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The Spiritualization of Art in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory

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Abstract

IF at one time natural beauty was considered a legitimate topic of investigation—a view that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* advanced—subsequent developments in aesthetics, beginning with the publication of Schelling's *Philosophy of Art,* minimized nature with the shift of aesthetic interest to art. Adorno attributes this development to the progressive spiritualization of art over the course of two centuries. By excluding natural beauty, art established itself as a realm of freedom created by the autonomous subject. Yet, Adorno notes that although art achieved a valuable status as spiritual, the transition was not straightforward. This split was not, as Hegel's aesthetics supposed, one in which "natural beauty was dialectically sublated, both negated and maintained, on a

Keywords

higher plane."[1] Instead, Adorno asserts that natural beauty was repressed. The emphasis on the free subject worthy of human dignity, inaugurated by Kant and carried over into aesthetics by Schiller and Hegel, was dependent on the unfreedom of the other. "The concept of natural beauty rubs on a wound, and little is needed to prompt one to associate this wound with the violence that the artwork—a pure artifact—inflicts on nature."[2] While art inflicts violence on nature in order to enact its separation from it, art's artifactual character at the same time conceals an inherent dependence on natural beauty. Art seems to be the opposite of nature—what is not made—yet "as pure antithesis…each refers to the other: nature to experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy."[3] In this respect, the spiritualization of art shares a cognitive structure spelled out in the early text of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[4]

On the one hand, spiritualization or the evidence of consciousness attributed to art is already present in natural beauty, since natural beauty, as we will see, is an historical construct. On the other hand, the spiritualization of art, as much as it transcends natural beauty, ultimately returns to it by mimicking it. This dual structure of spiritualization in *Aesthetic Theory,* however, is not a mere repetition of the relationship between enlightenment and myth theorized in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where according to Horkheimer and Adorno's double thesis, "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."[5] Rather, if spiritualization as the movement of consciousness in art embodies the contradictions of instrumental reason, art is also uniquely positioned, precisely because of its autonomy, to respond to these contradictions. The spiritualization of art, while designating a process of formation by which art achieves autonomy from the realm of nature, is also the chief force by which the undesirable, the rejected, the foreign, the repulsive, and the ugly enter into art and threaten its coherence. As Adorno explains, the dialectic of spiritualization makes possible the artwork's transcendence of existing reality and yet this transcendence is a return to the wounded and suffering materiality of what art dominates and oppresses. The modern artwork, impossible without spiritualization, is simultaneously disturbed by spiritualization's destabilizing and chaotic negativity. Adorno tracks the development of art's spiritualization and its inherent tension with existing reality in order to expose the fundamental character of modern art, which in negating its origin is unable to leave behind what it negates. While this destabilizes art and threatens its very possibility, it at the same time exposes art's repressed other and creates the conditions for reconciliation.

Aesthetic Spirit

Adorno's discussion of spiritualization in *Aesthetic Theory* is grounded in the concept of aesthetic spirit, both from the standpoint of German idealism—particularly the aesthetics of Kant and Hegel—and its contemporary significance for the radical modernism of Kandinsky. For

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 62. Hereafter *AT*.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Adorno, *AT,* 6.

[4] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). Hereafter *DE*.

[5] Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE,* xviii.

Adorno, the concept of aesthetic spirit signifies the freedom of consciousness that makes artworks into something more than mere material objects:

> That through which artworks, by becoming appearance, are more than they are: This is their spirit. The determination of artworks by spirit is akin to their determination as phenomenon, as something that appears, and not as blind appearance. What appears in artworks and is neither to be separated from their appearance nor to be held simply identical with it—the nonfactual in their facticity—is their spirit. It makes artworks, things among things, something other than things.[6]

While making artworks into more than merely things and thereby emphasizing the freedom and dignity of aesthetic creation, spirit can nevertheless only appear when the artwork is produced as a thing—that is, when through the process of reification the artwork becomes self-identical or projects the appearance of autonomy. As much as spirit is the transcendent moment in art that raises it above the status of mere object, spirit can only appear in the material of art. Like Hegel, Adorno views the spirit of art as synonymous with its content and not with some "thin, abstract layer hovering above it."[7] But at the same time, the artwork is not a container that spirit fills, it is not "simply *spiritus*, the breath that animates the work as a phenomenon."[8] Instead, spirit is intrinsically linked to the organization of the artwork itself. The spirit of the artwork is a configuration of its elements."[9] In this respect, Adorno's concept of spirit is devoid of the mystical or religious connotations that inform some approaches to the spiritual dimension of art in contemporary aesthetics. It is indeed precisely on this point that Adorno is critical of Kandinsky's approach to the spiritual in art.[10]

Kandinsky emphasized the spiritual aspect of art in order to free it from sensualism or the emphasis on sensual satisfaction. In doing so, Adorno argues that Kandinsky "abstractly isolated the contrary of this principle and reified it," to the point that the emphasis on spirit became indistinguishable from superstition, and "an arts-and-crafts enthusiasm for the exalted."[11] In contrast to the exaltation of the spiritual in Kandinsky's work, Adorno insists on the dialectical relation between the sensuous and the spiritual elements of the artwork. Adorno asserts "the spirit of artworks is their immanent mediation, which transforms their sensual moments and their objective arrangement; this is meditation in the strict sense that each and every element in the artwork becomes manifestly its own other."[12] Spirit, as the immanent mediation of the artwork, is the dialectical relation of the sensual and material aspects of the artwork to their other, "the sensual exists in art only spiritualized and refracted."[13] To illustrate the relationship between the spiritual and the sensuous aspects of the artwork, Adorno mentions the "critical situation" of important works in which the sensual aspects of the artwork are able to point beyond themselves but only in

[6] Adorno, *AT,* 86.

[7] Adorno, *AT*, 90.

[8] Adorno, *AT*, 87.

[9] Adorno, *AT*, 52.

[10] See Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M.T.H. Sadler (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1977).

[11] Adorno, *AT,* 87.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

the context of the movement of the artwork as a whole.[14] While the sensuous aspects of the artwork refer it to the spiritual—spirit is the internal tension of the artwork's sensuous parts—it is at the same time not identical with these parts; spirit also 'breaks up' the form in which it appears. The spirit of the artwork cannot be identical with the appearance of the artwork since then there would be nothing spiritual about the artwork. Thus, spirit is not simply the appearance of the artwork, it emerges through the negation of the sensuous aspects of the artwork. As much as spirit is one with the artwork, it is also its other: "the spirit of artworks is bound up with their form, but spirit is such only insofar as it points beyond the form."[15] The spirit of art, then, is constantly negotiating a tension between fidelity to and a transcendence of the artwork's form. Finding Kandinsky's notion of the spiritual dimension of art to be negligent of its relation to art's sensuality, Adorno turns to objective idealism, which while also explicitly stressing the spiritual against the sensuous, inadvertently maintains a stronger connection to it.

On the surface, Adorno notes that the concept of spirit in objective idealism reduces the sensual and the particular to the accidental and merely incidental. Nonetheless, Adorno views the spiritualization of art in idealism to have contributed positively to the development of art. He acknowledges Hegel for his achievements in conceiving of spirit as something that exists in and for itself, and therefore making the spirit of art synonymous with its content or recognizing it as art's substance instead of some "thin, abstract layer hovering above it."[16] For Hegel, spirit is an objective content of art and refers the artwork to something more than just its formal qualities; "this is implicit in the definition of beauty as the sensual semblance of the idea." In Hegel's aesthetics, the work of art stands between immediate sensuousness and ideal thought. The work of art "is *not yet* pure thought, but, despite its sensuousness, is *no longer* a purely material existent either, like stones, plants, and organic life."[17] Yet, for Adorno, Hegel's notion of spirit did not fully capture its implications. Adorno insists that, "on the contrary, idealism set itself up as the defender of precisely that sensuality that in its opinion was being impoverished by spiritualization; that doctrine of the beautiful as the sensual semblance of the idea was an apology for immediacy as something meaningful and, in Hegel's own words, affirmative."[18] In this respect, Adorno believes that philosophical idealism misrecognized the spirit of artworks. In emphasizing the spirit of art as something that appears through the sensuous, idealism reverted to a defense of immediacy. For Adorno, the spirit of art, contrary to idealism, is the "mimetic impulse fixated as totality,"[19] exemplified by the radical spiritualization of modern art.

To demonstrate the inadequacy of the old conception of spirit and his own understanding of radical spiritualization, Adorno turns to the explosion of aesthetic form in modern art. With the crisis of representation in painting and sculpture, and

[14] Adorno, *AT,* 88. To illustrate the critical situation of the artwork, Adorno gives the example of Beethoven's *Kreutzer* sonata in which "the secondary subdominant produces an immense effect. Anywhere outside of the *Kreutzer* sonata the same chord would be more or less insignificant. The passage only gains significance through its place and function in the movement."

[15] Adorno, *AT,* 89.

[16] Adorno, *AT,* 90

[17] G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Lectures on Fine Art, Vol 1*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 38.

[18] Adorno, *AT,* 90.

[19] Ibid.

the "explosion of fragments in music," the elements set free—colors, sounds, and "the absolute configuration of words"—appeared as though they inherently carried meaning—they were viewed as expressive in their own right. For Adorno, this belief in the unmediated and elementary experience of the sensuous is illusory. It masks the context within which the elements become meaningful. This is a flaw that affected theories of art such as expressionism and arts and crafts, as much as it affected philosophy. The reduction of the artwork to its sensuous aspects does not account for the way in which art, through its configuration, or the relation of its sensuous aspects, becomes spiritual. At this most basic level, artworks cannot be grasped without this "immanently idealistic element, that is, without the objective mediation of all art through spirit."[20] It is this understanding of spirit that Adorno believes can be helpfully retained from the otherwise problematic architectonic of Hegel's aesthetics. In Hegel's conception, the spirit of art is only one manifestation of spirit on the way to religion and philosophy. Thus, the spirit of art is univocal, judged according to the same criteria within different artworks and genres, and subordinated to the more privileged unfolding of spirit in religion and philosophy. In essence, the spirit of art is valuable not from the perspective of the artwork, but from the perspective of its scientific or philosophical analysis. In this respect, Adorno turns to Kant as an antidote to Hegel's aesthetics.

> Hegel's metaphysics of spirit results in a certain reification of spirit in the artwork through the fixation of its idea. In Kant, however, the ambiguity between the feeling of necessity and the fact that this necessity is not a given but something unresolved is truer to aesthetic experience that is Hegel's much more modern ambition of knowing art from within rather than in terms of its subjective constitution from without.[21]

To avoid the absolute identity that Hegel's concept of spirit necessitates, Adorno turns to Kant, whose aesthetics allows for the ambiguity of aesthetic experience. In contrast with spirit as the sensuous representation of the idea, Adorno recovers Kant's analysis of natural beauty, which will be addressed further on. Adorno links the spirit of art to the process of spiritualization, which Hegel characterized as the progress of consciousness. But it is Kant's emphasis on natural beauty that fleshes out the internal contradiction within the artwork produced as a result of the particular character of consciousness in modern society.

The Spiritualization of Art

In tracing the spiritualization of art, Adorno reveals the repression and violence upon which the concept of spirit depends and that is otherwise silently erased from traditional aesthetics. Spiritualization describes the process through which art proceeds by the negation of its origins in other activities such as magic. Adorno describes this negation as an annihilation or obliteration such that artworks no longer need to account for their earlier, dependent manifestations. Artworks "are not to be called to account for the disgrace of their ancient dependency on magic, their servitude to kings and amusement, as if this were art's original sin, for art retroactively annihilated that from which it emerged."[22] Yet art's absolute negation or annihilation of its origins is an

[20] Adorno, *AT*, 91.

[21] Adorno, *AT,* 91.

[22] Adorno, *AT,* 3.

illusion. Adorno applies the Hegelian lesson to art: "the moment a limit is posited, it is overstepped and that against which the limit was established is absorbed."[23] The autonomy of art is successful only insofar as it is able to firmly draw its boundaries with respect to existing reality. Yet these boundaries are constantly threatened insofar as what art negates becomes art's repressed content. The process of spiritualization that establishes art's autonomy also, paradoxically, retains a foreign element in art. Artworks are inherently unstable because of their unreconciled relationship to this foreignness, this otherness that destabilizes the artwork. The appearance of an artwork as a fully formed object with definite boundaries is a semblance that hides this element of otherness in the artwork.

Adorno borrows the psychoanalytic model of the ego and the id to explain the relationship between art's autonomy and the elements within the artwork that threaten it.

> The pure concept of art could not define the fixed circumference of a sphere that has been secured once and for all; rather, its closure is achieved only in an intermittent and fragile balance that is more than just comparable to the psychological balance between ego and id. The act of repulsion must be constantly renewed.[24]

In Freud's psychoanalytic model of the mind, the 'id' is the unrestrained instinctual life of the organism ruled by the pleasure principle and a constant threat to the ego's attempts to maintain harmony amongst the subject's conflicting parts. The ego attempts to substitute the id's pleasure principle with the reality principle. For Freud, the ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast with the id, which contains the passions.[25] Yet, these two aspects of the psyche are not cleanly opposed. Transition "The ego is not sharply separated from the id; its lower portion merges into it. But the repressed merges into the id as well, and is merely part of it. The repressed is only cut off sharply from the ego by the resistances of repression. It can communicate with the ego through the id."[26] We can see in this model a conflict between parts of the same organism, insofar as the ego wishes to maintain the integrity of the organism as a unified being and the id threatens this coherence by reasserting its instinctual and, therefore, process-like character.

There is a similar conflict transpiring in the artwork. Just as the ego is an outgrowth of the id, "art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of."[27] The spiritualization of art enacts this separation by sacrificing particulars to the totality of the artwork, and, at the same time, this abstraction is perpetually unstable and must be constantly reasserted, the "act of repulsion must be constantly renewed."[28] Thus art does not perform an original act of separation that guarantees its autonomy. Instead,

[23] Adorno, *AT,* 6.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960), 19.

[26] Laplanche and Pontalis, 393.

[27] Adorno, *AT,* 3.

[28] Adorno, *AT,* 6. For a much more involved discussion of the influence of psychoanalysis on Adorno's work than I am able to undertake here, see Joel Whitebook, "Weighty Objects: On Adorno's Kant-Freud Interpretation" in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno,* ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

spiritualization is a constant process of repelling the otherness that is seen to contaminate art. This repulsion must be renewed because the act of repulsion itself, in attempting to completely expel the other, guarantees that art will continue to be infected by it. The process of repulsion internal to art makes possible art's autonomy and at the same time threatens it.

If spiritualization is a process that introduces the conditions by which the integrity and the autonomy of the artwork is threatened, then, for Adorno, the antidote is neither to expel the other once and for all nor to incorporate the ugly into the beautiful. Instead, it is only artworks that address the other—what is repressed within them—that are able to transcend their deficient boundaries. Art thus posits an illusory autonomy, one that maintains pure indifference from that which it separates. This false separation causes the artwork to fall prey to the return of the repressed. Arresting this cycle of repression and its return requires that artworks address this relation to the other instead of continuously repelling it. Adorno explains that "only when art's other is sensed as a primary layer in the experience of art does it become possible to sublimate this layer." The illusion of art's autonomy conceals its inherently process-like character, which results from the continuous renewal of repulsion that the spiritualization of art entails. It is only when this process-character is momentarily suspended that art reveals something about its relationship to the other.[29]

Natural Beauty, Art Beauty, and Transcendence

In order to consider the otherness that is transported into art through its spiritualization, Adorno turns to natural beauty as the repressed origin of art beauty. In this return to natural beauty, the imprint of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* on Adorno's thought is clear. For Adorno, the post-Kantian turn to art beauty misses something crucial about Kant's privileging of natural beauty. In Kant's aesthetics, the judging subject makes possible the experience of natural beauty. Reflective judgments about natural beauty are only possible because of the transcendental principle of purposiveness that makes the experience of nature intelligible; nature does not appear to be merely chaotic but appears as if it was designed, as if it had a purpose. Nature is beautiful when the form of a natural object, because of its purposiveness, puts the faculties of the imagination and the understanding into free play resulting in the feeling of pleasure. The beauty of a rose results not from our recognition that it is a rose—not, that is, by making a determinate judgment and thus subsuming the intuition of the object to the appropriate concept. It results from our consideration of the form of the flower itself, whose lines, composition, and design—unable to be subsumed by a concept—put our faculties into free play. We do not determine what we see according to a concept but derive pleasure from the harmonizing of our faculties. In Kant's aesthetics there is the necessity of consciousness or the subject that makes the purposiveness of nature possible, but the experience of natural beauty can only emerge with a direct experience of the formal properties of an object that escape conceptual determination.

For Adorno, although nature is not a product of spirit, its eloquence depends on consciousness, which immerses itself in nature and makes a qualitative distinction between what is

[29] For a discussion of the processual character of art in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* see Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida,* trans. Neil Solomon (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1998).

and what is not beautiful. This distinction cannot be made categorically but rather, "consciousness that immerses itself lovingly in something beautiful is compelled to make this distinction."[30] Instead of the transcendental principle of purposiveness, Adorno's aesthetics maintain that natural beauty is possible when the subject gives itself over to the object—immerses itself lovingly in nature rather than approaching it violently. Nature's eloquence, and therefore, natural beauty, is not simply a message or meaning imposed on nature by the subject. Adorno writes that "without receptivity there would be no such objective expression," that is, without a consciousness immersed in nature, the beautiful in nature would not emerge; and yet, natural beauty is not simply an effect of the subject, "natural beauty points to the primacy of the object in subjective experience."[31] The subject's openness to the object becomes possible with respect to natural beauty because its experience is indeterminate and therefore escapes conceptual determination.

Adorno also takes up Kant's idea that art beauty is an imitation of natural beauty. For Kant, art is beautiful when it imitates the beauty of nature, in the way that we might find a painting of a rose beautiful. For Adorno, art is beautiful when it mimics natural beauty *as such*. Specifically, "nature is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is. To wrest this more from that more's contingency, to gain control of its semblance, to determine it as semblance as well as to negate it as unreal: This is the idea of art."[32] It is not the particular content of nature that art mimics, but the more to which nature points. Both natural beauty and art beauty refuse the univocity of judgment, or in Kantian terms, determinative judgment, insofar as they cannot be subsumed to the concept. Yet, art beauty is closer to the concept because artworks have a greater level of determinacy.

> The encipherment of the artwork, one facet of its apparition, is thus distinct from natural beauty in that while it too refuses the univocity of judgment, nevertheless in its own form, in the way in which it turns toward the hidden, the artwork achieves a greater determinancy. Artworks, thus, vie with the synthesis of significative thinking, their irreconcilable enemy.[33]

By mimicking natural beauty, artworks exceed their material composition, and yet, what they promise, via their spiritualization, is a blocked or denied sensuality. In this regard, transcendence is central to Adorno's understanding of the artwork. Artworks become alive only when they step outside of their material form, out of the rigidification of the world of conventions. According to Adorno, "authentic artworks, which hold fast to the idea of reconciliation with nature by making themselves completely a second nature, have consistently felt the urge, as if in need of a breath of fresh air, to step outside of themselves."[34] This taking a breath is a turn to first nature, the living stratum that was discarded as art developed into its own autonomous sphere. Artworks only become alive, and therefore eloquent, by stepping out of themselves and their confining material form, towards their repressed other: nature. In order to become alive, in order to

[30] Adorno, *AT,* 70.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Adorno, *AT,* 78.

[33] Adorno, *AT,* 82.

[34] Adorno, *AT,* 63.

step out of their rigidification as artworks, they seek what they purportedly left behind—artworks seek consolation in first nature. In seeking this consolation, artworks become second nature. Transition "Over long periods the feeling of natural beauty intensified with the suffering of the subject thrown back on himself in a mangled and administered world. The experience bears the mark of Weltschmerz."[35] For Adorno, there is a parallel with respect to the freedom and dignity of the autonomous subject and the autonomous work of art as the subject's creation. As the subject's experiences do not match up with its conceptual determination as free, the feeling of natural beauty intensifies—there is a wish to escape from the conditions of existing reality to what was left behind. Adorno asserts, "the subject's powerlessness in a society petrified into a second nature becomes the motor of the flight into a purportedly first nature"[36] This turn to first nature, however, is dependent upon and only possible through what is mediated, through the world of conventions. Only through their formation as material objects, through their specifically artifactual character, do artworks transcend their materiality. Natural beauty is an historical construction. We experience natural beauty because we impose the structure by which we can experience nature as beautiful. The spiritualization present in art is already a facet of natural beauty. While natural beauty seems to promise a world free of domination, this promise is illusory since natural beauty seeks this freedom in the realm of an old unfreedom—the realm of myth. This is why, as important as natural beauty is for the origin of art, it is art that gives access to the promise of natural beauty in a way that natural beauty itself cannot.

The spiritual dimension of art, what removes art from nature, in turn brings us closer to nature than nature itself. This turn to first nature, this taking a breath, depends on what is mediated, on what Adorno calls the world of conventions; "the subject's powerlessness in a society petrified into a second nature becomes the motor of the flight into a purportedly first nature."[37] Yet, art has a paradoxical relationship to what it renders. If on the one hand, "everything in empirical reality has become fungible, art holds up to the world of everything-for-something-else images of what it itself would be if it were emancipated from the schemata of imposed identification."[38] At the same time, art is ideological because in presenting an image of what is beyond exchange, "it suggests that not everything in the world is exchangeable,"[39] that is, it suggests that something could exist that stands outside the logic of this exchange. This is the basis for much criticism of Adorno's aesthetics—that in presenting an image of the nonexisting, artworks preserve the metaphysical impulse evacuated from philosophy. In becoming the repository for philosophy's failed hopes, artworks promise transcendence. Yet, the transcendence promised by art is not otherworldly, and at the same time, artworks do not bring into existence the nonexisting. For Adorno, art's transcendence is linked to its rejection of natural beauty. Art appears to separate itself from and discard natural beauty, but in a double move, reproduces what makes it beautiful; art produces its own transcendence. "Their transcendence is their eloquence, their script, but it is a script without meaning or, more precisely, a script with broken

[35] Adorno, *AT,* 63.

[36] Adorno, *AT,* 65.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Adorno, *AT,* 83.

[39] Ibid.

or veiled meaning." Artworks compel reflection because they present an image of the nonexisting through which its possibility becomes apparent, even if its existence cannot be confirmed.[40] Since art is the *mimesis* of what it rejects, it is the conduit by which first nature, mangled beyond recognition, appears.

Conclusion

Just as modern philosophy in *Negative Dialectics* must question its own status after the failure of the revolution to pass, modern art in *Aesthetic Theory* contends with the failure of the revolutionary art movements of the early twentieth century to truly achieve artistic freedom. Although art's spiritualization attained an autonomy that freed it from its previous conflation with religion, magic, and cultish activities, this autonomy comes into conflict with the unfreedom of the whole. Since art's autonomy was "nourished by the idea of humanity. As society became ever less a human one, this autonomy was shattered."[41] That is, while the aim of art's autonomy was to create a sphere with its own independent values, the result is an autonomy that replicates the dominant logic of empirical reality. The more that art tries to separate itself from society, the more it falls under its spell. In this situation, "it is uncertain whether art is still possible; whether, with its complete emancipation, it did not sever its own preconditions."[42] While *Aesthetic Theory* seems to begin with a thesis about the end of art, Adorno does not suggest that art's fate is sealed. Adorno also shows that art's possible demise contains an unfulfilled hope. The existence of art is threatened insofar as artworks become ideological and yet, in this very predicament, Adorno also sees an emancipatory potential.

On the one hand, the autonomy of art creates the illusion or semblance (*Schein*) that art is separate from the material realm of commodities because of its own unique quality as a work of art—a separation that in reality is impossible under the conditions of instrumental reason. Adorno explains that "artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity."[43] Art's autonomy is ideological because it masks the fetish character that it shares with all other things produced under capitalism. In turn, "by virtue of its rejection of the empirical world—a rejection that inheres in art's concept and thus is no mere *escape*, but a law immanent to it—art sanctions the primacy of reality."[44] Thus, Adorno claims that artworks can be charged with "false consciousness and chalked up to ideology" since they promote themselves as something spiritual independent from the material condition of their production and untouched by the dominant logic of reality.[45]

On the other hand, it is also precisely because artworks are guilty of fetishism that they express a freedom from domination: "Only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value."[46] Art's autonomy is emancipatory because its

[40] Ibid.

[41] Adorno, *AT,* 1.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Adorno, *AT,* 2.

[45] Adorno, *AT,* 227.

[46] Ibid.

illusory character is generated by the wish for something nonillusory, for something that might transcend art's current formation as a fetish object.[47] The "truth content of artworks, which is indeed their social truth, is predicated on their fetish character."[48] Art's illusory character is ideological insofar as it conceals its production process as a fetish and it is true insofar as it anticipates something that does not yet exist—the production of an object that does not have exchange as its end-goal. In this way, "artworks are plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity."[49] Indeed, modern artworks are a product of the empirical world in which logic and causality reign as the ordering enlightenment principles of modern society. However, modern artworks also, in this same construction, repudiate the means-ends relation of reality.[50] Through their semblance character artworks seem to offer the possibility of transcendence from the logic of reality.[51] The rescue of semblance is the aim of Adorno's reading of the spiritual dimension of art, which both transcends the fetish character of the artwork and return to what it suppresses.

[47] For a discussion of this issue in Adorno see Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 88-89.

[48] Adorno, *AT,* 227.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Adorno writes, "If art had absolutely nothing to do with logicality and causality, it would forfeit any relation to its other and would be an a priori empty activity; if art took them literally, it would succumb to the spell; only by its double character, which provokes permanent conflict, does art succeed at escaping the spell by even the slightest degree" *AT,* 138.

[51] For this view of the role of semblance in art see Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

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