

studies in

---

# social & political thought

Volume 21

Summer 2013

## Articles

Self-Determination and Responsibility in Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*  
*Brian O'Connor*

Civic Virtue and Fraternity:  
Problems of Rawls's Luck Neutralizing Approach  
*Kazutaka Inamura*

Between Theory and Praxis: Art as Negative Dialectics  
*Rebecca Longtin Hansen*

## Books Reviewed

*Empathy Imperiled: Capitalism, Culture, and the Brain* by Gary Olson  
*State Power and Democracy: Before and During the Presidency  
of George W. Bush* by Andrew Kolin  
*Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* by Axel Honneth  
*Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* by Roberto Esposito  
*Introduction to Systems Theory* by Niklas Luhmann

# Between Theory and Praxis: Art as Negative Dialectics

by Rebecca Longtin Hansen

## Abstract

This paper takes up Adorno's aesthetics as a dialectic between philosophy and art. In doing so, I argue that art provides a unique way of mediating between theory and practice, between concepts and experience, and between subjectivity and objectivity, because in art these relations are flexible and left open to interpretation, which allows a form of thinking that can point beyond itself. Adorno thus uses reflection on art as a corrective for philosophy and its tendency towards ideology.

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* begins by questioning the possibility of its very object of investigation: art. "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist... It is uncertain whether art is still possible..." (Adorno, 2006: 1). This observation throws into question the possibility of Adorno's aesthetic theory. How are we to think about art when nothing about art, including its very possibility, is evident? Where are we to begin? To complicate the matter further, Adorno's Draft Introduction to *Aesthetic Theory* describes how works of art defy our efforts to conceptualize them such that "[a]esthetics is compelled to drag its concepts helplessly behind a situation of art" (Adorno, 2006: 339). Adorno further notes that aesthetics has fallen out of favor in academic inquiry. The hope of attaining a systematic approach to aesthetics that is relevant to other theoretical areas, such as epistemology or metaphysics, sounds anachronistic—a relic from 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and the ideal of an absolute science that can unify all philosophical investigations.<sup>1</sup> Adorno thus problematizes aesthetics on two fronts: its relation to concrete works of art and its relation to other forms of theory. Yet this two-fold problem does not undermine the possibility of aesthetics. Rather these very problems create the impetus for Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* because they indicate that art is an activity of resistance.

For Adorno it is these very problems—the contradictions and

impossibilities in and between art and thinking about art—that allow aesthetics to provide a proper space and process for contemporary theory and praxis. Adorno states that “[t]he task of aesthetics is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended” (Adorno, 2006: 118).<sup>2</sup> This task of aesthetics, comprehending the incomprehensible, is obviously contradictory. This inherent contradiction, however, is not meant to be resolved or to find a positive solution. Instead, we must explore the depth and negative relations of these contradictions to understand their full significance.

This paper will demonstrate how Adorno’s aesthetics attempts to think the incomprehensible in a way that is fruitful on the side of theory as well as practice. The problematic effort to relate theory and art—or to create art at all—reflects the attempt to re-envision social and political practices without merely subjecting thought to the same forms of domination that it seeks to overcome. By thinking the impossible art and aesthetic theory enact a form of negative dialectics between theory and praxis, between concepts and experience, and between the subject and object, which Adorno uses as a corrective for philosophy.

### **Between Theory & Praxis: Utopia and Art**

The contradictions within *Aesthetic Theory* gesture towards the tension between theory and praxis. Adorno thematizes this tension throughout his writings, especially insofar as the culmination of theory and practice—utopia—creates a particularly difficult and contradictory relation. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno states that the goal for philosophy is to see everything from the ‘standpoint of redemption’—from the perspective of the utopian ideal (Adorno, 2005: §153). This standpoint is both the easiest perspective to attain and the most difficult: “It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge... But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is...” (Adorno, 2005: §153). Although we must think and create new possibilities, we cannot simply think of something outside of actuality. We can never escape *what is* in order to arrive at a pure form of *what should be*. We cannot have the perspective of redemption even though every instance points towards its necessity. For Adorno, we must contemplate the impossibility of redemption in order to have any sense of its possibility (Adorno, 2005: §153). Due to the impossible nature of redemption, the utopian ideal cannot be objectified or

realized through action, but must be contemplated as the incomprehensible.

For Adorno, contemplating the incomprehensible is not resignation or defeatism, but a more determined commitment to utopianism by rejecting all of the easy answers of naïve, non-dialectical social activism, or “pseudo-activity”, which do not and cannot recognize the impossible (Adorno, 1998: 287). In his 1969 radio address “Resignation”, Adorno discusses the need to rethink the relation between theory and praxis such that they form a more dialectical relation: “Thinking is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway. As long as it doesn’t break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility. Its insatiable aspect, its aversion to being quickly and easily satisfied, refuses the foolish wisdom of resignation” (Adorno, 1998: 292). In this sense, it is thought that allows the possibility of utopia. In contemplating the impossibility of utopia, thought does not objectify redemption and thus undermines its possibility by reducing or conflating it to the current forms of domination, or what is. In this sense, thought bears the weight of redemption that praxis loses when it attempts to throw off thought for the sake of action. As Adorno proposes:

The utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it—this too a form of relapse—objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization. Only thinking points beyond itself. For its part a comportment, a form of praxis, it is more akin to transformative praxis than a comportment that is compliant for the sake of praxis. Prior to all particular content, thinking is actually the force of resistance (Adorno, 1998: 292-293)

Thought is a form of resistance because it recognizes the impossibility of utopia, which allows its possibility. Within this contradiction, however, we see that thought should not be separated from praxis, but forms its own dialectical movement between theory and practice.

Given this dialectical movement between theory and praxis, the tension between art as a concrete practice and philosophy as a theoretical process does not undermine aesthetics but instead elevates it. Aesthetics draws out the very tensions that are significant to Adorno’s philosophy. For Adorno, positive accounts of utopia always fall into the error of ideology and undermine the possibility of utopia. Thus the very illusory and incommensurable nature of art allows it to fulfill the social function of utopianism without becoming ideology. Like utopianism, works of art envision possibility and create something new. Yet art cannot create from nothing and must draw its possibilities from what is. Art negates what is, without merely reasserting another positive option that would fail by trying

to make its ideal concrete and actual, and in this sense allows the possibility of utopia without any trace of ideology. If a work of art attempted to concretize an ideal, it would be too literal and become mere propaganda, not art: “Artworks that unfold to contemplation and thought without any remainder are not artworks” (Adorno, 2006: 121).<sup>3</sup> As such artistic practices are practices that resist the error of ideologies that attempt to realize utopias concretely and thus cancel its possibility.<sup>4</sup> Here we gain some insight as to why Adorno’s late works privilege aesthetics and make it central to his thought.<sup>5</sup>

In rethinking this relation between theory and practice, we see why aesthetics becomes so central to Adorno since art occupies this troubled interface between thought and action. Adorno further problematizes the dialectic between thought and praxis in his account of experience and concepts. Just as Adorno rejects positive approaches to utopianism, which fall into ideology, so he also rejects an epistemological framework that accepts experience as simply given, i.e. positivism. Through his critique of positivism, Adorno further indicates an open space for art.

### **Between Experience and Concepts: Infinite Mediation, Negative Dialectics, and Art**

In his treatment of different ways of theorizing, Adorno rejects epistemological frameworks that take experience to be unproblematic and immediately given, especially positivism. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno frames the problem of positivism as an issue of distance—or lack of critical distance, since positivism takes experience to be transparent and immediately available to thought. This assumption of immediacy undermines the possibility of thought grasping anything. When we attempt to grasp facts and to take experience as literal, i.e. given without the need for interpretation, we fail to grasp anything. By ignoring the mediated relation between thought and reality, thinking fails to understand anything—its supposedly given object and itself: “as soon as thought repudiates its inviolable distance and tries with a thousand subtle arguments to prove its literal correctness, it flounders. If it leaves behind the medium of virtuality, of anticipation that cannot be wholly fulfilled by any single piece of actuality; in short, if instead of interpretation it seeks to become mere statement, everything it states becomes, in fact, untrue” (Adorno, 2005: §82). In this sense, thought cannot approach experience as empirical data or discrete information or assert a statement of fact. Nothing is immediate or factual—everything is mediated.

Nevertheless, this mediation prevents thought from reducing itself

to the abbreviated form of the actual and opens up the possibility of intellectual inquiry that can “illuminate the realm of facticity...with reflections of a different type” (Adorno, 1997: 7). Facticity describes the thisness of experience, the here and now, which is not immediately given or completely analyzable.<sup>6</sup> The realm of facticity presents itself as a complex of conceptually mediated contradictions, the true that is always false in some sense, the continually negated whole. As he states in his foreword to the English translation of *Prisms*, Adorno considers “matters of fact to be not mere fact, unreflected and thinglike, but rather processes of infinite mediation, never to be taken at face-value” (Adorno, 1997: 7). Experience is given in one sense and infinitely removed in another because of this infinite mediation.

The concept of infinite mediation distinguishes Adorno’s negative dialectics from Hegel’s dialectics. In some ways, Adorno adopts dialectical thought from Hegel. Dialectics in general relates to the problematic effort of thought to subsume particulars under universals—i.e. the problem of conceptualizing experience. “The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy” (Adorno, 2005a: 5). Adorno, however, distinguishes his dialectics from Hegelian dialectics because Hegel’s idealism requires that dialectics find resolution, i.e. that dialectic method ends in the assertion of some positive form of truth or identity—the truth of the whole.<sup>7</sup> Since the insight of dialectics is the contradiction between objects and the concepts we use to identify them, Hegelian dialectics does not sustain a meaningful relation to objects of experience and instead subsumes them into one concept as an absolute identity. For Hegel, double negation leads to identity. His dialectical thought ends with the Absolute.<sup>8</sup>

For Adorno, the negation of dialectical thought does not lead to identity because there can be no synthesis. He claims that the “nonidentical is not to be obtained directly, as something positive on its part, nor is it obtainable by a negation of the negative. This negation is not an affirmation itself, as it is to Hegel...To equate the negation of negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification” (Adorno, 2005a: 158). For Adorno, Hegel’s positive synthesis of identification undermines dialectics, which is necessarily negative since “dialectics means to break the compulsion to achieve identity” (Adorno, 2005a: 157). Hegel’s dialectics suspends identity, but then asserts a higher, more absolute form of identity. For this reason, Adorno describes his own thought as *negative* dialectics in order to maintain, and not resolve, the problematic relation between objects of our experience and the concepts we use to analyze them.<sup>9</sup> Adorno’s dialectics is essentially

a way of thinking through contradictions without canceling those contradictions in order to indicate “the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived” (Adorno, 2005a: 5).

Adorno’s negative dialectics thus works with these contradictions, in particular the contradiction between objects of experience and the concepts we use to identify them. In understanding these contradictions which come to the fore through the process of dialectic negation, we see that objects always elude thought. We do not have immediate access to objects through experience. Experience is always mediated. This mediation not only prevents thought from subsuming objects completely into its concepts, but it also serves to indicate the sense in which objects are incommensurable with empirical data and cannot be reduced to or specified in concrete terms. While Adorno addresses these issues throughout his corpus, they are central to his *Aesthetic Theory*. Moreover, in posing these questions in terms of works of art and aesthetic theory, Adorno demonstrates the way in which aesthetics serves negative dialectics. We come to understand the nature of philosophy and thought in understanding how aesthetics situates itself in this contradiction between experience and concepts. This mediation between thought and its object is especially pronounced within aesthetics’ attempt to understand the work of art.<sup>10</sup>

With aesthetics, art relates to thought but is not immediately comprehensible – there is no intuitional understanding or immediate experience of art. An artwork that is completely obvious and immediately grasped would lack any artistry. Such art would be too literal, as “[t]he literal is barbaric. Totally objectified, by virtue of its rigorous legality, the artwork becomes a mere fact and is annulled as art” (Adorno, 2006:61). Art cannot be mere fact. Instead, art is factual. Art always invites us to consider it more, to examine it from a different perspective, to see it transformed by another context. Art resists thought—which always seeks to understand through analyzing separate parts that can be resolved into concepts. Understanding art is not consonant with dissecting and analyzing each individual element, because the reduction of the work of art to its separate pieces still does not achieve a comprehensive grasp of it as a whole: “As soon as one imagines having a firm grasp on the details of an artwork, it dissolves into the indeterminate and undifferentiated, so mediated is it” (Adorno, 2006: 101).

Arthur Danto provides a good example of why dissecting a work of art into separate analyzable parts prevents understanding it when he describes a hypothetical exhibit consisting entirely of paintings that look almost identical—a collection of works that are red paint on canvas (Danto, 1981: 1-4). In one case, however, the painting presents the spiritual turmoil felt by the Israelites crossing over the red sea. Another painting entitle



“Nirvana” presents the relation of identity between Nirvanic and Samsara religion. Another painting is a minimalist geometrical painting entitled “Red Square”. While the elements of these paintings are all similar, it is impossible to reduce them to the same identity. Yet what separates them from each other, as well as what separates them from anyone painting something red in a non-artistic context, is not obvious to analysis. The analyzable details are all the same in this instance. As Adorno notes, “the so-called primal elements turned up by analysis are usually eminently insubstantial. Only insofar as these elements asymptotically approximate nothingness do they meld—as a pure process of becoming—into a whole” (Adorno, 2006: 100-101). That is, only insofar as these elements appear to become one whole, or give the semblance of meaningful totality, do they relate in a way that can be grasped by concepts. Yet this whole is still false—it approximates nothingness—and cannot be given as a complete or positive entity. We can never pin the work of art down in a sense that clearly defines it. What brings its discrete elements into one whole lacks proper expression. This process of becoming whole that expresses nothing mirrors Adorno’s claim that “the whole is the false” (Adorno, 2005: §29) – the work of art only resembles or gives the appearance of being whole; it cannot be whole in a true sense. “The illusory quality of artworks is condensed in their claim to wholeness” (Adorno, 2006: 101). As such, the work of art is always illusory and only given in a process of becoming, never as a complete whole to be grasped. Moreover, the work of art contradicts itself, because even as art presents itself as existing it still discloses the possibility that it could completely otherwise: “in an artwork everything can just as well be different from the way it is” (Adorno, 2006: 101). The work of art is itself mediated through a series of inner antagonisms: “every element of aesthetic semblance includes aesthetic inconsistency in the form of contradictions between what the work appears to be and what it is” (Adorno, 2006:101). Art contradicts itself and what it presents itself to be; it cannot be a discrete whole easily grasped by thought.

Understanding art is always mediated through several contradictions, and yet the work of art is not completely opaque. Instead the conflict between the work of art as the illusion of a conceptual whole and the work of art as factual, i.e. that which denies thought, describes the process of negative dialectics. Thus art occasions thought to realize that it cannot apply its concepts absolutely, and at the same time thought occasions the possibility for rescuing art from being treated non-dialectically as simple fact.<sup>11</sup> Adorno asserts that works of art are neither factual nor conceptual, but still relate to the non-conceptual mediation of thought.<sup>12</sup> Adorno describes this non-conceptual thought of art as the logic of the “as if” (Adorno, 2006: 137).



While Adorno does not describe the logic of the “as if” thoroughly, it seems to indicate an act of relating two things without determining them in any absolute sense. Metaphor and simile are ways in which we indicate “as-if” relations, especially within art, without insisting upon any form of necessity. The logic drawn is relational, it mediates between two separate instances or objects, but does not determine either of them or the relation. In fact, when a metaphor or simile is drawn, it is necessary that it only suggests similarity or relation without indicating identity. If a metaphor draws a relation too closely, the metaphor would collapse into identity ( $A=A$ ) and would no longer be metaphorical. In this way, the logic of art, i.e. the way in which we can think of art, allows relation without identity. For this reason, Adorno relates the logic of art to the logic of our experience because “[i]t draws consequences from phenomena that have already been spiritually mediated and to this extent made logical” (Adorno, 2006: 136). Just as experience always already relies upon the process of applying concepts and is never grasped through pure intuition, so art is never pure and immediate. Both art and experience resist concepts and rely upon concepts<sup>13</sup>—a process of infinite mediation, or negative dialectics.

Art and theory form a negative dialectic not simply in terms of its infinite mediation, but also in terms of what remains inaccessible to thought. Adorno’s development of negative dialectics is an attempt to think in a way that allows for incommensurability. The way in which experience denies commensurate concepts reveals something of our relation to the world and in effect dismantles simplistic subject-object relations.

### **Between Subjects and Objects: Incommensurability and Art**

For Adorno the question of how thought appropriates or fails to appropriate things requires understanding more than the relation between concepts and experience; it requires understanding the relation between subject and object. Adorno’s essay “Subject and Object” discusses the problem of epistemology at the very foundation of its formulation – the relation between subject and object. This relation between subject and object has proved to be very problematic throughout the philosophical tradition, and Adorno’s concern with it is by no means unique. The difference in Adorno’s account, however, is the way in which he is able to maintain the tension of this problem without reifying it.

Adorno maintains this tension in several ways. First of all, Adorno addresses the subject-object relation without providing a substantial or determinate definition of either subject or object. Instead of providing such definitions that would reify the subject and object and assert some form of

separation, Adorno enters the relation and the debate surrounding it *in media res*. Not only does this move avoid the reification of subject and object, but it also bears witness to the “reciprocal need” between these two ideas (Adorno, 2006a: 138). The subject cannot be a subject without an object, and the object cannot be an object without a subject. As such, Adorno cannot begin with simple definitions of subject and object apart from each other, which would be not only naïve in terms of their mutual entanglement but also uncritical in terms of finding the deeper tension between them. For these reasons, Adorno begins with stating how problematic his topic is: “To engage in reflections on subject and object poses the problem of stating what we are to talk about. The terms are patently equivocal” (Adorno, 2006a: 138). If, on the other hand, Adorno had begun epistemology with the separation of these equivocal terms, he “would land in an aporia that adds to the problematics of defining” (Adorno, 2006a: 139). That is, the contradiction of this attempt would be immediately realized since a definition always implies objectivity and subjectivity because a definition means that a concept has effectively captured an object, but that act of capturing implies a subject who is defining. There is an implied subject and object behind every definition. Thus beginning from definitions of subject and object is both illogical since it creates circular reasoning—it assumes in advance the terms that it seeks to ascertain—and superficial since it fails to understand the constantly implied subjectivity and objectivity in its own formulation of the problem.

In dealing with this problem of formulation, Adorno takes us through a series of necessary contradictions that preserve the tension needed to develop a critical epistemology in opposition to the naïve epistemologies of both realists and idealists. The first contradiction Adorno introduces is: “The separation of subject and object is both real and illusory” (Adorno, 2006a: 139). The separation is true because we experience it cognitively and can recognize this dichotomy; it is false because in asserting it we reify these terms apart from each other, which is impossible due to their “reciprocal need” (Adorno, 2006a: 138). For Adorno, epistemology must recognize and deal with this contradiction and not lose sight of it. To keep this contradiction in mind, we must understand how subject and object “mutually mediate – the object by the subject, and even more, in different ways, the subject by the object” (Adorno, 2006a: 139). Realists and idealists fail to address this mediation properly and either liquidates the subject or reduces the object such that “the subject swallows the object” (Adorno, 2006a: 140). Without mediation, the separation of subject and object becomes ideology (Adorno, 2006a: 139).

Adorno’s discussion of subject and object reflects the idea of mediation and incommensurability, but also formulates its own questions

in terms of art. As Shierry Weber Nicholzen has stated, “As we know from Kant, it is in the aesthetic dimension that the intimacy of subject and object is particularly pronounced, and it is in his aesthetics that Adorno provides us with his most emphatic model of genuine and valid, if difficult and problematic subjectivity” (Nicholzen, 1997: 15). In *Aesthetic Theory*, we can see how Adorno uses aesthetics and considerations of art to maintain this negative dialectic between subject and object. For Adorno, art becomes *deaestheticized* when it is completely subordinated to the subject and becomes a vehicle of the spectator (Adorno, 2006: 17). At the same time, the work of art cannot be absolutely objective or conceived of in-itself, since “absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity” (Adorno, 2006: 21). What defines art cannot be merely the subjective experience of it nor pure facticity as an object, which would reduce it to a mere commodity. Instead, art must occupy the intermediate territory where subject and object relate and yet contradict. In this sense, art recognizes the intimacy of subject and object, their necessary relation, even in their division: “it is the form of knowledge that—having preceded the polarity of subject and object—does not recognize this polarity as definitive” but instead dialectically moves in contradiction of these poles without ever arriving at synthesis (Adorno, 2006: 111). As Weber Nicholzen notes, Adorno’s aesthetic theory draws out this tension in ways that “Subject and Object” does not:

The work of art may be objective, both in being object—artifact—and in embodying an objective relationship to societal dynamics, and in this sense nonsubjective in that it is not simply an expression of some purportedly unique and original personality exercising its creativity, but the objectivity of the artwork is nevertheless mediated both by the subject who produces it and by the subject who experiences it. This is the “objective mediatedness of art through the subject”, in Adorno’s words. It is this quality of kinship within difference between artwork and subject that makes the subject-object dialectic particularly acute in the case of the aesthetic (Nicholzen, 1997: 15-16)

The aesthetic draws out the way in which subjectivity and objectivity are caught up together. Art thus makes us aware of how we experience and how we think of experience in problematic and open-ended ways.

Adorno even claims that art *corrects* our conception of the subject-object relation: “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, 2006: 113). As a subjective act that reveals the objective, art occupies this space in which subjects and objects are contradictory and yet in necessary relation to one another, but are a part of a process of infinite mediation. Art eludes identity; it is an enigma. Art is never wholly revealed or given over to semblance, even in the infinite process of mediation: "All artwork—and art together—are enigmas; since antiquity this has been an irritation to the theory of art. That artworks say something and in the same breath conceal it..." (Adorno, 2006: 120). If the work of art did not escape or elude the processes of thinking in some sense, it would not be art—it would be mere ideology, i.e. something that can be summed up in its content or the idea it puts forward.

Since art resists theory in terms of its enigmatic quality, in order to think about art, aesthetics must attempt to understand what cannot be understood. Aesthetics must engage art as a question. For Adorno, a work of art "reveals itself as a question and demands reflection; then the work vanishes into the distance, only to return to those who thought they understood it, overwhelming them for a second time with the question 'What is it?'" (Adorno, 2006: 121). For Adorno, art always invokes a question, but is never resolved by an answer. The enigma of each work of art is incommensurable with any answer that could be provided. The work of art always negates and in doing so continues the process of philosophizing, or negative dialectics: "art causes people to wonder, just as Plato once demanded that philosophy do, which, however, decided for the opposite" (Adorno, 2006: 126). Art enacts the process of questioning that Adorno wishes to pursue and likewise rejects a positivistic account of art that could be reduced to its empirical data: "What is essential to art is that which in it is not the case, that which is incommensurable with the empirical measure of all things" (Adorno, 2006: 335). Since art always appears as an enigma that cannot be fully conceptualized but always leaves a remainder, art always gestures beyond itself towards what is not the case. In this sense, art opens our thought beyond the limitations of its concepts.

### **Conclusion: Art as Resistance**

Adorno's aesthetic theory is not confined to the limits of the work of art, as if this limit could be drawn explicitly and concretely around works of art without touching upon other questions. Instead, Adorno opens up philosophical inquiry through aesthetics and thinking about art by indicating the ways in which practices, concepts, and approaches to objective knowledge fall short of what they seek. In this sense, the problem of

aesthetics on the side of theory—that philosophical inquiry cannot have concrete or determinate principles in relation to art—is actually its strength. Art and thinking about art allow us to rethink what we take to be merely given. Aesthetics allows thought to open itself, because art leads to the wonder that should define philosophy and motivate inquiry continuously, negatively, and without any pretension to arrive at a synthetic truth of the whole: “Common to art and philosophy is not the form, not the forming process... Both keep faith with their own substance through their opposites: art by making itself resistant to its meanings; philosophy, by refusing to clutch at any immediate thing” (Adorno, 2005a: 15). In this way art always relates to utopia—it points towards what is possible beyond the narrow bounds of the present and allows practices and ways of thinking that resist the current forms of domination.<sup>14</sup>

**Rebecca Longtin Hansen (rlongti@emory.edu)** is currently a PhD candidate in philosophy at Emory University, Atlanta. She specializes in German idealism, contemporary continental philosophy, and aesthetics.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> At the time he wrote *Aesthetic Theory* in the 1960's, Adorno noted that “philosophical aesthetics has an antiquated quality, as does the concept of a system or that of morals. This feeling is in no way restricted to artistic praxis and the public indifference to aesthetic theory. Even in academic circles, essays relevant to aesthetics have for decades now noticeably diminished” (Adorno, 2006: 332). Stephen Regan describes a revival of aesthetic theory in the 1990s. He cites the announcement of “The Return of the Aesthetic” in the 1991 volume of the *Oxford Art Journal* to discuss his point (Regan, 1992). For Regan, the issue of aesthetics reopened due to the failure of psychoanalysis and deconstruction to provide a satisfactory account of value in cultural theory. This edited volume discusses Marxism and the Frankfurt school in relation to this return to aesthetics.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno contrasts his dialectical method to hermeneutics, however, this task does not have to be anti-hermeneutical. Hermeneutics can be considered as negative, i.e. as saying the unsaid in a way that preserves the incommensurability of experience. Cf. Arnason, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> For Adorno, art is to be contrasted from both propaganda and mass culture, which are forms of ideology. In “The Culture Industry”, when Adorno and Horkheimer discuss the style – or pseudo-style – of products of the culture

industry, they contrast it to the style of great art. The culture industry does not produce style, but “the negation of style. The reconciliation of general and particular, of rules and the specific demands of the subject, through which alone style takes on substance, is nullified by the absence of tension between the poles” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 102). This negation of style is the negation of the particular and the assertion of the universal. It is the negation of negation. It demonstrates unproblematic synthesis, not negative dialectics.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have considered Adorno’s aesthetic theory to narrow the relation between theory and practice rather than open it to new possibility. For a critique of Adorno’s aesthetics cf. Roberts 2009: 92-103.

<sup>5</sup> While some have considered Adorno’s movement away from the practices of social sciences and more concrete analyses such as his work in *Stars Down to Earth* towards the more theoretical works on aesthetics to be a movement towards intellectual resignation and defeatism, others have seen his late works as hopeful and far from giving up on the possibility of action. Cf. Sullivan and Lysaker, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> The contemporary concept of facticity is derived from the debates between Neo-Kantians and life-philosophers at the end of the nineteenth century (Raffoul and Nelson, 2008: 1-2). Facticity takes up the idea of a fact, something given empirically, but also has the sense of something that is made (*factum*) or fabricated. Facticity problematizes what is given to thought in experience. “Facticity designates a kind of ‘fact’ that has not been previously thematized in the history of philosophy. Although clearly contrasted with transcendental ideality and normative validity, it nonetheless does not designate empirical ‘factuality’, a fact of nature, or an ontic occurrence. It points to another kind of fact, one that falls out of and subverts the transcendental/empirical duality” (Raffoul and Nelson, 2008: 2-3). For this reason, I will distinguish between ‘facts’ in a positivistic, empirical sense and ‘the factual’ as a subversion of both idealism and realism.

<sup>7</sup> For Hegel, “The True is the whole” (Hegel, 1977: 11). For Adorno, “The whole is the false” (Adorno, 2005: §29). Adorno negates Hegel’s dialectics.

<sup>8</sup> For another critique of Hegel’s thought as a dialectics of absolute identity, Cf. Marcuse, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> In his preface to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno describes his project as an attempt to make dialectics thoroughly negative in contrast to the tradition

of positive dialectics: “As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of a ‘negation of negation’ later became the succinct term. This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy” (Adorno 2005a: xix). Positive dialectics ends in synthesis, i.e. the “return to the starting point” of thought that “was supposed to bring about a continuous identity of subject and object” (Adorno 2005a: 156).

<sup>10</sup> Adorno’s forward to *Prisms* describes why he looks at specific artists and works of art as a way of rejecting “the usual mode of thought which is content to register facts and prepare them for subsequent facticity” and then justifies his method in terms of his book *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno, 1997: 7).

<sup>11</sup> “The truth content of artworks cannot be immediately identified. Just as it is known only mediately, it is mediated in itself. What transcends the factual in the artwork, its spiritual content, cannot be pinned down to what is individually, sensually given but is, rather, constituted by the way of this empirical givenness. This defines the mediatedness of the truth content” (Adorno, 2006: 129).

<sup>12</sup> “Although artworks are neither conceptual nor judgmental, they are logical. In them nothing would be enigmatic if their immanent logicity did not accommodate discursive thought, whose criteria they nevertheless regularly disappoint” (Adorno, 2006: 136).

<sup>13</sup> Adorno’s discussion of this space in between thought and concepts, as well as the process of mediation, relies upon Kant’s aesthetics. Although Adorno is critical of Kant’s aesthetics, particularly insofar as he sees that Kant fails to allow the movement of dialectics, some scholars have attempted to draw stronger ties between these two thinkers. Cf. Huhn, 1997: 237-257.

<sup>14</sup> I would like to thank Michael Sullivan and Andrew Mitchell for their critical feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

## Bibliography

Adorno, T. (2006) *Aesthetic Theory* [trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor] Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (eds.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press



- Adorno, T. (2005) *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life* [trans. E.F.N. Jephcott] London: Verso
- Adorno, T. (2005a) *Negative Dialectics* [trans. E.B. Ashton] New York: Continuum
- Adorno, T. (1997) *Prisms* [trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber] Cambridge: MIT Press
- Adorno, T. (1998) "Resignation" *Critical Models* [trans. Henry Pickford] *Critical Models* New York: Columbia University, 287-293.
- Adorno, T. (2006a) "Subject and Object" [trans. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt] *The Adorno Reader*, Brian O'Connor (ed.) Malden: Blackwell, 137-145
- Arnason, J. (1988) *Praxis and Interpretation* Frankfurt: Suhrkamp
- Danto, A. (1981) *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit* [trans. A.V. Miller] Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T. (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [trans. Edmund Jephcott] Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (ed.) Stanford: Stanford University
- Huhn, T. (1997) "Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic" *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (eds.) Cambridge: MIT Press, 237-257.
- Marcuse, H. (1999) *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* Amherst: Humanity Books
- Nicholsen, S.W. (1997) *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* Cambridge: MIT Press
- Raffoul, F. and Nelson, E.S. (2008) *Rethinking Facticity* Albany: SUNY Press
- Regan, S. (1992) *The Politics of Pleasure: Aesthetics and Cultural Theory*, Stephen

Regan (ed.) Buckingham: Open University Press

Roberts, J. (2009) "Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Politics in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*" in *Aesthetics and the Work of Art: Adorno, Kafka, Richter, Peter de Bolla and Stefan H. Uhlig* (eds.) New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 92-103

Sullivan, M. and Lysaker, J.T. (1992) "Between Impotence and Illusion: Adorno's Art of Theory and Practice" *New German Critique* 57, 87-122