
Aesthetics versus Instrumental Reason: The Critical Function of Art in Adorno *

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Research Article

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Abstract: This article examines Adorno's aesthetic theory within the framework of his critique of instrumental reason, discussing the critical function of art in modern society. According to Adorno, Enlightenment thought failed to realize its ideal of emancipation and instead transformed reason into an instrument of domination. In this process, knowledge became a tool of control rather than freedom, and the relation between subject and object was reduced to the principle of identity. Against this reduction, Adorno emphasizes the resistant power of art. Art transcends the empirical world, making the non-identical visible and giving voice to suppressed differences. Within this context, the concept of mimesis is reinterpreted beyond its classical meaning of imitation as a mode of non-conceptual relation with the world. Art thus transcends the utilitarian framework of instrumental reason and establishes a negative dialectic that suggests truth without directly representing it. Aesthetic experience, in this sense, is not merely sensory pleasure but an intellectual shock and a practice of liberation. The article concludes that Adorno's conception of art constitutes a form of critical consciousness against the rationality crisis of modernity.

Keywords: Adorno, instrumental reason, mimesis, aesthetic experience, negative dialectics, autonomy of art.

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Introduction

When focusing on Adorno's (1903-1969) intellectual approach, his claim that Enlightenment has turned into a myth comes to the fore. Accordingly, the enlightened critical reason, which was supposed to activate dialectics, instead rendered it ineffective and, rather than liberating, has become a means of domination that condemned humanity -presumed to be liberated- to darkness. Domination is realized through the identification (the cancellation and oblivion) of differences within the entire social system. Adorno argues that Enlightenment placed the idea of identity at the foundation of its conception of knowledge, transforming knowing into an act of reducing the object to the subject's own measures.

Enlightened reason does not merely seek to know the object; it transforms it by making it resemble itself. Therefore, according to Adorno, Hegel's (1770–1831) identity-centered idealism represents the highest philosophical form of thought's desire for domination. Auschwitz is the most extreme realization of this metaphysics of identity-the most horrifying form of the homogenization of the individual. Genocide is the absolute unification. For Adorno, Auschwitz confirmed that pure identity is death. The identity of the whole imposed by the system of domination brings an end to the Enlightenment ideal of emancipating differences. The homogeneity of individuals within a society of total domination- the a priori identity imposed between reason and reality- represents what Adorno calls the "system of horror": a world in which individuals are captured, annulled, and de-individualized.¹

If a universal narrative of human history is to be constructed in a deindividualized world, as Marx (1818-1883) also stated, it will be a story not of triumph, but of poverty and suffering. Every historical period has witnessed the destructive effects of instrumental reason, shaped by its own circumstances; yet, in the face of all these processes, the human body has managed to maintain its existence. However, the

¹ Antonio Gutiérrez Pozo, "Idealistic Identity and Dialectical Mimesis in Adorno's Negative Aesthetics," *Filosofía Unisinos* 14, no. 1 (2013), 3.

body's historical experience is fundamentally based on pain rather than pleasure.²

In this context, Adorno's aesthetic thought emerges as a field of resistance against the domination of instrumental reason. In his philosophy, art is not merely an object of taste but the "language of the non-identical" against the coercion of identity. Works of art, by violating the categorical boundaries of empirical reality, become the expression of difference, pain, and historical negativity. Adorno argues that art is not detached from social reality; on the contrary, it derives its critical power precisely from being positioned in opposition to it. Therefore, art is, in both social and cognitive terms, a "negative dialectic": not the transformation of reality by opposing it, but the possibility of making its contradictions visible.

The aim of this study is to analyze Adorno's aesthetic thought developed on the basis of his critique of instrumental reason. Specifically, it will discuss how art assumes a critical function against the domineering forms of reason through the concept of *mimesis* and the dialectical structure of aesthetic experience. This discussion seeks to reveal how Adorno's aesthetic theory exposes both his critique of modern rationality and his positioning of art as a critical field of knowledge. Thus, it will question how art can be conceived as a possibility of liberation that arises at the very limits of rationality.

Mimesis Against Instrumental Rationality

Adorno's philosophy, as is well known, is built upon a comprehensive critique of the instrumental conception of reason that defines the rationality of modern society. At the core of Critical Theory lies this concept, which refers to the reduction of reason's emancipatory potential to mere instrumental purposes-principles of control and efficiency. This dissolution is treated by Adorno as a fundamental problem in both his social theory and his aesthetic thought. Instrumental reason installs the idea that every object is identical with itself. In other words, we assume that things are only what they are and can be

² Emre Zeytinoğlu, "Theodor Adorno'nun Sanat Tanımı ve Protesto," *Cogito* 36 (2003), 244-256.

nothing else. Yet in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno seeks to demonstrate that this identity is not inherent to objects; rather, it is imposed upon them through conceptual thought. According to him, the appearance of identity is immanent in thought itself as its pure form. To think is to identify. The conceptual order merely veils what thought attempts to grasp.³ Concepts do not possess what they refer to and are therefore negative. The world of our everyday experiences is structured according to conceptual schemes that, through their very negativity, disguise it under a false identity.⁴

In this system that homogenizes differences, the redeemer will be art, which is able to transcend limitations and support what is non-identical, yet without submitting to the coercion of identity in factual reality. Art can fulfill this task precisely through its aesthetic and mimetic harmony. By freely modeling the elements that constitute the whole of a work, art transcends the limitations of empirical reality. Merely by separating itself from empirical reality -which allows the relationship between the whole and the parts of the work to be modeled according to the work's own needs- the artwork reaches a higher order of existence. Works of art appear as successive images of empirical reality, because by going beyond empirical limits, they help to access meanings denied to life and thereby liberate life from the captivity of reified external experience. At the same time, art denies the categorical determinations imprinted upon the empirical world, yet still manages to contain what is empirically real within its own sub-structure.⁵

The foregoing discussions are of crucial importance for our study insofar as they show how Adorno's aesthetic thought, developed through his critique of instrumental reason, conceptualizes the transformation between modern rationality and art. In particular, by revealing how modes of thinking grounded in the principle of identity produce mechanisms of domination that suppress individuality and

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negatif Diyalektik*, çev. Şeyda Öztürk (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2014), 102.

⁴ Rafał Czekaj, "Unity of Art in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," *Art Inquiry: Recherches sur les Arts* 24 (2022), 43.

⁵ Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 82; Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minnesota: Continuum, 2002), 4-5.

difference, Adorno highlights that art is not confined to taste but also constitutes a critical field of resistance. Within the framework of *negative dialectics*, art appears as the only domain capable of making the non-identical visible. In this sense, art is positioned not only against modern aesthetics but also against the conceptual domination of thought itself. Based on the principle that the concept is not identical with the object, Adorno argues that art can be the bearer of experiences that are unrepresentable and irreducible. Thus, aesthetic experience becomes a liberating space that develops at the limits of cognition, making difference visible and disrupting the logic of identity. This approach, which conceives aesthetic experience as a liberating and difference-revealing activity, occupies a central position in Adorno's thought, especially as it emerged from the perspective inaugurated by Nietzsche (1844–1900).

In this regard, Adorno views the emancipatory potential of aesthetic experience as a process that is concretized within the dialectical structure inherent in the relation between form and content of the artwork. According to Adorno, the form of a work of art reflects the contradictory character of the existing world, while its content proposes an alternative possibility to the world as it actually exists.⁶ Works of art separate themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world; standing against empirical reality as though this other world were itself autonomous, they simultaneously propose an alternative possibility to the world as it exists, offering a promise of happiness absent from the world as it is. Thus, no matter how tragic they may appear, works of art are a priori inclined toward affirmation.⁷

Adorno attributes to art the quality of being a second world. Yet this is not a simple aesthetic duplication; art is a site of transgression—something other than the natural world or the bourgeois modern world. Even in the highest art, there is nothing that does not derive from the world; nothing remains untransformed. But this second world of art manifests a negative tendency toward the first; the artistic

⁶ Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, 71.

⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

transformation of empirical reality always takes place in a critical sense. Art separates itself from the world in order to negate it through aesthetic transfiguration. For Adorno, the defining feature of aesthetics is critique, resistance, and protest against what exists. Artworks, by their very objectivity, are a priori negative. To understand art, it must be seen in a negative relation to what is not art -to reality itself. The authentic work of art is, in itself, a revolution.⁸ Works of art that bear within themselves a revolutionary quality separate themselves from empirical reality and acquire an autonomous existence. This expresses Adorno's understanding of "the autonomy of art." The work of art is not a direct reflection of empirical reality; rather, it transcends and criticizes the boundaries of existing social and historical reality. In defending art's autonomy, Adorno emphasizes that this autonomy does not mean complete detachment from society; on the contrary, it is nourished by social contradictions. By offering an alternative world, art criticizes the existing order, but this alternative should not be regarded as a utopia or an ideal; it functions rather as a critique that exposes the impossibilities of the present.

On the other hand, art cannot entirely separate itself either from the conceptual or from the empirical. Concerning art's ability to contain within itself the very world it negates, Adorno writes: "Art, though it opposes society, nevertheless cannot take a position beyond it; its opposition succeeds only by becoming identical with what it opposes."⁹ This statement summarizes the formula underlying all contemporary radical art. To be equal to empirical reality -to be merely "black" - may carry critical and utopian potential. This transcendence toward the other thing (empirical and black reality) contained in radical black art constitutes the very essence of artistic *mimesis*. For Adorno, *mimesis* is a key term for understanding the dialectical relations between subjectivity and objects, and more importantly, among art, philosophy, and reality. Hence, the mimetic *logos* of art consists in avoiding alienation, equating itself with suffering, and giving voice to

⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 133.

⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 133.

what the society of domination conceals or silences.¹⁰

Mimesis is one of the most difficult concepts in Adorno's philosophy. It appears in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as an element of Adorno and Horkheimer's (1895–1973) speculative anthropology. In *Negative Dialectics*, however, mimesis becomes part of the conception of experience and expresses the as-yet-undifferentiated foundation of the subject–object dynamic. The relationship between subject and object, insofar as it escapes reification, can be understood and realized through acts of conceptualization and judgment, and through the correction of the contradictions arising in these processes. Art is mimetic not only in its content but also in terms of its aesthetic performance and experiential activities. The entire aesthetic domain, in this sense, possesses a mimetic structure.¹¹

As is evident, Adorno approaches the dialectical activity that characterizes art through the concept of mimesis. According to him, the spiritual element of art is not the “spirit” of idealist aesthetics; rather, it is the mimetic impulse stabilized as a whole. The spirit of artworks lies in their objectified mimetic harmony. The aesthetic spirit is defined not as a constructive principle, but as mimesis – the element that enables the work of art to become a language expressing historical reality. Radical art can thus be thought of as the writing of history. Everything that speaks in a work of art is spoken by historical and social context. The artwork speaks; hence it is a text, a language, a writing – but this expression is not idealist in nature; it is the inscription of historical and social reality. For the work of art contains the sediment of history. What art narrates is not for itself, but for expressing a darkened and damaged reality. The aesthetic principle that constitutes the work of art -the “spirit” understood as mimesis- is the writing of an obscured historical reality. The mode of thought of art takes place not through concepts but through imitation or directness, using mimesis instead of words, and in an immediate way. In this regard, Adorno ar-

¹⁰ Pozo, “Idealistic Identity and Dialectical Mimesis in Adorno's Negative Aesthetics,” 6.

¹¹ Brian J. O'Connor, *Adorno*, çev. Soner Soysal (Ankara: Alfa Yayınları, 2022), 186.

gues that the element of art that resembles language is its mimetic element. Art can acquire universal meaning only in its opposition to the universal within its particular impulse.¹²

Mimesis, which attains universal significance through its opposition to the universal, becomes a rational mode of conduct if it can be used critically against an irrational society. In aesthetic experience, the object is the goal of the experience. By contrast, in socially useful rationality -instrumental rationality- objects are means used to attain an end that is indifferent to them. What makes aesthetic behavior appear irrational according to the standards of dominant rationality is that art reveals the particular essence of a measure that pursues ends rather than means.¹³ In this thought, mimesis goes beyond the meanings of “imitation” or “representation,” encompassing the capacity both to relate to the universal and to create opposition to it. In this sense, mimesis can serve as a critical instrument against an irrational society. This critique of social irrationality transforms mimesis into a rational practice. That is, art, by exposing and criticizing the irrational, can constitute a rationality of its own. Adorno’s conception of mimesis contains both a sensitivity toward the object and a resistance to its absolute conceptualization. In this respect, mimesis frees the object from the classificatory schemes of instrumental reason while at the same time exhibiting a creative relationship that surpasses and transforms it. This understanding differs significantly from Plato’s (424/423-348/347) concept of mimesis: whereas Plato regarded art as a reflection of the world that imitates truth -a practice that leads away from truth- Adorno views mimesis as the possibility of approaching truth sensitively and making it visible in an indirect way. Thus, in Adorno, mimesis is not direct imitation or reflection but a mode of approaching the world with sensitivity - a relational attitude. It is an effort to establish a pre-conceptual, pre-reflective relationship with nature, in contrast to the objectifying, instrumental mode of modern thought.

¹² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 111.

¹³ O’Connor, *Adorno*, 211-212.

By challenging the utilitarian and functional framework of dominant rationality, art demonstrates that a kind of purposiveness beyond instrumental reason is possible. In this respect, art emerges not merely as an object of production or source of pleasure but as an autonomous activity governed by its own inner logic. Its value derives not from serving an external purpose, but from the self-constituting structure that determines its own criteria. From the standpoint of dominant rationality, this renders art “irrational” or “meaningless,” since instrumental reason values only what is measurable, functional, and manageable. Yet precisely this irrationality constitutes art’s emancipatory potential: rather than serving predetermined ends, art offers an experiential domain that carries meaning in itself. In this sense, aesthetic experience is not only a sensory pleasure but also a conscious practice that questions, transforms, and reconstructs the normative and ethical world of human beings. The fact that art pursues ends rather than means allows it to develop a unique ethical and aesthetic normativity; thus, art becomes not merely a form of representation but also a possibility of freedom.

What Adorno emphasizes is that Hegel himself had already discovered within the dialectical essence of aesthetics the antidote to this philosophy of identity that justifies the wounds of concrete reality. In the work of art, spirit is *mimesis*. Adorno thinks that in works of art, spirit becomes their formative principle; it achieves its *telos* only when it emerges from the mimetic impulses to be constructed – when it shapes itself according to them instead of allowing itself to be dictated by a dominant rule: “The rationality of works of art becomes spirit only when immersed in its polar opposite.”¹⁴

According to Adorno, art approaches the world through *mimesis* not merely in an aesthetic or emotional way, but also intellectually. Here, *mimesis* is not imitation in the classical sense; it is a mode of sensitive, intuitive, and non-conceptual relation that the artist establishes with the object and with the external world. Art addresses things without categorizing them or reducing them to the concepts of

¹⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 180; Pozo, “Idealistic Identity and Dialectical Mimesis in Adorno’s Negative Aesthetics,” 12.

instrumental reason. Adorno argues that this mode of relation points to art's capacity to produce knowledge. Art approaches truth not by directly representing the world, but by revealing its contradictions and invisible dimensions through formal means. Therefore, in Adorno's view, art constitutes a unique mode of thinking; it is not irrational but, on the contrary, rational in a different way.¹⁵

According to Adorno, art can reach the non-identical through sensory intuition; yet this access is possible only through appearance and semblance. Art possesses truth as the appearance of what has no appearance. For him, both philosophical or metaphysical experience -achieved through concept- and aesthetic experience -based on intuition- face the epistemological and metaphysical problems that are the legacy of the dialectic of Enlightenment.¹⁶

In the experience of artworks -when our aesthetic receptivity is engaged and we lose ourselves within the work- all dimensions of mimesis become clearly visible: sensitivity to the other, active adaptation to it, the transcendence of the self-governing autonomous sphere, and the liberation of the self through encounter with the other.¹⁷ Aesthetics must now adapt itself to the processual and therefore fragmentary nature of the reality in which the subject interacts with the work of art and where philosophy must also find its stance. In this context, art can neither be reduced to a fixed category nor be considered merely as a catalogue of exemplary works. Aesthetics should not begin with generalized reflections on art but must ground itself in the individual artwork. Indeed, art cannot exist apart from the world of becoming that recognizes only singular works. Moreover, the value and meaning of a work of art are not fixed structures beyond historical interpretation. The artwork is essentially a continuous process within the dynamic relation between the whole and its parts; this process can be reduced neither entirely to the whole nor to the parts.¹⁸

¹⁵ O'Connor, *Adorno*, 212.

¹⁶ Henry Pickford, "Theodor W. Adorno," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/adorno>.

¹⁷ O'Connor, *Adorno*, 209.

¹⁸ Larry McGrath, "(Un)Doing Critical Philosophy: Reflections on Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," *Philosophy Today* 67, no. 1 (2023), 68.

Adorno's aesthetic understanding, rather than situating artworks within absolute and immutable forms, emphasizes their place within historical context and focuses on the dynamic relationship between individual and society. Autonomous art evolves together with the idea of humanity. The concept of art cannot be reduced to specific and fixed definitions; on the contrary, it presents a structure that contains elements subject to change and transformation within the historical process. Art should be understood not within a framework of fixed principles but according to its own internal laws of movement.¹⁹

A work of art always takes shape within the tension between the representation of the universal and the particularity of innovation. According to Adorno, this tension arises from the inherently temporal dimension of the artwork. He states that "what truly endures in works of art is not an abstract concept of beauty lifted out of time." On the contrary, "the motifs that harbor hidden infinity most profoundly reveal themselves within the web of relations inherent in the temporal." Adopting a typically dialectical approach, Adorno links the permanence of artworks to their continual transformation. Yet this transformation does not entail the loss of the work's identity or its complete detachment from a universal model; rather, the transformation of the artwork becomes the essential condition for preserving its meaning and effect.²⁰

The Meta-Critical Function of Art

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* proceeds, for the most part, at a meta-critical level; it reflects on the categories employed in the interpretation and critique of artworks in relation to what they express and the social implications they bear. Typically, Adorno treats these categories in terms of oppositions or dialectical pairs.²¹ He seeks to position himself critically between a phenomenology that exaggerates the

¹⁹ Geoff Boucher, *Yeni Bir Bakışla: Adorno*, çev. Yetkin Başkavak (İstanbul: Kolektif Kitap, 2013), 102.

²⁰ Mario Farina, *Adorno's Aesthetics as a Literary Theory of Art* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 8.

²¹ Pickford, "Theodor W. Adorno," <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/adorno>.

powers of art and a crude materialism that reduces art to a superstructural reflection of socioeconomic forces or finds its social power in explicit thematic content.²²

Adorno, in conjunction with the deconstructive theory that could be said to have been inspired by his own thinking, believes in the “dependence of the identical on the non-identical.” What is insoluble must be conceptually appropriated; a mode of thought that mirrors the exchange logic of market relations should not be subsumed under an abstract idea within a generalized field of equivalence. For Adorno, as for Nietzsche, identificatory thought finds its source in the eyes and the stomach, in the arms and the mouth. The prehistory of the violent assimilation of otherness is the prehistory of the destructive, devouring human being of early times. Dominant reason is a “mind rooted in the umbilical cord.” And such rage toward the other marks all forms of idealism. All philosophy, even when it claims to pursue freedom, bears within itself -by nature- the sanctioning force that ensures the persistence of a repressive social order.²³

Adorno’s assertions about art generally stem from his attempt to reconstruct the modern art movement. Hence, two main themes emerge within his philosophy of art: one is an updated Hegelian question regarding whether art can survive in a late capitalist world; the other is an updated Marxist question concerning whether art can contribute to transforming that world. In addressing both questions, Adorno borrows from Kant (1724–1804) the notion -expressed in Kant’s vocabulary as “fine art” -that art is characterized by formal autonomy. Yet Adorno combines Kant’s emphasis on form with Hegelian intellectual depth and Marxist insistence on the social embeddedness of art within the totality of society. The result is a complex account of the necessity and the deceptiveness of the artwork’s autonomy. This necessary and deceptive autonomy of modern art is the key

²² Ayon Maharaj, *The Dialectics of Aesthetic Agency* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 143.

²³ Terry Eagleton, *Estetiğin İdeolojisi*, çev. Bülent Gözkan et al (İstanbul: Doruk Yayınları, 2010), 431.

to understanding its social character as “the social antithesis of society.”²⁴

Together with Horkheimer, Adorno thus articulates his project of a dialectical aesthetic theory in explicit terms. However, the notion of dialectic used here differs from both its Hegelian and Marxist variations. For Adorno, dialectics must be negative. This means it should neither culminate, as in idealist thought, in the positive synthesis of thesis and antithesis, nor submit to the objective historical laws presupposed by historical materialism. Instead, dialectical thought must insist on “the determinate negation of what is immediately given.” It must grasp reality as deprived of totality, fragmented, and woven through with oppositions, taking this antagonistic structure itself as its concrete object.²⁵

Within this dialectical relation, artworks possess a critical dimension when considered in light of their position both inside and outside the world. What differentiates artworks from inert objects is their resistance to the world, articulated within an explanatory context. Adorno writes: “The work of art attains a higher order of existence only by virtue of its separation from empirical reality.” The great artists he exemplifies - Rembrandt (1606–1669), Beckett (1906–1989), or Beethoven - are those in whom “the keenest sense of reality coincides with estrangement from reality.” Therefore, the necessity of a dialectical aesthetics arises from what constitutes the artistic in the artwork itself. For aesthetics to direct itself toward the work, art must preserve its autonomy negatively - its negative participation in reality. In this sense, the law of experience that defines art is the dual requirement that it confront society autonomously while remaining at the same time social.²⁶

In Adorno’s thought, aesthetic experience consists above all in the empirical subject’s recognition that it, too, is an appearance - and in its capacity to shatter this appearance. In this regard, autonomous art does not merely develop formal resistance against historical and

²⁴ Pickford, “Theodor W. Adorno,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/adorno>.

²⁵ McGrath, “(Un)Doing Critical Philosophy,” 71.

²⁶ McGrath, “(Un)Doing Critical Philosophy,” 72-73.

social norms; it also creates a distinctive experiential domain that leads to transformation within individual consciousness. In the moment of aesthetic shock, the subject becomes aware of the possibility of a spiritual self beyond the ego; yet this possibility is sensed only as a potentiality, not as a concrete reality. For Adorno, art, while unable to abolish the ego entirely, allows it to experience modes of existence not its own as though they were possible forms of reality. Aesthetic shock is a radical experience of negativity: the ego's striking awareness of its own finitude and limitation.²⁷

For Adorno, if the subject finds true happiness in being shaken by art, this happiness is one that stands in opposition to the subject. The melancholy of all art consists of a fragmented promise of redemption: rather than saving us, art makes us feel more sharply the poverty of who we are within empirical contingency.²⁸ In a Kierkegaardian (1813–1855) vein, Adorno conceives the twentieth-century modernist artwork as a dynamic “field of force” that employs negativity as a dialectical resource pointing to redeeming possibilities beyond the “poverty of a life that always remains insufficient.”²⁹ At this point, to interpret Adorno as defending a naïve empiricism against a self-deceptive rationalism would be to force his thought into an artificial Procrustean³⁰ frame. His position is not so simple; rather, he maintains that seeking clarity and coherence belongs to the nature of judgment or cognition, while resisting them belongs to the nature of life itself.³¹

What Adorno expects from art is not a transient glance or a momentary sensory pleasure, but a sign of the nearness of a better world. This constitutes the strongest epistemic claim art can make. The utopian hopes once placed upon the cunning of history in Hegel, upon the invisible hand of economic mechanisms in Adam Smith (1723–1790)

²⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 245; Maharaj, *The Dialectics of Aesthetic Agency*, 158.

²⁸ Maharaj, *The Dialectics of Aesthetic Agency*, 160.

²⁹ Maharaj, *The Dialectics of Aesthetic Agency*, 145.

³⁰ Procrustes is a giant in Greek mythology. He invited guests to his bed to receive them, torturing those shorter than the bed to lengthen them, and cutting off the excess parts of taller ones to make them fit. The Procrustes myth has historically been used metaphorically to mean “forced equalization” or “the forced fitting of the different into a single mold.” This figure is frequently cited, particularly in texts criticizing the tendency of modern thought or systematic thought to suppress heterogeneity.

³¹ Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, 77.

or Karl Marx (1818–1883), or upon the self-destruction of capitalism, are now placed upon the shoulders of art. Yet this expectation is a burden too great for art -or for anything else- to bear. Perhaps instead of expecting art or anything else to truly bring about a better world, we should content ourselves with merely sensing, for a brief moment, the possibility of such a world. According to Adorno, the only way to preserve the promise of happiness that art offers is to refuse to reduce it to something beyond itself-such as an instrument of deliverance from a corrupted society. Therefore, Adorno opposes the idea that art or aesthetics in general (including natural beauty) can alone shoulder the task of transforming society. Nor can art be understood merely as a free play expressing our capacity for pleasure and carrying meaning within itself.³²

It is clear, then, that Adorno seeks to express and ground the agency of the artwork not on metaphysical assumptions about art but by exploring the dialectical possibilities of aesthetic negativity. For him, the agency of the artwork depends not on an external subject or transcendent principle but on a non-metaphysical notion of “spirit” arising from the internal contradictions of the work itself. The spirit of artworks emerges from the continual dialectical interplay between, on one side, the sensuous factuality of the work as an object and, on the other, the aesthetic force operating beneath its formal structure; and it is from this interplay that it arises.³³

In Adorno’s thought, the decline of metaphysics signifies the rise of a world in which the solid ground upon which aesthetics could rest has dissolved. Aesthetics can no longer ground itself in the Kantian position of a transcendental subject, for the faculties of knowledge no longer surrender themselves to a trans-historical investigation. Adorno cannot work within the logic of Hegel’s dialectic culminating in the “end of history.” Hence, theory must abandon the search for a fixed starting point from which the investigation of the artwork could proceed. This situation emerged after Nietzsche exposed the truth of metaphysics by revealing that “the apparent world is the only real

³² Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, 91.

³³ Maharaj, *The Dialectics of Aesthetic Agency*, 150.

one” and that “the ‘true’ world” had been added only as a lie.³⁴ In this respect, the purpose of art should be to enlighten people and to enable them to act as genuine subjects autonomous agents of their own destiny. Yet the economic powers of late capitalism appear superhuman, capable of overcoming even the will of the most devoted artist -or at least of reducing nearly all attempts at enlightenment through art to kitsch -and forcing the few artists able to resist these forces to produce works so indeterminate that they virtually guarantee their own obscurity.³⁵

Adorno also insists that the phenomenological claims concerning aesthetic experience must be tempered and tested by the materialist emphasis on the inevitably ideological dimension of art – on its participation in, and complicity with, the social forces it strives to resist. Even though the pervasive forces of late capitalism have reduced the subject to little more than an ideological automaton, Adorno finds within aesthetic experience a radical critical potential. For him, the social power of art lies in its capacity to effect “an almost imperceptible transformation of consciousness,” enabling the self to catch “even the faintest glimpse beyond the prison of its own being.”³⁶

Adorno also identifies the conflict between the better world indicated by art and its historical condition with the insoluble tension between the spirituality of art and its sensuousness. At every aesthetic level, the antagonism between the unreality of imagination and the reality of manifest historical content is renewed. Art, in advancing toward pure form and thus pure spirit, seeks to escape its historical and material context.³⁷

According to Adorno, the radical contemporary art that serves as the practical support for aesthetic theory compels thought to confront the truth of its time. The outcome of this exercise in thought is a black and ugly art, for reality itself is black, ugly, alienated, dehumanized, reborn, horrific, bloodstained, torn, and maddening. Black is the color

³⁴ McGrath, “(Un)Doing Critical Philosophy,” 67.

³⁵ Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, 79.

³⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 243-245.

³⁷ Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, 83.

of our time's reality. If we hope to tell the truth, we are condemned to blackness. Negative aesthetics concretely expresses what the radical art of its time declares: a thinking art, an art that tells the truth. Mimesis is the condition of possibility for a negative dialectic. To give voice to suffering, for Adorno, is also what explains the incomprehensibility and enigmatic nature of art. All works of art -and art as a whole- are enigmas. If a work of art could be completely understood and translated into concepts, it would coincide with the concrete reality it defines – but that, in fact, is precisely what the philosophy of identity does in order to expel such negativity. The artwork fulfills its dialectical function and, in all its negativity, gives voice to real suffering, independent of any interpretation.³⁸

Conclusion

Adorno's aesthetic thought represents one of the most profound critiques ever directed at the conception of reason within modernity. The Enlightenment's emancipatory promise turned into the domination of instrumental reason, which means that thought closed itself under the principle of identity. This closure renders difference, suffering, and historicity invisible, reducing the human being to an object of administration. Adorno diagnoses this impasse not only on a philosophical but also on an aesthetic level: when reason absolutizes its own rationality, it loses the experiential, sensuous, and historical dimensions of truth. Art, on the other hand, emerges as the expression of the non-identical-that which has been repressed- against this loss.

It is therefore clear that, for Adorno, art is the only form that preserves the possibility of emancipation in both social and cognitive domains. For art does not represent the world directly; it transforms it formally, and through this transformation it reveals the invisible aspects of social reality. The critical power of art derives not from proposing an ideal or a utopia, but from making the contradictions of the existing world visible. In this sense, art stands as an alternative "mode of thought" opposed to positivist forms of knowledge: it thinks not

³⁸ Pozo, "Idealistic Identity and Dialectical Mimesis in Adorno's Negative Aesthetics," 13.

through concepts but through forms; not through identity but through mimesis.

In Adorno, mimesis is no longer classical imitation but a receptive, responsive mode of approaching the world. Art rescues objects from the functional categories of instrumental reason and reestablishes with them a pre-conceptual relationship. Thus, aesthetic experience becomes not merely sensory pleasure but also a form of knowing, an act of awareness, and a practice of liberation. The very aspect of art that is stigmatized as “irrational” constitutes, in fact, a negative rationality that exposes the limits of rationality itself.

Adorno’s aesthetics grounds the autonomy of art not as a withdrawal from society but as a mode of critique directed against it. The autonomy of the artwork is not its independence from the system but its capacity to speak against it. In this respect, art is not the direct representative of truth but a negative form that opens toward truth. The “fragment of utopia” carried by art arises not from a promise to transform the world, but from its power to make us sense that the world could be otherwise.

In conclusion, Adorno’s conception of art places aesthetics at the very center of the critique of instrumental reason, removing it from the sphere of mere taste or pleasure. Art appears as a form of critical consciousness against the domination of instrumental reason, expressing truth not as an absolute concept but as an experience, a shock, a moment of negativity. Thus, in Adorno, aesthetics becomes the language not only of beauty but also of truth, suffering, and resistance.

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