an aesthetic one, which allows to an ephemeral gap of critical resistance for the present and within the present to remain open.

A further and indisputable evidence of Adorno’s account of the aesthetic and the functional, as not mutually exclusive instances, can be identify in some very explicit statements of his. Along his argumentation, he actually affirms that “there is no chemically pure purposefulness set up as the opposite of the purpose-free aesthetic”, as well as the latter does not exist “in itself, but only as a field of tension” (Adorno, 1997, p. 7, mod. transl.) of the sublimation of purpose. This clearly means that there can never be technical objects that are purely functional nor art-objects that are irreducibly aesthetic, but rather objects constituted by an internal field of tension. Adorno’s stance here is quite unambiguous and it implies then that the aesthetic, precisely as an operative principle within the forcefield that a work is, can perfectly dialogue with the functional. Accordingly, all those creations produced by architects, designers or engineers, that claim for themselves a status of pure utility, are actually exposed in their illusory character: under Adorno’s gaze, even the most functional forms are informed by aesthetic experience (Katz, 2019, p. 235). To overcome the absolute hiatus between rigid purposefulness and autonomous freedom, Adorno identifies a mediational ground that innervates both the fine and the applied arts and redirects them towards the critical human potential: i.e., the aesthetic principle, conceived as a relational force.

In virtue of this conception of the aesthetic, I will address one last factor that lets the functional really become susceptible to aesthetic reflections: Adorno’s account of the concept of beauty. More precisely, I refer to the determination of beauty that appears in *Functionalism today*, that defines it as the result of tensions, of the work’s ability to pursue contradictions. In Adorno’s terms, such formulation corresponds precisely to an aesthetic experience of beauty that can be attributed also to technical objects without contradicting their objective formal law. Conversely, this is rather the case of Loos, who teaches an

Incidental beauty [*Beiheerspielende Schönheit*], measured in terms of opaque traditional categories such as formal harmony or even imposing grandeur, [that] impinges on the real functionality in which functional works like bridges or industrial plants seek their law of form (Adorno, 2022, p. 61).

Thus, in Adorno's view, extrinsically associating these creations with a category of beauty conceived according to traditional canons takes the form of nothing more than an apologetic consolation. Such beauty does not possess a stringency that is immanent to the logic of the functional. As already mentioned, this does not mean, however, that one cannot actually trace beauty in the functional. Articulated as a field of forces, beauty finds now its substance in a dialectical dynamic that for Adorno is also perfectly inherent to objects of use.

3. A Bidirectional Gaze

To conclude my analysis of Adorno's essay, it is worth pointing out once again how Adorno's critique of functionalism does not take on the guise of a one-sided denunciation of the cold technological rationality, as one might expect. On the contrary, it rather takes the form of a Kantian investigation of the very conditions of functionalism's possibility (Adorno, 2022, p. 236-237). Consequently, one could affirm that Adorno's approach rather aims at rescuing the theory and the praxis of functionalism from the state of paltriness into which it has sunk. This rehabilitation evidently passes through its reconsideration under the sign of the aesthetic, capable of bringing to manifestation the critical role of functionalism and architecture in the social reality. In order not to decay into a complete banality, architecture must be encountered beyond its mere use or exchange value as well as thought not just as an affirmation of the current culture and modes of production (Bourque, 2015, p. 171). To that end, Adorno invites the technocrats of the *Deutscher Werkbund* to reconsider the urge that aesthetic thought imposes on them: a thought that could indeed allow them to develop "insights which one day might even improve praxis in an unpredictable way" (Adorno, 1997, p. 16).

Briefly, in his contribution Adorno configures a radical and interesting movement that works bidirectionally: if architecture and the world of applied arts are to turn their gaze to aesthetics, the latter must move away from its aged academic path. In other words, the need for

an aesthetic thought that goes beyond an abstract disciplinary compartmentalization has become imperative. In order to be able to penetrate everything that manifests an aesthetic potential, namely even the functional, Adorno concludes that a renewed aesthetics should not close its eyes in front of what is not art, but – through art – must try to think that too. Therefore, with the aim of nourishing even those domains that, conversely, would like to escape it, aesthetics needs to reflect on the criticisms usually raised against it by giving account of its own processual logic that is no less binding than that of the material, on which the functionalism deeply relies (Adorno, 1997, p. 17). Thus, the reflective effort Adorno points to possesses an intrinsic stringency that does not find its articulation in the empty and abstract space of the concept but receives its force by its adherence to the material, which in its turn demands for a speculative moment.

In short, during his speech, Adorno makes every effort to ensure that his audience of technocrats understands the objective need to innervate their work through an aesthetic reflection that, in return, has to abandon its too antiquated patterns. To such extent, Adorno refers to the fact that a similar compel towards aesthetic thought could take by surprise especially those who now have to unexpectedly submit to its gravitational force, by echoing the experience of Monsieur Jourdain, the famous Molière's character, who indeed “discovers to his amazement in studying rhetoric that he has been speaking prose for his entire life” (Adorno, 1997, p. 17). And yet, it has to be admitted that in none of the passages examined above Adorno does hint at his aesthetic theory as a concretization of such a “modified aesthetics” (Adorno, 1997, p. 17). Nonetheless, it is easy to guess that at least he sides with it. Actually, in the light of the argumentative process here proposed, one could go even further, arguing that Adorno's philosophical intention strives towards that very conception of aesthetics that moves beyond art, without, however, getting rid of it. By just loosening the ties of a tradition that constrain the aesthetic to the theory of art, Adorno is free to shift from the thematic development of the work of art to a different and more complex understanding of the category of the aesthetic itself.

This could be in fact the deeper sense of the essay's final quote that has inaugurated the present paper. That is to say that by suggesting the dialectical interweaving between the aesthetic and the functional, Adorno does not intend to completely eradicate the doctrine of the artwork from his aesthetics, in which the latter still continues to be the privileged object of

investigation. However, he opens up to the possibility of going beyond the theory of art, to make it actively effective: namely, not to disregard it, but to proceed beyond it, by reflecting on it. Hence, transcending the thematic discourse of the work of art signifies focusing on what actually takes place and acts in the artwork itself, or, in other words, to identify a performative trait of the aesthetic that operates in the phenomenon by bringing to manifestation its plural tensive structure. Therefore, the most evident and most interesting consequence of a similar reading of Adorno's thought is a revised consideration of his conception of aesthetics itself, which tends to find its pivotal point precisely in the relational instance. As a result, as Adorno himself puts it, "aesthetics is not an individual discipline but the scope of a correlation of concrete philosophical questions" (Adorno, 1992, p. 38, transl. by EV). Then, in light of all these elements, perhaps the time has finally come to seriously question the vulgate image of Adorno that condemns him to the perpetual stereotype of the strenuous and intransigent critic of the cultural industry and elitist apologist for the Great Art, in order to grasp the full and still unexpressed potential of his thought.

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