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(Non)Identity: Adorno and the Constitution of Art

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ABSTRACT. It is a well-known and fairly appropriate view that Adorno's aesthetic theory is extensively concerned about difference. It asserts nonidentity as centerpiece of both art's structure and its genuine achievements. In order to grasp this notion, the paper refuses the view that Adorno regards art's nonidentity in terms of an abstract negativity. Instead of being radically opposed to conceptuality and rationality, art achieves a critical and reflexive identity by a transgressive *integration* of the coercion of identity. Thus, the paper will reconstruct Adorno's argument for both the damaged character of art and its emancipatory potential in opening up the relationship between identity and nonidentity. I will underline that the inherent evocation of identity must be understood as a reflexive shift of the artwork's formal character, which embraces and appeals to the recipients' active engagement with a work of art.

1. Introduction: What is Art's Negativity?

Adorno's theory of art is closely connected to his overall philosophy, which is centered around his critique of identity thinking. In his major works Adorno shows evidence of the universal hegemony of identity, both in philosophical reasoning and in social history, especially since capitalism has

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evolved (cf. Adorno 1973, 146). Identity thinking results from conceptual subsumption and from the exchange of commodities, which posits identical values onto discrete items. Thus, identity socially and conceptually ensures that everything can be made entirely commensurable to instrumental reason. In contrast to this, art is committed to sensuousness. It is stated to be resistant to identity thinking and to defend nonidentity.

But how can these notions of nonidentity, and of art's critical potential be grasped? Adorno's aesthetic theory is frequently construed as opposing art not only to identity thinking, but to rationality and conceptuality, altogether. Hence, art's potential would consist of revealing individuality beyond identity and unscathed by concept. But once a reading of Adorno is presupposing this opposition of art and identity, it easily invokes a rather abstract term of negativity, losing touch of the issues at stake. If we presuppose the rigidly negative stance of art, we are just reassuring identity thinking ourselves by making an utterly abstract ascription to art's constitution and meaning. Furthermore, Adorno does not claim that all conceptual or rational thinking is affiliated with the distortions of identity thinking. Both, suggesting an abstract negativity of art and reducing rationality to instrumental reason easily encourages inappropriate critiques of Adorno's theory.

For example, Albrecht Wellmer misconceives Adorno's critique of identity thinking as withdrawing to a utopia beyond conceptual reason and even *beyond history*. He deems Adorno's critical approach "the latest form

of a theological critique of the earthly vale of tears" (Wellmer 1991, 63).[2] But does art really amount to a theological critique of history, according to Adorno? Does it provide access to radically singular beings that resist identification? In this paper, I will refute these notions of art's abstract negativity and the suggestion that art is simply 'the other' of identity and conceptuality. Instead, as shall be shown, art deals with the entanglement of identity and nonidentity and with the twist of progressive and regressive forms of conceptual reason.

I will first develop the connection of art and society. After that, I will illuminate the consequences that Adorno draws from this connection with regard to aesthetic organization. This discussion of identity and nonidentity will then lead me to some concluding remarks on the status of art's recipients and their acts of approaching and engaging with art.

2. Art and Society

Nonidentity is an exceedingly important category for Adorno. But rather than being a simple category it is regarded to be a dialectical notion. So it is basically connected with its opposite, identity. Debating on art's critical impact Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* underlines identity as being crucial to art's striving for nonidentity: "Aesthetic *identity* seeks to aid the nonidentical, which in reality is repressed [...]." (Adorno 1997, 4; my

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[2] Rüdiger Bubner is drawing on the very same interpretation in his critique. Hence, being committed to a 'theological' and 'transcendental' idea of aesthetic truth Adorno is regarded to miss the importance of aesthetic experience (cf. Bubner 1989, 13–16; 30–34).

emphasis)

At this point, we could take aesthetic identity to be the somehow circular solution of how art resists identity thinking: Being solely an identity within itself, an artwork would be a radical singular being, which simply cannot be identified from the exterior. Nonidentity would thus lead to a radical individual.

But in fact, Adorno *insists* on the inevitable dependence of any singular being on the mediating operation of concepts. Nonidentity is not opposed to thinking but it is its *telos*. Accordingly, Adorno is aware that art's potential will not be exhausted by claiming nonidentity, but that it is dialectically intertwined with identity. Besides, he indicates that certain menaces of identity thinking reappear in art. Art evades neither identity nor society; but, as per Adorno, art is capable of critically working through this involvement.

Adorno elucidates that identity and nonidentity are internal matters that art has to deal with. According to a famous claim, artworks are crucially coined by their 'double-character' being autonomous arrangements *and* social products (cf. Adorno 1997, 229). Following Kant, Adorno stresses that art's significance is tied to its being an end to itself. But at the same time every artwork is basically connected with forms and elements that have a social context and history. However, for Adorno the sociality of art is not merely founded by the factual social origin of an element, but by its mediation, by the way the elements are organized and connected to each other. As the *organization* of human life is deeply flawed in capitalism, art

proves to be tied to society by facing the problems and contradictions of organizing itself: "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society. The complex of tensions in artworks crystallizes undisturbed in these problems of form […]" (Adorno 1997, 6). Within an artwork the immanent problems of form concern the relation of the particular elements or impulses and their organizing unity. It is exactly here, where the problems of identity get into view again.

3. Organizing Identity?

For Adorno organization primarily applies to an artwork's form, which is in turn conductive to the singular elements. These elements get expressed and supported when the tensions of their demands are organized. This is done by articulation. As Adorno states: "Articulation is the redemption [Rettung] of the many in the one." (Adorno 1997, 190)[3] At the same time, aesthetic articulation is not independent from mastery of nature, which is dominant in society. The unsolved tensions of reality pertain to the integrity of aesthetic form. Form is the only way to articulate the many, nonidentical impulses. And form is deeply connected to domination, because any organization implies its own affirmation. "Art's affirmative element and the affirmative

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[3] The concept of redemption hints at the issue that aesthetic form has an eminently social and ethical dimension for Adorno. I will refer to this dimension without explicitly discussing the notions of truth and justice, which are nonetheless crucial in this context. For further elaboration see Kreis (2011).

element of the domination of nature are one in asserting that what was inflicted on nature was all for the good." (Adorno 1997, 160)

So, how could art ever escape domination within its own constitution, let alone establish resistance to identity thinking? Being aware of art's inherent entanglement with mastery, Adorno shows that the only way out is to take the way in: to intensify identification within art. As it is not possible to simply follow or express a primordial self-identity of nonidentical moments, artworks themselves have to handle the mechanisms inherited from identity thinking. "Whereas art opposes society, it is nevertheless unable to take up a position beyond it; it achieves opposition only through identification with that against which it remonstrates." (Adorno 1997, 133) Though any artwork is singular, it finally "must absorb even its most fatal enemy – fungibility [Vertauschbarkeit]; rather than fleeing into concretion, the artwork must present through its own concretion the total nexus of abstraction and thereby resist it" (Adorno 1997, 135).

To elucidate how this attains success, Adorno introduces the idea that any artwork is a force field [Kraftfeld]. The particular demands of individual impulses and the opposite tendency to organize a comprehensive unity have to be grasped as being intertwined within a process. Thus, particularity and unity are no separated movements, but *constitutive moments* of one and the same process. According to Adorno, this implies that aesthetic organization finally incorporates both arranging and abolishing its overall unity. An artwork does not simply stage nonidentical elements struggling against universal identity thinking. It rather exposes its own unity and identity as

being contradictory in itself. This tension-filled exposition is what Adorno calls art's *objectivation*. It relates art's constitution to the tracing of its inherent contradictions.

4. Experiencing and Articulating Art's Tensions

Even given that art identifies with its most fatal enemies, like domination and fungibility, this does not result in a repetition of mastery and reification. Instead, by elaborating their contradictory identity, artworks yield objectivation.

> No matter how much spirit may exert domination in art, its objectivation frees it from the aims of domination. In that aesthetic structures create a continuum that is totally spirit, they become the semblance of a blocked being-in-itself in whose reality the intentions of the subject would be fulfilled and extinguished. Art corrects conceptual knowledge because, in complete isolation, it carries out what conceptual knowledge in vain awaits from the nonpictorial subject-object relation: that through a subjective act what is objective would be unveiled. (Adorno 1997, 113)

In contrast to the widespread criticism that Adorno's theory solely concerns ontological questions about artifacts (cf. Bubner 1989; Rebentisch 2013), I'd like to argue that objectivation [Objektivierung] decisively embraces the spectator and her experience of the artwork. In order to elaborate this I will

capture two major issues of the passage cited above.

First, the aim of objectivation is the unveiling of something objective through *subjective acts*. As a consequence, while the argument just arrived at the *artwork's* contradictory identity, we are now pushed to involve subjective activities. To reach objectivity as it is for itself one cannot skip or delude the approaches of the subject, which however are always one-sided, if not oppressive. There is no way but working through subjective approximation.

This is why Adorno, secondly, gives a contradictory and rather puzzling remark about the involvement of subjectivity: In the face of the overall organization of an artwork "the intentions of the subject would be fulfilled and extinguished" (Adorno 1997, 113). Adorno does not vindicate a sheer overwhelming and overcoming of the subject – as some modern theories of the sublime would do. We rather have to concentrate on the *relation* of subject and object: Through its objectification art is capable of surpassing and criticizing domination, because for Adorno objectification implies the mutual transition of the contradictory identity of the artwork and the contradictory identity of the spectator's activities.

Both sides are concerned with the very same tensions in approaching a self-identity of an individual being – as the artwork 'aims' at giving shape to individual impulses and the spectator attempts to construe the puzzling aesthetic object and to understand its genuine, or even global, claims. Being at once fulfilled and extinguished, subjective engagement with art shares the dialectics of an artwork's inherent form. As I explained before, aesthetic

organization aims at articulating singular impulses. Yet, to achieve this, the organizing structure finally would have to extinguish itself, too. Its identity is contradictory, because on the one hand it aims at establishing free comportment and on the other hand its structure is always set and determined *before* this process could take place. Debating on this problem Adorno writes:

> Artworks are such only in actu because their tension does not terminate in pure identity with either extreme. On the other hand, it is only as finished, molded objects that they become force fields of their antagonisms; […] Artworks' paradoxical nature, stasis, negates itself. The movement of artworks must be at a standstill and thereby become visible. (Adorno 1997, 175)

This last sentence is important. Art's paradoxical nature finally has to become visible. It opens towards the living experience of the spectators and it is up to them to actualize the force field of antagonisms. In Adorno's theory living experience involves imitating and interpreting the artwork and ideally both activities coincide. Aesthetic experience requires attentive and finally conceptual engagement with the artwork's dynamics and antagonisms: "[I]f finished works only become what they are because their being is a process of becoming, they are in tum dependent on forms in which their process crystallizes: interpretation, commentary, and critique." (Adorno 1997, 194) Thus, art does not dismiss conceptuality, it rather culminates in its conceptual reconstruction and interpretation. Likewise,

objectivity is not reached by abstracting from the subject but requires the full energy of subjective effort and engagement.

Yet, interpretation does not subsume the dynamics of an artwork to a subjective, or universal concept. Instead, the subjective activities are reflexively guided and corrected by *identifying themselves* with the tensions of the artwork. "Even an authentic relation to the artwork demands an act of identification" and for this reason, the spectator is committed to "relinquish himself to the artwork, assimilate himself to it, and fulfill the work in its own terms" (Adorno 1997, 275).

To conclude, the conceptual part of interpreting the artwork's dynamic through subjective acts has to be intertwined with assimilation and imitation of this dynamic. (Non)Identity appears to be a relation *between* artwork and spectator. However, the dynamic within the artwork and within the subjective approach towards it demands that conceptual articulation has to avoid its own closure. Art is challenging spectators to constantly re-arrange their own comportment: the relation of conceptual articulation and relinquished imitation of the artwork. If identity becomes an open process of re-arranging relations in this way, nonidentity flashes up as a reflective instant of identity.

As Christoph Menke has pointed out, aesthetic judgments adapt to their object (the artwork) by interrupting themself (cf. Menke 1991, 142-153). As I tried to outline here, another perspective is worth considering as well: If no single interpretation could ever fulfill the artwork, it is up to the manifold interpretations to interrupt and contradict each other for the

purpose of unfolding the artwork as a *force field*. Elaborating this force field implies the negotiation of the social tensions which are embedded in the artwork. It further implies a transformation of subjects, objects, and of how their interrelations are framed in current society. The developing of interpretations brings out the manifold relations between parts and whole. Art thereby opens up new ways of considering the demands and faults of organizing – aesthetically and socially. Hence, reflecting and transforming relationality finally turn out crucial for grasping art's critical impulse.

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