

## **Adorno's Aesthetic Model of Social Critique**

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### **Abstract:**

Aesthetics, in many ways, is at the center of Adorno's philosophical enterprise. Politics, and social critique, are in turn very much at the fore in his aesthetics. His art criticism is thereby bound up with social and political critique. That much is of course a truism about Adorno. In this essay, I shall suggest that Adorno's social criticism (in one of its main manifestations) is related to his art criticism in another interesting way as well. Specifically, their *form* is similar. The object of critical analysis, whether an artwork or other social phenomenon, is objectionable not simply because it promotes or fosters problematic things downstream—authoritarianism, anti-semitism, and the like—as cause to effect. Rather, it is objectionable because it contains, often in a way difficult immediately to detect, such objectionable ideologies covertly embedded in it. Critique will thus be a hermeneutic endeavor seeking to expose these ideologies. While this critical-interpretive model is of course more familiar in the aesthetic sphere, Adorno extends it to unmasking a wider range of social phenomena.

Keywords: *Adorno, Frankfurt School, society, social critique, aesthetics, hermeneutics, ideology*

### **I. Introduction**

Aesthetics, in many ways, is at the center of Adorno's philosophical enterprise. He devotes monographs to Mahler, Berg, and Wagner, and he writes a multitude of essays on literature and especially music, with his coverage ranging from high modernism to mass market

Hollywood cinema. Politics, and social critique, are in turn very much at the fore in his aesthetics. Through his close readings of canonical as well as newer works, Adorno analyzes the way society and its ideologies are—so he takes it—in evidence in the works he discusses. His art criticism is thereby bound up with cultural criticism. That much is of course a truism about Adorno. In this essay, I shall suggest that Adorno's social criticism (in one of its main manifestations) is related to his art criticism in another interesting way as well. Specifically, their *form* is similar.

The familiar dichotomy in Marxist-inspired work in social critique is between 'theory' and 'praxis,' with Adorno typically classified as someone suspicious about overtly (and in his view overhasty) revolutionary attempts to turn theory into praxis—and sometimes (often unfairly) classified as someone who repairs to the ivory tower of theory, with strains of high modernist music playing in the background. The centrality of aesthetics to Adorno's philosophical concerns has further entrenched this impression. My claim that Adorno has an 'aesthetic' model of social critique may seem to play right into this caricature. But I intend for it instead to show how Adorno is using this aesthetic approach, not simply to *retreat* to art, but instead to expand and enrich the resources available for the critique of society.

To this end, I want explore a divide that is, as it were, *within* the theory side of theory vs. praxis, but ultimately with implications for what the route to praxis might be. If praxis is about what we do practically once we uncover an ideology in order to make the world better and escape its grip, theory, by contrast, concerns an account of that ideology itself. Our question in the present paper will primarily be at the meta-level of that theory: What is the nature and method of such a critical account, and of the ideology it purports to uncover? What mode of

diagnostic analysis is necessary to identify the ideology in the first place? On these issues, I suggest, Adorno offers a distinctive philosophical perspective. I develop and contrast two modes of cultural critique—*causal* critique and *intrinsic* critique—and go on to classify much of what Adorno is doing in the latter camp.

Criticism, for him, is not just a matter of charting something's bad social effects and leveling criticism on account of these. Criticism is instead about what close 'micrological' analysis reveals about the ideology manifested in these phenomena themselves. It thus involves the hermeneutical unravelling of something, where the goal is to uncover, and then to criticize, these pernicious ideologies themselves. The object of analysis, whether an artwork or other social phenomenon, is thus objectionable not (simply or mainly) because it causally promotes or fosters problematic things—authoritarianism, anti-semitism, and the like. Rather, it is objectionable because it contains—often in a way difficult immediately to detect—such objectionable ideologies covertly embedded within it. In this respect, I suggest, Adorno's model of social critique is in debt to his aesthetics, not because it reposes its hopes in the aesthetic sphere alone, but rather because it employs a hermeneutical, non-causal, non-reductive model of ideology critique familiar from art criticism and extends this to model to social and cultural criticism more broadly.

After describing these two forms of cultural critique, I will go through some key manifestations in Adorno's work. I will begin with his application of it in conventionally 'high' aesthetic domains, and then look to how he applies this model to thinking about the culture industry and popular culture, and then finally look to his treatment of a broader range of social phenomena in *Minima Moralia* in particular.

My goal here is both exegetical and philosophical: I want to understand what Adorno is up to in his critical enterprise, as well as what its philosophical import is. But I am not aiming to vindicate Adorno's particular interpretations, accusations, and the like. These are contentious at best, often highly one-sided. I do, however, want to explore the *method* of cultural critique he uses and its ongoing applicability in social and political philosophy.

## II. Causal Critique and Intrinsic Critique

Before I turn to the exegesis of Adorno, I would like to set out and illustrate these two broad styles of criticism in more general terms. One style of cultural critique, as already mentioned, takes a broadly *causal* form. We look to some cultural phenomenon and then we see what effects it has in relation to some ethical, social, or political good (for example, individual flourishing, freedom, and the like). Insofar as the phenomenon in question negatively affects some things we care about, we then criticize it. We might thus, for example, criticize "fake news" propagated by social media, insofar it leads to a poorly-informed citizenry. This *causal critique* is a central and indispensable kind of social critique.

Another style of critique looks not to what objectionable things a cultural phenomenon causes, but to the intrinsically objectionable nature of the ideological content it contains. Let us call this *intrinsic critique*. One interprets the phenomenon in question, and gives a "reading" of the ideology embedded in it, and then critiques the ideology on account of this embedded ideology. This approach takes a page from the way in which one might interpret and criticize a work of art on ethical or political grounds. In doing so in the art case, one needn't be concerned with the artwork's ethical or political effects, or likely effects, but rather with, for example, its

viewpoint and the ideological content thereof. That viewpoint needn't be the viewpoint of its creator necessarily (Adorno 1954, 168), and needn't (and typically won't) be explicitly stated. It can, for Adorno, instead be borne out in other, more subtle ways, such as the relation between its formal elements and what this relation analogically suggests. Adorno, I maintain, interprets not just art, but also other social phenomena in this art-inflected, hermeneutical way.

The comparison to art interpretation can be misleading, however. It might make us think that it is just a narrowly aesthetic complaint being made, that the target of criticism is simply aesthetically defective (e.g., disordered, inharmonious, hackneyed, etc.). But that is not in general true with this sort of art criticism, and certainly not true of Adorno's art criticism or his social criticism. Often, it is at core an ethical or political and not a (purely) aesthetic charge that's being leveled. By way of example: Adorno purports to uncover authoritarianism and other noxious content in the music of Stravinsky. This is a controversial interpretation on his part, which we will turn to shortly, but its particular merits needn't be our concern. Notice, irrespective of whether this is a fair criticism of Stravinsky, that this is not just an aesthetic objection, in any narrow sense; although Adorno has aesthetic complaints about the music, he is also finding this music objectionable on ethical and political grounds. Admittedly, these kinds of charges (aesthetic-ethical-political) are very difficult, maybe impossible, to disentangle, but the point is the continual foregrounding of ethical and political concerns, not a sidelining of them for the sake of an allegedly 'pure' aesthetic criticism. Something further is important to see, in order to get this style of criticism into view: Adorno's charge isn't grounded in a causal sociological claim that this music has the social effect of propagating or promoting authoritarianism or other social deformations. It *may*, but Adorno is not (here, at least) making the kind of charge that

would be settled by, for example, an empirical study. His claim is also not the intentionalist one that Stravinsky deliberately composed his music to give voice to this ideology. Nor is it grounded in a psychological claim that the music gives voice to Stravinsky's own unconscious attitudes, though Adorno may well think there **is** an affinity there. Adorno's charge isn't even—straightforwardly anyway—the claim that the music inherits this ideological content directly from the social world in which it is produced, if that is meant to be a reductive justification of why it should be seen as having this tainted content (i.e., the facts about the social world become our evidence for holding that the music is thereby thus-and-so). It is rather that, in its immanent musical materials, the music is, as we might say, 'expressive' of authoritarianism (and other such things) and is problematic on this account as well. This intrinsic criticism is of course compatible with thinking it is *also* problematic in downstream causal ways. The point is that those downstream causal effects do not exhaust the respects in which it is problematic, and they do not serve as the sole grounds for potential criticism.

In light of the above, I use the word "expressive" with a caveat, familiar from aesthetics. When we say something is "expressive," we needn't construe that reductively either: that is, we shouldn't think something has its expressive properties simply in virtue of being in a relationship to the correlative mental or psychological states of individuals or groups (however exactly those are understood). To use the stock example from aesthetics: The sonata could be "expressive" of sadness, even if it's not the composer's or performer's sadness, and the novel can be expressive of misogyny, even if the author has no such attitudes, even unconsciously. That sadness is a property *of the music*, and the misogyny *of the novel*. Now, there may well often be a genetic story, including for the cultural phenomena of interest to Adorno. The point is that there *needn't*

be, and that the interpretive justification needn't look to such a story. In this discussion, I use various terms, including "express," in order to pick out the embeddedness of these ideologies, present in a work of art or social phenomenon, that stand in need of being uncovered and criticized. Determining what something is expressive of will be a matter of interpreting *it*, not of what genetically precipitates it or otherwise underlies it.

This independence is reflected in the wonderful image, to which Adorno repeatedly returns, of the "windowless monad." The whole point of the monad is its causal and epistemic isolation from other things.<sup>1</sup> Now this, in Adorno's case, is a metaphor, certainly not literal metaphysics, and not a denial of actual causal interconnectedness. But one of the key points of this metaphor is to signal resistance to a kind of crude view—cartoon marxism, we might say—about the relation between so-called "superstructure" and so-called "base," maintaining that facts about the base determine facts about the superstructure. There is, for Adorno, no doubt a sense in which everything, including art, bears indelibly the mark of the social world around it. But there is also a sense in which these kinds of things have a measure of autonomy, at least in the sense that the methods of the hermeneutical *Geisteswissenschaften* will be essential for unearthing their content and serving as the tribunal of justification relating to possession of such content. The recognition of this degree of autonomy is in keeping with Adorno's praise for the 'non-identical' and rejection of identity-thinking, in its resistance to reductive social analyses, in which the phenomenon (whether social or artistic) simply becomes a cipher of various outside forces. My contention in this paper is that this outlook, and the approach it informs, permeates Adorno's social critique as well as his aesthetics.

Adorno's adoption of this style of social critique is part and parcel of his more general complaints about such things as identity thinking, instrumentalist rationality and positivism. When it comes to social critique, the instrumentalist will be keen to evaluate social phenomena in terms of downstream effects. The only way, she says, something can *be* bad is if it has instrumental effects that are bad. This is typically allied with a kind of positivism, which will hold that these effects need somehow to be quantifiable and subject to empirical validation of some kind. To think everything is to be measured and criticized in terms of its effects is to capitulate to the hegemony of 'exchange' value over 'use' value (in the extremely broad way Adorno allies the latter notion with that which resists 'identity' thinking). Adorno's recurring theme is that these narrow and blinkered ways of thinking have blinded us to the possibility of a genuinely 'reflective' critical rationality that will be hermeneutically-sophisticated, normatively-committal, and untethered to these positivistic-instrumentalist assumptions. Yet, of course, one of the main ambitions of the Frankfurt School was to marry social critique with empirical sociology. Many of Adorno's reflections, for example on music-listening habits, are undergirded by careful research. **He** doesn't reject criticism grounded in such results; far from it. The point is that this is not, for Adorno, all social critique can be.

To get a grip on the structure of causal vs. intrinsic critique as applied to social institutions, consider the charges one might level against, say, the Nuremberg race laws, instituted under the National Socialists in Germany. These without a doubt have tremendously bad effects on the overall flourishing of those stigmatized by them. Those targeted by these laws get stripped of fundamental rights, deprived of social goods, and barred access to jobs and opportunities. The laws serve to solidify and perpetuate nefarious anti-Semitic attitudes in the



populace—attitudes which in turn have further terrible effects. But these laws are also objectionable because they (and the social formations in which they operate) express a certain offensive idea about Aryan superiority and Semitic inferiority. In addition to objecting to their manifold bad effects, we can object to things of this sort too. Now, this is, as it were, an ‘easy’ case, since this ideological content is virtually on the face of the laws themselves. As we shall see, Adorno’s distinctive philosophical move will be to locate ideology in far less obvious places, by looking to relatively unnoticed and seemingly innocuous phenomena as the bearers of such ideology as well.

Casual critique and intrinsic critique are both important kinds of social criticism. But there is a danger, by Adorno’s lights, that causal criticism will, aided by positivistic sociology, arrogate for itself the claim of being the only legitimate or respectable form of social criticism. Although Adorno doesn’t use this particular terminology of “intrinsic” versus “causal,” or explicitly reflect on his critical methodology of social critique in the way I am doing here, these distinctions help us to see what is going on in his work. I’d now like to turn to see how he puts this sort of intrinsic critique into practice.

### III. Aesthetic Applications: ‘High’ Art

I shall begin by looking to how Adorno applies this critical method to unearthing the ideological content of artworks. Such ideological criticism is a staple of his approach. Of course, moral and political approaches to aesthetic criticism have been around since at least Plato’s *Republic*. Certain types of poetry and certain musical modes get banned, on account of the alleged danger they pose to the citizenry. This type of critique is causal in form, as is much that

follows in its wake. But many other types of art criticism, Adorno's being a prime example, follow what I am calling the more intrinsic route. This involves showing that the work of art is somehow approvingly giving voice to a viewpoint that is morally or politically suspect. The classic example used in this domain is Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. The objection to this film is based not just on what the film causes, socially or politically-speaking (no doubt bad!), but also based on the content it itself expresses, a stance glorifying National Socialism. Such approaches to moral and political criticism of artworks are familiar from elsewhere in aesthetics from outside Adorno's work, including in anglophone aesthetics and in artistic criticism of different stripes.<sup>2</sup>

Adorno's critique is in this style. He offers interpretations of works that seek to locate problematic ideologies within the immanent content of these works themselves. Few could seriously dispute the attribution of a National Socialist ideology to *Triumph of the Will*, since that work wears its ideology on its sleeve. Adorno wants to probe artworks that do not wear their ideology so clearly on their sleeve, and his claims are thus more interpretively controversial. Wagner and Stravinsky are two central targets of his criticism.

Independently of Adorno's criticisms, Wagner of course often appears in a suspect light, on account of his own repellent anti-Semitic attitudes, and on account of his later admiration by Hitler in particular. Adorno's criticism will not focus on these dimensions primarily, however. It will instead aim to show us that the ideological content is already there, present in the musical form of Wagner's works:

Wagner's music simulates the unity of the internal and external, of subject and object, instead of giving shape to the rupture between them. In this way the process of composition becomes the agent of ideology even before the latter is imported into the music dramas via literature (Adorno 1952, 27-8).

The actual state of the world, Adorno holds, is one of a cleft between subject and object, internal and external. Serious art will 'give shape' to this rupture in an analogical fashion, representing the state of the world through the state of the musical materials (Subotnik 1990; Paddison 1996; Geuss 2006). But Wagner's music pretends that this gaping social and metaphysical rift doesn't exist, disguising it in an illusory sonic oneness. The interpretation is not about what Wagner's music leads to downstream or causally promotes. The issue is with the musical content of his works themselves (at least as interpreted by Adorno, and against the backdrop of Adorno's own theory, of the state of society and how works of art should respond to this.)

Adorno's views about the way that the relations between individual and society, subject and object, and so on, can be presented analogically in music are extraordinarily complex. But one key issue for Adorno is the relation between part and whole in the musical composition:

In Wagner's case what predominates is already the totalitarian and seigneurial aspect of atomization; that devaluation of the individual vis-à-vis the totality, which excludes all authentic dialectical interaction... In Wagner's music, we can catch a glimpse of that tendency of the late-bourgeois consciousness under the compulsion of which the

individual insists the more emphatically on his own importance, the more specious and impotent he has become in reality (Adorno 1952, 40).

What we have in Wagner's music is a symbolic mirroring of a more general social (indeed also metaphysical) pathology. Adorno continues in this register when he discusses the fate of subjectivity in Wagner's music:

The 'subjectivization' of orchestral sound, the transformation of the unruly body of instruments to the docile palette of the composer, is at the same time a de-subjectivization, since its tendency is to render inaudible whatever might give a clue to the origins of a particular sound (Adorno 1952, 70).

Adorno here adds an interesting twist: What might *seem* like the emergence of subjectivity from Wagner's music is actually not giving voice to it. Subjectivity gets effaced in being merged into the totality (Steinberg 2004). We may find Adorno's interpretations rather far-fetched and questionable. What, we might ask, licenses his particular interpretation over one that puts a more positive spin on the very same features of the music? It indeed might seem as though there is something worryingly ad hoc about Adorno's entire approach, as if he is just itching to indict Wagner and to couch the music in such a light as to do that. Our focus is not on the merits of Adorno's charges against Wagner, but on the style of ideological criticism he is employing.

Let us now turn to Stravinsky, who, at first glance anyway, is a less suspect personality than Wagner. The central conceit of Adorno's *Philosophy of Modern Music* is a contrast between

Schoenberg the valorized progressive and Stravinsky the nefarious reactionary. Juxtaposing Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* with Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, Adorno writes:

The texture of the composition designs the image of hope beyond hopelessness with the expression of shelter and security in desolation. Such pathos is totally alien to Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*...the music tends to take the part of those who ridicule the maltreated hero, rather than come to his defense...In Stravinsky's case, subjectivity assumes the character of sacrifice, but—and this is where he sneers at the tradition of humanistic art—the music does not identify with the victim but rather with the destructive element (Adorno 1958, 143)

“Liquidation of the individual” is something “celebrated by Stravinsky's music” (Adorno 1958, 190). Nothing in Adorno's critique hangs on the claim that Stravinsky's music promotes authoritarianism, as a downstream causal effect. The point instead is that this collectivist ideology is found in the work itself.

Consider another remark of Adorno's about the musical materials Stravinsky adopts. Adorno uses a Freudian vocabulary here. The musical elements are characterized by “infantilism” and “regression” in their archaism (Adorno 1958, 160-7). According to Adorno, they are thus lacking in “immanent musical validity”: “the [musical] structure,” he continues, “is externally superimposed by the composer's will which determines the nature of his formulations” (Adorno 1958, 167). By Adorno's lights, composers are faced with certain musical materials at their particular period in musical history. To turn one's back on these is a kind of

abnegation of responsibility: One should be working in such a way as to keep with the demands of these materials, but in Stravinsky's case, we have a notable retreat to an earlier (and now no-longer-appropriate) musical vocabulary. On one level, this can seem as though it is a personal charge against Stravinsky's exercise of compositional will. But Adorno's point is also about the resultant music itself and what its lack of "immanent musical validity" ideologically reflects. Not just Stravinsky the man, but Stravinsky's *music* is reactionary in its musical vocabulary. This reactionary quality is something to be located on a symbolic level: that we get, for instance, a neo-classical idiom in place of a steely atonal one is an indication that the work is fleeing from an honest representation of reality rather than facing up to it.

The basic model of Adorno's art interpretation, illustrated through these brief examples, involves locating an embedded ideology through close reading of the formal texture of the work itself. This method is not confined to "high" art. The culture industry and popular culture, the topic of the next section, often involve this method as well. Then we will move on to look at other social phenomena in Section VI and see how Adorno extends the model of criticism to works outside the usual domain of art, broadly-construed.

## V. The Culture Industry and Popular Culture

Adorno's approach to the culture industry is often empirical. Research of a psychological and sociological nature can tell us about the effects of culture on its consumers, and the mechanisms that explain its ongoing appeal and its design to ensure that appeal. For example, in his discussion of popular songs, Adorno sees their market appeal as relying on a balance on standardization and variation. This music needs to be as familiar as possible (so as to be

reassuring and unchallenging) while nonetheless having some minimal differences (so one can justify selling the new song, album etc.) (Adorno 1941). Yet Adorno's approach is not confined to this sort of explanatory model, illuminating though it is. As with his criticism of "high" art, he is also interested in an explanation of what is conveyed through the immanent content of these works, and he subjects them to close hermeneutical scrutiny to unveil this content.

We get a programmatic statement of this approach in remarks on the (at the time) new medium of television. Adorno notes that the "treatment of the formal characteristics of television within the system of the culture industry should be supplemented by closer consideration of the specific contents of programs...Abstracting from the form would be philistine vis-à-vis any work of art; it would amount to measuring by its own standards a sphere that ignores aesthetic autonomy and replaces form with function and packaging" (Adorno 1963, 59). About the script of one now-forgotten show, Adorno writes: "Within the psychological routine and the 'psychodrama' there still lurks the old pernicious idea of the taming of the shrew: that a sensitive and strong man overcomes the capricious unpredictability of an immature woman. The gesture toward psychological depth serves only to make stale patriarchal conceptions palatable to spectators..." (Adorno, 1963, 65). Now, this may have the effect of stabilizing the patriarchy. But there is an additional, intrinsic objection to the ideology present in show itself, and that ideology needs to be uncovered through close reading.

A similar sort of approach is at work in Adorno's treatment of popular music. Noting the tendency of popular music (evident in titles and lyrics of countless pieces) to regress into "baby talk," Adorno traces this into the musical form as well:

The music, as well as the lyrics, tends to affect such a children's language. Some of its principal characteristics are: unabating repetition of some particular musical formula comparable to the attitude of the child incessantly uttering the same demand; the limitation of many melodies to very few tones, comparable to the way in which a small child speaks before he has a full alphabet at his disposal; purposely wrong harmonization resembling the way in which small children express themselves in incorrect grammar; also certain over-sweet sound colors, functioning like musical cookies and candies (Adorno 1941, 450).

The music may well cause people to be more infantilistic. But Adorno's point doesn't rest just on this possible effect or related ones. It is that the objectionable infantilism is also *in the music*, analogically mirrored in its formal elements.

So too with Adorno's notorious remarks about jazz. (This is an essay from 1936, so Adorno's point of reference is music in, for instance, Weimar Berlin, not American jazz of later decades). As with his criticisms of Wagner and Stravinsky, the point is not to vindicate his controversial take. But I want to show that he uses the same kind of micrological analysis, looking to the musical character of the jazz piece itself, not to its effects on the social world. As with Adorno's other sorts of remarks about art, his main point is going to turn on analogies among the formal musical elements, on the one hand, and individuals and society, on the other. Take, for example, what he says about jazz improvisation:



Even the much-invoked improvisations, the ‘hot’ passages and breaks, are merely ornamental in their significance, and never part of the overall construction or determinant of the form. Not only is their placement, right down to the number of beats, assigned stereotypically; not only is their duration and harmonic structure as a dominant effect completely predetermined; even its melodic form and its potential for simultaneous combinations rely on a minimum number of basic forms (Adorno 1936, 477).

The improvisation gives the impression of being free, but actually it is not. This mirrors the fate of the subject in the modern world, who isn’t truly free under the reigning ideology, but has the illusion of ostensible freedom. The line that Adorno is pressing, again, is not just about effects, but what we find when we do ‘close’ readings of certain cultural phenomena. As we shall in the next section, Adorno applies this same approach to other social phenomena as well.

#### VI. Micrological Analysis in *Minima Moralia*

We see this aesthetic form of social critique especially in evidence in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*. The book comprises a collection of aphorisms, modeled after Nietzsche’s *Gay Science*. Yet for Adorno the relevant form of science will be a “melancholy” one, subtitled *Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Whereas Nietzsche will be a celebrant of vivacious life, Adorno will quip, quoting Ferdinand Kürnberger in the epigraph to the book, that “life does not live.” Adorno’s approach in this book is “micrological”: “He who wishes to know the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its estranged form, the objective powers that determine individual

existence even in its most hidden recesses (Adorno 1951: 15). The point is to look closely at various social phenomenon, undertake a certain sort of hermeneutical unearthing, and reveal what these social phenomena indicate about the world around us. “The splinter in your eye,” he notes, “is the best magnifying glass” (Adorno 1951: 50). This is a rich metaphor, alluding to the famous dictum from the Gospels.<sup>3</sup> The Biblical reference is about hypocrisy—criticizing others, without realizing that there are similar faults of one’s own. Ideology, it might be comfortable and reassuring to think, is not about nice, ordinary everyday life; it is about those nasty things that happen in the political sphere at the hands of *other people*, the nefarious malefactors. Yet Adorno wants to indicate that everyday life is also shot through with ideology as well. Adorno is going to be looking at small, familiar things, and uncovering the ideology embedded in them. He traverses an impressive range of phenomena, which might seem as though they are beyond suspicion.

Take, for example, what he says about these mundane phenomena:

What does it mean for the subject that there are no more casement windows to open, but only sliding frames to shove, no gentle latches but turntable handles, no forecourt, no doorstep before the street, no wall around the garden? And which driver is not tempted, merely by the power of his engine, to wipe out the vermin of the street, pedestrians, children, and cyclists? The movements machines demand of their users already have the violent, hard-hitting, unresting jerkiness of Fascist maltreatment” (Adorno 1951, 40)

The point is analogical. It's not that windows and cars *encourage* Fascism, as a political movement. It is that in this mode of interaction with the world, there is a kind of *mirroring* of such violence already. But this dimension would pass beneath regular notice. Ordinary life would *seem* all right. But actually something darker is present. Compare this with the aesthetic cases. Yes, Stravinsky's music may sound lively and rich, the Hollywood movie may have a charming plot, and a sweepingly beautiful, lushly-orchestrated score. But this can serve to mask worrying forms of ideology. So too in social life itself.

Or consider his remarks on the dress of hotel doormen:

The culture industry's budget runs to the billions, but the formal law of its performances is that of the tip. The excessively glossy, hygienic quality of industrialized culture is the sole rudiment of primal shame, an exorcising image, comparable to the tail-coats of the highest hotel managers, who, in their eagerness not to look like head-waiters, outdo aristocrats in elegance, so thereby giving themselves away as headwaiters" (Adorno 1951, 196).

The seemingly innocuous gets interpreted in such a way that it no longer seems ideologically innocent. Note also what Adorno says about small talk:

In the form of a few sentences about the health of one's wife that prelude the business discussion over lunch, the utilitarian order has taken over and assimilated even its opposite. The taboo on talking shop and the inability to talk to each other are in reality

the same thing. Because everything is business, the latter is unmentionable like rope in a hanged man's home. Behind the pseudo-democratic dismantling of ceremony, of old-fashioned courtesy, of the useless conversation suspected, not even unjustly, of being idle gossip, behind the seeming clarification and transparency of human relations that no longer admit anything undefined, naked brutality has been ushered in. The direct statement without divagations, hesitations, or reflections, that gives the other the full facts in the face, already has the full timbre of the command issued under Fascism by the dumb to the silent. Matter-of-factness between people, doing away with all ideological ornamentation between them, has already itself become an ideology for treating people as things (Adorno 1951, 40).

Thanks to Adorno's interpretation, we come to see something in this that might otherwise have been lost on us. The architecture of homes (§18), practices of gift-giving (§21), and many more all fall under Adorno's withering gaze. To many, Adorno's interpretations will seem hyperbolic and paranoid. My point, as it was in my discussion of his aesthetics, is not to vindicate his interpretations, but rather to try to understand the nature of the charge.

Now, in the case of all of these things, they are products of a certain ideological system. On some level then, they can be explained as arising due to this system. But Adorno doesn't rest content with that sort of explanatory approach. As I've indicated already, he finds a kind of ideological content embedded, analogically or metaphorically, within these practices themselves, and he seeks to unpack that content for further investigation and criticism. What is important is that these phenomena somehow *inscribe* or *mirror* the ideology themselves. Once again, we

return to that image of the monad. The point is not that there is literal causal isolation between the larger capitalist system and, say, small talk. Obviously, the interrelations are going to be rich. But it is rather that when we look to the practice and interpret it, we uncover the traces of the ideology lodged there.

## VII. Pushing Back Against Adorno's Methods

Now that we've had an illustration of Adorno's aesthetic mode of criticism, and its application to social phenomena, I would now like to consider some philosophical issues about its merits as a method.

As I have indicated, there is a strong similarity to Adorno's art criticism here. But might we accuse Adorno of relying *too much* on this analogy? Social phenomena are not works of art, after all. The former are intentionally created by a person or relatively circumscribed group (as in the collective creation of a film). Because these are created through design, and bear a closer relation to the minds of their creators, it is easier to think of them as bearers of content that might be extracted through interpretation. But not so, it might seem, when it comes to social phenomena. How then can they have this sort of content in them to be unpacked? Is this any more intellectually legitimate than reading tea leaves?

It might seem that it is easier to locate these kinds of 'meanings' in works of art. But notice that even when it comes to art, these meanings are not explicitly stated, not even in a work involving language. Such content will have to be recovered through interpretation. So there is actually less of a disanalogy here, by Adorno's lights, than it first seems. As we've seen, having the content in question is a matter of a structural analogy between the formal artistic materials

and the individual and society. The sort of mirroring in question happens in a variety of different phenomena, not simply in those that are conventionally mimetic. Here the monad metaphor again proves useful. A Leibnizian monad will contain within it a representation of the whole world. Adorno of course doesn't accept that metaphysics, but the point of the metaphor is that a social phenomenon is monadic insofar as it inscribes the character the society around it. Adorno doesn't think this mirroring is limited to art, but it is a feature of other sorts of social phenomena as well.

Suppose we agree on the broadly-speaking metaphysical point that there can in principle anyway be content of this sort. An epistemic worry still lurks in the vicinity: Who's to say that the content is really there? When Adorno makes charges against Stravinsky's music, what is to say he's right? What justification can he have for this interpretation? One answer here, somewhat unsatisfying, is that the justification is of the same form as it is for interpretations in general. Do they weave together sufficient features of the thing in a persuasive way? Do they shed useful light on the thing being interpreted? Such is the test of an interpretive account. There will not be hard-and-fast rules, nor, when it comes to anything reasonably complex, will there be interpretations brooking no debate. Even if we think these interpretations of social phenomena will be the site of continual contestation, it doesn't follow that any interpretation is as good as any other. Ultimately these kinds of epistemic worries cannot be fully allayed, but their force can at least be somewhat lessened.

Another final kind of objection I want to consider is a more political objection. It is that Adorno's focus on these sorts of things is ultimately frivolous and insufficiently revolutionary. It is the reaction of an aesthete at core. It is, the objection continues, the least of our problems what

cultural phenomena express. In the face of actual murder, and other grave harms, who could possibly care about this sort of thing? These may of course be correlated with bad effects. But the effects are ultimately what matter. Focus on this sort of seemingly irrelevant content might give further sustenance to the charge that Adorno is an out-of-touch aesthete mandarin, resident of the “Grand Hotel Abyss” (Lukacs 1962; Cf. Geuss 2006).

Yet Adorno could reply that his sort of approach is not as pointless as it may seem. This remark from *Minima Moralia* serves as a methodological statement of sorts: “Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will one day appear in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with objects—this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls out imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite” (MM, §153). Criticism can give us this, even when it can’t give us a well-worked out plan for ameliorating the status quo. Social criticism is similar to aesthetic criticism in this way. Adorno is opposed to art with its eye always on praxis (such as that of Brecht), which he thinks risks degenerating into crass propaganda. On one way of looking at things, the charge that social criticism is insufficiently effective is virtually a backhanded compliment. For him, one of the great potential merits of art is its autonomy, which means as well its autonomy from immediate praxis. So too with social criticism. Of course, this defense may just serve to further confirm the charge. In any event, we needn’t think that there is a kind of either/or in operation here: Intrinsic critique can coexist alongside causal critique. As we see, Adorno himself engages in both.

## VIII. Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined a certain form of social and cultural criticism that we get in Adorno's work. While it is not the exclusive form of critique in Adorno's oeuvre, it is particularly notable there. Since it is philosophically-distinctive and interesting, it bears further methodological scrutiny. As a form of criticism, it is not unique to Adorno. It has important anticipations in Nietzsche (see Huddleston: 2018) and arguably in Hegel as well, in his analyses of *Geist's* self-understandings and misunderstandings in various of its forms of life. With Nietzsche, we begin to see more of the turn to a hermeneutics of the covert, finding hidden meanings beneath the apparently simple surface: what seems like a worldview of love is actually one of hate, one of ascetic renunciation actually one of world-hatred, and so forth. With Adorno, this probing interpretation of cultural phenomena reaches a particularly rich and sophisticated expression.

It is a familiar idea in anglophone social and political philosophy that practices or institutions might express ideals or values (e.g. equality) in their organizing principles (e.g., Anderson 1999). The issue then is not just whether the institution causally promotes a good outcome, but rather what it expresses. In the terms I have used in this paper so far, a critique organized along these lines would be an *intrinsic* critique as opposed to a *causal* critique. As employed by Adorno, the style of critique is different in two main ways from what we typically see in analytic work today. First, for him, it is not just large-scale political institutions (e.g. democratic government) that have such expressive content, but rather the mundanities of everyday life, which are not sealed off from the influence of ideology. "*Es gibt kein richtiges*



*Leben im falschen*” [There is no right living/ genuine life in the false]. (Adorno 1951, 39).

Second, interpretation becomes a considerably more contentious matter. The ideological content allegedly located in a social phenomenon will prove far more controversial. This, again, is in keeping with the aesthetic analogy, with the idea being that the same work of art can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. This doesn't necessarily collapse into the idea that 'anything goes.' So too with social phenomena.

Adorno is sometimes accused of abandoning actual politics for art. But this analogy between aesthetic criticism and social criticism should serve to remind us that art, society, and politics prove impossible to disentangle. This lesson, I have suggested, informs not just Adorno's aesthetics, but his social criticism as well. His model of social criticism is not a way of giving up real social critique for occupation with purely aesthetic matters, but rather a way of rethinking what social critique might amount to.

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno 1971, 5: “That artworks as windowless monads ‘represent’ what they themselves are not can scarcely be understood except in that their own dynamic, their immanent historicity as a dialectic of nature and its domination, not only is of the same essence as the dialectic external to them but resembles it without imitating it.”

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Gaut (2007) of ‘ethical’ criticism. The problem for Gaut is with the attitude or stance put forward by the work, particularly if this is one where it invites our agreement.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 7:3-5.