

Saggi

Precarious Autarky: Adorno on Art and Solipsism

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Abstracts

This essay focuses on the relationship between solipsism and aesthetic subjectivity, as outlined in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, especially considering the relationship between solipsism and art's "subjective point of reference". For this purpose, I reconstruct Adorno's relevant ideas on the role of subjectivity within art and relate them to his elaborated analysis of the process of aesthetic experience. Finally, I scrutinize the value of the non-apodictic truth, this experience reveals, and also its relationship to particular aspects of "truth-content" and to Adorno's redemption of the artwork's fragile ontological status, its semblance character.

In diesem Beitrag wird Adornos Korrelation von erkenntnistheoretischem Solipsismus und ästhetischer Subjektivität oder "subjektivem Bezugspunkt von Kunst", untersucht und rekonstruiert. Zu diesem Zweck werden Adornos relevante Gedanken, die die Rolle der Subjektivität in der Kunst anbetreffen, rekonstruiert und ihre mögliche konzeptuelle Beziehung zu seiner differenzierten Analyse des Begriffs der ästhetischen Erfahrung untersucht; ästhetische Erfahrung beinhaltet eine rein subjektiv offenbarte Wahrheit des Kunstwerks, der, trotzdem, Objektivität zuerkannt wird. Zum Schluss wird der Wert dieser nicht apodiktischer Wahrheit und seine mögliche Beziehung zum Begriff des "Wahrheitsgehalts" und zu Adornos Rettung des fragilen ontologischen Status der Kunstwerks, seines "Scheincharakters", überprüft.

Keywords

Critical Theory – Aesthetic Subjectivity – Aesthetic Objectivity – Solipsism – Semblance and Truth

I. Introduction: individuation and collectivity in artistic production

Just at the beginning of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno points out that in the first half of the 20th century art lost its self-evidence as far as it concerns its inner life, its relation to the world, even its right to exist¹. This could be demonstrated on the gradual institutionalization and commercialization of great art of the past through new technical means of preservation and reproduction, and on the marginalization of modernistic art, which the philistine cliché faced “as ugly as the world in which it originates” (AT, 260). Adorno had many reasons to ascertain a marginalization of modernistic art according to his aesthetic values. In a rationalized world towards production and economic growth, culture industry dominated and art experienced a gradual “deaesthetization”. Consequently, not commercial or not committed artistic creation, which opposed social trends, tended to become a refuge of oppressed social groups, an attitude of unconventional individuals. Adorno knew that this had always been the fate of artistic expression in bourgeois society, also during historical periods, not dominated by culture industry; autonomous and, eventually, oppositional art presupposes namely an inner need for expression. This need, channeled into artistic expression before succeeding to the artwork’s reification and not considered as profession within “administered” society, implies first of all an “element of inwardness” (AT, 116) and individuation; traditionally, whoever wants to become an artist often ignores social conventions, clichés and requirements, by trying to follow inner motivations, visions and obsessions. This attitude may

also imply avoidance of administered working conditions and the alleged autonomy of “reified division of labor” (AT, 259). In addition, modern, industrialized and instrumentalized society, as acknowledged by Adorno, primarily didn’t ask for artists but for other professions, thus trying to alienate artistic activities and art in a “natural reserve for irrationalism” (AT, 336)². Nevertheless, while acknowledging the possibility of “collective labor in art” (AT, 42) in the kind of Schoenberg’s, somehow renaissance and at the same time visionary, idea of collective forms of production in composer workshops (AT, 231) the ideal of the autonomous artist-hero of the 19th century on which Adorno still hangs, is a path of individuation and antithesis to society. Although there might also be other paths of radical individuation in thinking and acting, the artistic is the most idiosyncratic: it primarily concerns a domain of privacy and intimacy; “Art cannot be isolated from expression, and there is no expression without subject” (AT, 42). But even epistemological aspects of artistic creation, as for example the “appropriation” of technical-theoretical “discoveries” of a historic era by an artist (AT, 192), are being realized through a mirror of reflected subjectivity as a result of personal choice. The latter appear within artistic activity as “personality” and constitute a quality that distinguishes artworks from one another.

There are occasional statements on the relationship between art and solipsism in *Aesthetic Theory*, which suggest different aspects of the function and content of art. Solipsism, on the one hand, is a general “standpoint of radical modernism”, realized in atomistic society through “reified division of labor” (AT, 259). Artistic creation takes place within society and, according to Adorno, constitutes social production. Production of a particular artwork “demands the division of labor” (AT, 167). Given this established structure of production in modern society, atomistic

attitudes may also refer to artistic creation (production) thus pointing to a kind of societal solipsism. In addition according to Adorno, from an external point of view, art, especially modernistic art, may appear with solipsistic and fetishistic attitudes, as for example in its precarious, for its survival, insistence on inner coherence (AT, 228). He therefore relates art's purported autarky to the "persuasive force" of an argument of dialectical materialism (Lukács's attack) concerning the solipsistic standpoint of radical modernism "that of a monad that obstinately barricades itself against intersubjectivity" (AT, 259). Indirectly and occasionally, Adorno makes fruitful correlations between this standpoint and a general characteristic of art, its autonomous character. Actually, he should unfold an argumentation toward the sociologically solipsistic attitudes of autonomous art and artist, in other words to find a relationship between autonomy and solipsism. However, he does not. Indeed this could be reconstructed from scattered relevant statements in *Aesthetic Theory*. Autonomy and solipsism, though referring primarily to different contexts — sociological and cognitive respectively and with the former being broader than the latter — converge within a standpoint of the creative subject; in a standpoint of autarky, independence and introspection. For art itself this suggests a defensive standpoint of denial of social functionality endangered from the precarious ideology of *l'art pour l'art*, and a denial of any purpose as commodity. In addition, it suggests a denial of convenient social affirmations in the form of "dubious social-political commitment" (AT, 228) and "choice of [relevant] subject matter" (AT, 321). However, Adorno's main concern remains the highlighting of art's intersubjectivity, in other words, the dialectical coexistence of subject *and* society within the artwork.

At the same time, solipsism also constitutes a long standing philosophical hypothesis, which concerns existence, and the truth value of perception. Therefore, Adorno's brief statements on solipsism in *Aesthetic Theory* designate different phenomena under the same heading; these concern cognitive, sociological and existential aspects of artistic creation, aesthetic experience and of the artwork's content. Due to his above mentioned main concern, he often undertakes abrupt conceptual transitions within these aspects. In this essay I will mainly focus on the cognitive aspect, especially on Adorno's significant statement about the "subjective point of reference in art [...] that which solipsism has merely feigned in reality" (AT, 42). For this purpose, I will reconstruct Adorno's relevant references on the role of subjectivity within art and relate them to his statements on the subject-object confrontation in the process of aesthetic experience. Adorno considers aesthetic experience as objective understanding by locating in this confrontation a possibility of objectivity and truth, experienced subjectively. Therefore, I will scrutinize the value of truth, which could be articulated from, according to Adorno, an immanent solipsistic standpoint — this of the individuality, exclusivity and inwardness of aesthetic experience and artistic creation. Subsequently, I will relate it to particular aspects of "truth-content" and finally to the concepts of "semblance and "remembrance". Taking into consideration Adorno's above mentioned abrupt conceptual transitions, I will also explore the sociological aspect towards his significant statement that "art is the historicophilosophical truth of a solipsism that is untrue in-itself" (AT, 42); I will relate this statement to Adorno's highlighting of art's "double character", namely, its manifestation as "autonomous phenomenon" and "fait social".

II. *Art's immanent subjectivity*

How could art be related to a doubtful philosophical hypothesis as solipsism is? Adorno's main statement for such a relation is an initial and general observation concerning the lack of spirit in modern society: "In the contemporary social situation spirit is present only by virtue of the principium individuationis". Therefore, the "most progressive consciousness [...] today is exclusively that of the individual" (AT, 42). However, as mentioned in the introduction, he makes an abrupt transition from the sociological (also) to the cognitive level: "the extinguishing of art's immanent subjectivity" is inconceivable and generally art suggests a "subjective point of reference" (AT, 42). Repeatedly, in different contexts and through versatile formulations, Adorno refers to this cardinal characteristic of art. For example, he emphasizes the importance of the "immediacy of experience" (AT, 259) and the value of "lived perception" (AT, 345) when elaborating the process of aesthetic experience "as objective understanding". Respectively, as far as it concerns artistic creation, he stresses the role of expression within art and thereby the latter's dependence on a subject (AT, 42). However, the latter remains a general statement; as it will be stated later in this section, Adorno sets many restrictions on any decisive role of the artistic subject for the artwork's reification. Nevertheless, art's "immanent subjectivity" and "subjective point of reference" refer both to aesthetic experience and artistic creation. Actually, when referring to this aspect of art, Adorno's distinction between aesthetic experience and artistic creation is not always obvious. I will first focus on the former.

Whereas science doubts on the validity of knowledge arising directly from the data of sensual perception, aesthetic experience indispensably begins with immediate contact to the

artwork through sensual perception “otherwise it [art] would be indistinguishable from science” (AT, 259). One could object that this is just the way any experience of the world begins with. But within the aesthetic domain, immediate contact to the artwork, which presupposes sensorial awareness, stresses subjective engagement. This doesn’t constitute an abstract-conceptual, exemplary and intersubjective starting point, thus outlining initially an epistemology of the process we gain knowledge of the world. It implies a special and indispensable commitment towards the potential “perceptibility” of the art-object, and respective “attentiveness”³ of the subject (and maybe mutual alignment between them). Adorno considers this kind of subjective openness towards perception as a general cognitive virtue, which concerns not only aesthetic experience; as he states, “yet obdurate thought cheats itself of the element of receptivity, without which it is no longer thought” (AT, 346). In addition, “lived perception” implies privacy; it is the attentiveness of the individual recipient to which artworks respond and “open their eyes under [his] gaze” (AT, 275). These unavoidable preconditions of sensual receptivity and intimacy towards the artwork underpin what Adorno considers as “lived perception”. They constitute an indispensable, not necessarily, initial “layer” of aesthetic experience. It is the immediate attentiveness, perception and emotional engagement of the *particular* subject which first of all the artwork requires and not a mediated knowledge, e.g. through evaluation by others and through conceptual understanding. Furthermore, it is not the collective and anonymized perception and experience of the products of culture industry.

However, the above statements do not guarantee an objective aesthetic judgment beyond the contingency of “psychological

³ W. BENJAMIN, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, New York 1969, 188.

emotions”, even if they arise from an immediate contact to the artwork. They also do not refer to a strong condition for mutual alignment between artwork and recipient. Moreover, they do not really distinguish “real experience” from “artistic experience” (AT, 164), thus pointing to the way, art becomes distinguishable from science. Therefore, art’s “immanent subjectivity” and “subjective point of reference” would appear as a flaw without any claim for objective judgment towards the truth-content of the artistic object. However, if taking into consideration Adorno’s statements on the equivocalness of subjectivity and objectivity within art and his critique on Kant’s concept of objectivity in aesthetic judgment, these necessary distinctions become clear. Adorno’s Aesthetics are definitely work-centered. He acknowledges Kant’s efforts to establish “a subjectively mediated but objective aesthetics” (AT, 163). However, he also has two main objections. The first is an epistemological one, through which art indeed becomes distinguishable from science and its subjective point of reference plausible. As he states, the “subjective query”, the Kantian judgment of taste requires,

is itself more aesthetic than is the epistemological intention obliqua because the objectivity of the artwork is mediated in a manner that is qualitatively different from the objectivity of knowledge, being mediated *more specifically* through the subject (AT, 163-164, emphasis mine).

However, Adorno doesn’t, at least in this context, explicate the specificity of this mediation and “the modification of real experience by artistic experience” (AT, 164). Apart from the repeatedly emphasized feature of this specificity – the importance of “lived perception” – he provides this explication indirectly by articulating his second objection. Although Kant defines beauty

as “that which pleases universally without requiring a concept”⁴, at the same time he also introduces two requirements: universality and implicit necessity of the judgment. These however are concepts. Since being concepts, they do not provide a distinction between real- and artistic experience, but “reproduce the deterministic mechanisms of empirical reality” (AT, 165). Thus, they draw back the subjective query of artistic experience to an epistemological intention obliqua, whereas Adorno aims to an “aconceptual” aesthetic experience. This experience implies an aconceptual immediate “attentiveness”. Furthermore, the unity of these concepts, realized, according to Kant, through “the act of pleasing” (AT, 165) within the subject, is insofar *external* to the artwork. However, the act of pleasing, which according to Adorno should be replaced by a higher level of aesthetic experience, cannot remain external to (and independent from) the artwork:

The strongest buttress of subjective aesthetics, the concept of aesthetic feeling, derives from objectivity, not the reverse. Aesthetic feeling says that something *is thus* [...]“Aesthetic feeling is not the feeling that is aroused: It is astonishment vis-a-vis what is beheld rather than vis-a-vis what it is about; it is a being overwhelmed by what is aconceptual and yet determinate, not the subjective affect released, that in the case of aesthetic experience may be called feeling. It goes to the heart of the matter, is the feeling *for it* and not a reflex of the observer (AT, 164, emphasis mine).

Consequently, the subjective point of reference in art, is not psychological emotions, validated through their common appearance in the experiences of other individuals. It is constituted by subjective feelings under a precondition, aroused from the specific case every artwork constitutes –its objectivity, which

⁴ I. KANT, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis 1987, 64, cited after Adorno, AT, 164.

contrary to Kant remains indictable from “universally conceptual formalization” (AT, 165). True art, especially modern art, inherently contradicts conceptual formalization of taste. By criticizing Kant’s concept of objectivity in aesthetic judgment, Adorno finally formulates a paradox concerning the universal value of aesthetic judgment through formalization; the latter constitutes an “act of subjective reason” and insofar is exposed to contingency. Perhaps this paradox sounds hyperbolic. On the other hand it complies with Adorno’s work-centered Aesthetics and the specificity and dignity of the work, about which “no single rule by which the judgment of taste must subsume, not even the totality of these rules, has anything to say” (AT, 166). In the specificity of its reification, the artwork implies a peculiar truth, experienced individually by the subject. In so far, it points to an “aconceptual”, not apodictic and, insofar, solipsistic truth, appearing through the art-object and in the devoted spectator.

The above mentioned higher level the act of pleasing should, according to Adorno, be ideally replaced with, is the “shock aroused by important works” and “the moment of being shaken” (AT, 244). In this case, art’s “subjective point of reference [...] which solipsism feigned in reality” (AT, 42) becomes evident: “the possibility of truth, embodied in the aesthetic image, becomes tangible [*leibhaftig*]” (AT, 244). Even if this truth (or untruth) constitutes an immanent and objective characteristic of the particular artwork, it has to be subjectively experienced: “it is irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness” (AT, 245). Art inherently aims to a subject or, as mentioned above in Adorno’s words, “the objectivity of the artwork is being mediated more specifically through the subject” (AT, 164). This “more specific” is an immediate mediation, lacking, according to Adorno’s differentiation from Kant and in contrast to intention obliqua, the reference to universal concepts and categories:

“What each artwork would need to be according to its pure concept is essential to none” (AT, 166). Thus, Adorno, in contrast to Kant, distinguishes artistic from real experience and points to the reason “why people expose themselves to aesthetic experience in the first place” (AT, 164); it is a desire for becoming “overwhelmed” and enchanted, if not by the Kantian sublime, at least by the artwork’s factual spell and maybe truth.

By locating objectivity within the artwork and by acknowledging the irruption of this objectivity into the subject, he outlines the conditions for mutual alignment between them. The significance of this irruption becomes evident in Adorno’s reference to the moments of “shudder” and “liquidation of the I” during the subjective encounter with “important works” (AT, 245). This transient weakening and, as Adorno states, not “disappearance” of the subject does not point to a questioning of “art’s subjective point of reference”. Rather, it validates a standpoint of receptivity and immediate experience through the irruption of an external, objective truth, reified by the artwork. Thus, through this alignment, a necessarily subjective and individual standpoint of receptivity, this of an “aconceptual” aesthetic experience, provides the conditions for the “possibility of truth to become tangible”. In other words, it *validates a solipsistic standpoint*. Before exploring the eventual truth-value of this subjectively experienced objectivity reified through the artwork, I will return to the above mentioned aspect of art’s “immanent subjectivity” and “subjective point of reference”, as far as it concerns artistic creation.

Whereas Adorno acknowledges the subjectivity and individuality of artistic expression and perception when pointing to the fact that art “is nevertheless bound up with feeling, with the immediacy of experience” (AT, 259), at the same time he explores the limits of the subject’s involvement in artistic crea-

tion, questioning its decisive role in the artwork's formation. In other words, he challenges the amateurish idea of artistic creation from a state of "tabula rasa". This becomes evident among others in his critique of the psychoanalytic theory of art, in the questioning of the role of artistic intention, in the challenging of "inwardness" and "expression" and in the emphasis on art's, even latent, collective social subject and language character. I will here focus on the three aspects of Adorno's questioning, leaving the fourth for the next section of this essay. As he repeatedly states, antithesis to society is immanent in art. This antithesis suggests an esoteric domain, "an inward space of men", which plausibly implies interpretations based on a "theory of psychic life" (AT, 8). Psychoanalytic theory aims to interpret artworks as "unconscious projections" of their creators. However, Adorno states that in the creative process projections constitute "one element and hardly the definitive one" in contrast to "idiom and material" (AT, 8), which, as will be stated in the next section of this essay, transcend the scope of the creative subject in being historically and sociologically determined. Insofar, artworks are not psychoanalytic "documents" of the core of subjectivity –the subconscious life. Psychoanalytic theory might "bring to light what is internal to art", as biographical facts are, but at the same time "not artistic". It "unlocks phenomena" but not the "phenomenon of art", that is the artwork's "objectivity" and "inner consistency", beyond artistic intentions. "Unconscious forces" may serve as primary "impulse" in artistic creation. However, they remain just "material among many others"(AT, 8-9) which find their way in artistic creation thus explaining a subjective need for creation, even as a syndrome. They illuminate rather the factual aspect of this process and not its outcome, the reified artistic object. Therefore, as Adorno states, artworks are "incomparably less a copy and possession of the artist" (AT, 9) than a psychoanalyst

could imagine. Repeatedly he stresses the fact that the artist has to face the difficulties of form and material and master anti-thetical forces within them, which transcend his initial feelings, intentions and conceptions. And during the adventure of artistic creation he might fail to realize them, even the work itself. In the same way, as the art recipient has to control his initial feelings when facing the artwork through a form of “self-denial”, the creator has to emancipate himself from them:

Aesthetic relinquishment in the artwork requires not a weak or conformist ego but a forceful one. Only the autonomous self is able to turn critically against itself and break through its illusory imprisonment (AT, 116-117).

Once again, by delimiting the role of subjectivity in the process of artistic creation, Adorno does not eliminate the “subjective point of reference in art” and its “immanent subjectivity”. Rather, he recasts a view from an inevitable subjective standpoint, aiming to discover the possibility of an articulated objectivity and truth-value *of non-subjective origin*.

All the above statements point to a premise of interiority for art and its appreciation. As Peter Gordon points out, in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno reexamines the relevance of Kierkegaard’s “philosophy of inwardness” for modern art⁵. Any attempt of Adorno to salvage modernistic and new art in relation to an “ideology of inwardness” has complex implications. On the one hand, in the 20th century the autonomous subject experiences, through working conditions and domination of culture industry, a “growing powerlessness” (AT, 116). Therefore, “inwardness” tends to become ideology, an illusory, consolatory “mirage of an inner kingdom”. But since the subject forfeits his power

⁵ P. GORDON, *Adorno and Existence*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2016, 189.

and autonomy, this kind of inwardness becomes “shadowy and empty, indeed contentless in itself”. Given the fact that Adorno stresses a little later in *Aesthetic Theory* the importance of dialectical conception of inwardness, we could read his reference to subjective emptiness both from the point of view of the subject *and* of the object-society. “What is denied [the subject] socially” (AT, 116) through “reified division of labor”, which he has to “perform”, is a meaningful participation to social reality, thus to external objectivity. In that way subjectivity becomes “empty” and “shadowy”, since not dialectically validated through the external opposite. Thus, *society* vanishes in the *subject’s* precarious introspection. Such an illusory and empty inwardness would imply a socially solipsistic standpoint. But since it also constitutes a general presupposition for artistic creation and aesthetic experience, it would justify, contra Adorno, in such a socially unconscious and narrow-minded form, Lukács’s “attack on radical modern art” (AT, 43) through an alignment of a societal-epistemological handicap to aesthetics⁶. At the same time, the powerless subject, not being able for critical self-reflection, becomes in David Riesman’s terminology to which Adorno refers, “outer-directed”, concessional and easily assimilated, surrendering to stimuli of external reality. Thus, the *subject* vanishes in *society’s* manifoldness. Consequently, he may easily become exposed to the sirens of culture industry. Actually, in front of the latter’s domination, modernistic art itself needs inwardness in order to retain its autonomy and dignity⁷. However, if art, as reaction, follows a convenient, peaceful standpoint of introspec-

⁶ Cf. J. BALDACCHINO, *Post-Marxist Marxism: Questioning the Answer*, Routledge, London 2018, 121.

⁷ For the relationship between art’s autonomy and dignity cf. A. HELLER, *Autonomy of Art or the Dignity of the Artwork*, in *Aesthetics and Modernity*, ed. John Rundel, Lexington Books, Lanham 2011, 47-64.

tion and uncritical solipsistic inwardness, it will become untruth and harmless. Here appears the aporia of art's autonomy:

If art cedes its autonomy, it delivers itself over to the machinations of the status quo; if art remains strictly for-itself, it nonetheless submits to integration as one harmless domain among others (AT, 237).

On the contrary, according to Adorno, art's societal character consists in its attitude towards society: its sociality means "immanent movement against society" and its "asociality is determinate negation to society" (AT, 226-227). In addition, there also are special art-historical reasons for Adorno's critique of the ideology of inwardness. He refers to them indirectly, indeed *ex negativo*: by pointing to their ideological abuse. The "denunciation of radically expressive works as being examples of hyperbolic late romanticism" constitutes actually not only a "predictable babble of all those who favor a return to the pristine" (AT, 116). For a proponent of radical modernism as Adorno, any return to aesthetic psychologism, would mean regression. However, he also acknowledge that the once fruitful "antipsychologism" of radical modernism, demonstrated by Adorno in the latter's contempt of *Jugendstil* and meta-romantic inwardness, "shifts its function", becoming "socialized and serviceable to the status quo" towards aesthetic primitivism. "Yet art is scarcely imaginable without the element of inwardness" (AT, 116). How could consequently Adorno find a mediation between the salvation of inwardness, as Kierkegaard introduced it, and Benjamin's critique of "abstract subjectivity that powerlessly sets itself up as a substance" (AT, 116)? "The element of inwardness" refers namely to art's "immanent subjectivity" and "subjective point of reference". On the other hand, "abstract subjectivity as a substance", "arrogates all objective reality to its

own inner sphere”⁸. In that case, “aesthetic self-relinquishment in the artwork” and the latter’s objectivation would be impossible. The mediation lies in the dialectical conception of inwardness, demonstrated aesthetically with an analogy, once more of musical origin⁹: “Beethoven is, in modified yet determinate fashion, the full experience of external life returning inwardly” (AT, 116-117). Analogously, as mentioned above, “only the autonomous self is able to turn critically against itself and break through its illusory imprisonment”. Thus, the “forceful”, autonomous, not conformist ego, is able for aesthetic externalization to the artistic object, both as creator and spectator. By turning “critically against itself” the artistic ego escapes from the solipsistic boundaries of its purported autarky; the “illusory imprisonment” now collapses in front of the movement of the subject towards the objectivity of the artwork; the artist faces the above mentioned problems of mastering antithetical forces in material and form. These forces are determined from the course of history beyond the realm of subjectivity. He faces finally the consequences of creation – his creatures while acquiring independence from him. The Swedish poet, Tomas Tranströmer describes this process masterfully:

Fantastic to feel how my poem grows
while I myself shrink.
It grows, it takes my place.

⁸ GORDON, *Adorno and Existence*, 190.

⁹ See, f.i., another analogy in his statement that the reciprocity between intellectual-reflective and sensual moments in the process of aesthetic experience can be paradigmatically demonstrated in the process of “structural listening” to musical works (AT, 337-338; *Der getreue Korrepetitor. Lehrschriften zur musikalischen Praxis*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* 15, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1997, 186.

It pushes me aside.
 It throws me out of the nest.
 The poem is ready¹⁰.

III. *Art's truth and social mediation*

Adorno's questioning of any definite and exclusive role of the spontaneous involvement of subjectivity within artistic creation and aesthetic experience points to moments of "critical self-reflection". However, such moments constitute the way epistemology generally "destroys the spell of solipsism". In the aesthetic domain, moments of critical self-reflection, which challenge the autarky of the creative and experiencing subject, limit their tendencies to self-projection. On the other hand, it is exactly the "subjective point of reference in art that solipsism feigned in reality" (AT, 42). Does then this point of reference give a promise of accessing truth and what kind of truth could that be? There are two reasons to explore any truth value that could eventually be articulated from art's standpoint. The first is exactly the fact that solipsism imitates art's subjective point of reference "in reality"; that means that solipsism, as cognitive, though anti-epistemological standpoint, acknowledges and tries to imitate a peculiar autarky in the individuality of aesthetic experience and artistic creation. Thus, aesthetic 'knowledge' gives the promise of accessing truth, beyond the apodictic obligations of epistemology and the *universal* validity of concepts. As John Baldacchino puts it, "art's right to solipsism frees it from the epistemological legislation of an identitarian totality"¹¹; this totality appears, among others, as instrumental significance of universal concepts for accessing truth. The second reason is

¹⁰ T. TRANSTRÖMER, *Morning Birds* from *Bells and Tracks* (1966), in *New Collected Poems*, trans. R. Fulton, Bloodaxe Books, Hexham 2011, 75.

¹¹ BALDACCHINO, *Post-Marxist Marxism*, 123.

indeed Adorno's persuasion that through aesthetic experience and confrontation with the artwork the art-recipient attains a privileged access to an objective truth "embodied in the aesthetic image" (AT, 244). Indeed, in another context Adorno also explores the ontological domain of art and the possibility that it may express a kind of truth, that could become "tangible" to the subject though the process of aesthetic experience. But he doesn't just explore how art could be and thus express truth but what kind of truth this *could be*. For this purpose, he has to undertake two hard tasks; the redemption of art's mode of manifestation, its semblance-character as ontological domain and possible locus of *appearance* of truth, and the outlining of art's methexis in truth *despite* its semblance character, in other words, the redemption of semblance as *semblance of* truth. Each of these tasks can be understood as implicitly referring to two criteria for evaluation of art's claim to truth: being and content, respectively.

Adorno poses the crucial question "how can making bring into appearance what is not the result of making; how can what according to its own concept is not true nevertheless be true?" (AT, 107) given the fact that the truth cannot be something made. What is evident in the artwork's objectivation is definitely its sensuous character. However, "usually the semblance character of artworks has been associated with their sensuous element, especially in Hegel's formulation of the sensuous semblance of the idea" (AT, 108). *Therefore*, Adorno first of all has to undertake the redemption of semblance in its sensuous appearance. Indeed, even the pure objectivation of an artwork points inevitable to its semblance character; for instant, a picture pretends the process, which it represents. In order to salvage the semblance character of the artwork, Adorno on the one hand transforms the artwork's sensuous element, its Hegelian "being-

in-itself”, from an ontological disadvantage, arising from its state of ontological unfulfillment, to an ontic privilege. This can be related to his repeated efforts to highlight and emphasize the above mentioned perceptual analogue: the importance of the “immediacy of experience” and the value of “lived perception” during the process of aesthetic experience. As Albrecht Wellmer states, this constitutes a privilege of art and, consequently, of aesthetic experience in comparison to “discursive cognition”¹². On the other hand, the semblance character of the artworks points to an external, archetypal locus of truth, this of the “active spirit” (AT, 107). However, this autarchic and privileged “being-for-itself” of spirit, its intangibility, is now being transformed by Adorno to an ontic disadvantage; in view of the sphere of Dasein, spirit remains “necessarily illusory”:

All spirit, $\chi\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ from the corporeal, has in itself the aspect of raising what does not exist, what is abstract, to existence; this is the truth element of nominalism. Art carries out the test of the illusoriness of spirit as that of an essence sui generis by taking at its word spirit’s claim to be an entity and placing it as such before the eyes. It is this, much more than the imitation of the sensual world by aesthetic sensuousness, that art has learned to renounce and that compels art to semblance (AT, 108).

Thus, towards the being-in-itself of Dasein, spirit remains semblance. Only through the reification of the artwork and through its sensuous element it might appear “before the eyes”. It needs the artwork towards its “claim to be an entity”. This claim can be fulfilled in the ontological topos of the Hegelian existent, in the sphere of sensuous being. Otherwise spirit would remain abstract and intangible or pure subject to belief,

¹² A. WELLMER, *Wahrheit, Schein, Versöhnung. Adornos ästhetische Rettung der Modernität*, in *Adorno-Konferenz 1983*, eds. L. VON FRIEDEBURG & J. HABERMAS, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1983, 142-143 (my translation).

as Holly spirit is, which hopefully *also* may (according to those who believe to him) appear through a sensuously perceivable miracle or humanly reification “before the eyes”. Consequently, according to Adorno’s subversion of traditional Aesthetics, the semblance character of the artwork doesn’t arise from its sensuous element but from “the placing before the eyes” of an abstract entity, which remains illusory per se, in other words, semblance. At the same time, artworks, as such, are purposeless in a Kantian sense, which Adorno adopts; by resisting thingness they are not useful objects and “have their locus on the side of appearances”. But what appears is at the same time essence, the manifestation of spirit, of the nonexistent in aesthetic means. *In so far*, artworks are appearances (of spirit).

Finally, the redemption of semblance, “usually associated” (AT, 107) with the artwork’s Dasein, becomes possible through the latter’s correlation with the locus of truth, spirit. In a state of oscillation between the moments of conceptual truth and “nonexistence and negativity” towards sensuous being, spirit “enters” the artwork. The artwork carries out this nonexistence and negativity as a kind of guilt and “seeks to salvage”, through aesthetic semblance, “what is reduced to its material” (AT, 107). Only indirectly, Adorno here explicates the “refracted existence” of the “nonexistent” -spirit in the artwork’s “appearance” (AT, 109): it is the “relation of [the artwork’s] elements to each other”, through which “exclusively artworks become spirit” (AT, 108). We could also take into consideration his dispersed hints on the notion of the “content” (*Gehalt*), which in being “distinct from semblance” and the immediate existence of the artwork, constitutes for the latter the only possible bearer of

truth (and spirit) and the real “issue”¹³ in any relevant question¹⁴. Elsewhere, Adorno introduces different parameters to outline the artwork’s reification, among them technique and content¹⁵. Technique and content stand in a dialectical relationship. He distinguishes them by pointing to the fact that content, in contrast to technique, is not made. Adorno’s paradigm, individuality as content in Shakespeare’s works, is supported by a technique of succession of short scenes. Content appears as the non-sensuous, abstract result in the materialistic and sensuous means of a serving and thus, relevant and efficient, technique. As not made, it may have claim to truth because truth cannot be made. Therefore, the locus of any claim of truth is the content of the work, which, through this indicator and claim, may become truth-content. The spirit “enters” the artwork through the content. To continue Adorno’s thoughts, its preliminary “nonexistence and negativity” is perhaps manifested in the dependency of content on the efficiency of technique, the made; finally on the latter’s artistic functionality.

However, Adorno also adheres to the traditional understanding of the artwork’s semblance character; artworks are semblance by helping what they cannot be, the unmade truth of spirit, to a “second-order, modified existence” in the sphere of being (AT, 109). The aesthetic realization, which serves as cradle for a modified existence of what artworks cannot be – spirit

¹³ Cf. AT, 107;131.

¹⁴ Adorno also introduces another, materialistic meaning of content (German, “Inhalt”) as far as it concerns the musical work. He defines Inhalt of a musical work as “everything that transpires in time”, e.g. “changing [sonic] situations” (AT 147; cf. also *Kriterien der neuen Musik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften 16 (Musikalische Schriften I)*, 221-222. However, these situations cannot be distinct from the sensuous moment, thus from semblance in the initial, traditional meaning.

¹⁵ Cf. AT, 213.

as bearer of truth – is something made and produced, therefore “dominated” and inferior towards truth. This is the way to understand Adorno’s statement that “redemption through semblance is itself illusory” (AT, 107). This constitutes finally a dialectical relationship between the artwork’s sensuous being and the spirit’s nonexistence; both need the other in order to become truth *in the means* of the other.

Can this kind of truth become accessible to the perceiving subject? By pointing to the sensuous appearance of the artwork, Adorno aims primarily to a highlighting of the subject’s inevitable cognitive limits implied in the process of aesthetic experience. The reasons for this limitation lie in the partiality¹⁶ of the blinking truth, appearing during the artwork’s “shuddering apparition” (AT, 80). Wellmer aptly points to the “moment of blindness” towards the cognition of truth, inscribed in aesthetic experience and in the aesthetic image. Thus, artworks remain enigmas and the understanding of their truth-content requires philosophical reflection (AT, 128), states Adorno, that may unveil the complementary aspect of truth, the discursive-conceptual¹⁷. What could be the object of a philosophical reflection that focuses on an artwork?

Following Adorno’s statement, “The truth of discursive knowledge is unshrouded, and thus discursive knowledge does not have it; the knowledge that is art, has truth, but as something incommensurable with art” (AT, 126), Wellmer juxtaposes the “blindness of the immediateness of aesthetic experience”, as arising from lived perception of the artwork, to the “emptiness of philosophical thought”¹⁸. Actually, by stressing different features of the artwork, Adorno, provides further possibilities

¹⁶ WELLMER, *Wahrheit, Schein, Versöhnung*, 143.

¹⁷ *Ibidem* (my translation).

¹⁸ *Ibidem* (my translation).

beyond this fatal juxtaposition. By pointing namely to the unavoidable condition of its sensuous appearance, he has indeed not “the immediate existing artwork” (AT, 131) in mind. Thus, here, for the artwork’s ontological claim to truth “the issue is” its “content [*Gehalt*]” and not its ephemeral sensuous appearance and the implicit insufficiency of instantaneous aesthetic experience as opposed to discursive grasping of truth (AT, 131). The understanding of content – with an additional truth-indicator as truth-content – constitutes the culmination of what Adorno calls “aesthetic experience as objective understanding”. However, whereas comprehension of posited structures within Adorno’s very paradigm of artwork – the musical work – in other words, moments of reflection during lived experience¹⁹, can be achieved through a sole encounter with the work, the comprehension of its truth-content constitutes a long standing and complex process, beyond the reciprocity of “lived experience” and comprehension. By defining truth-content, among others²⁰, historically, Adorno provides a possibility for artworks to transcend their “posited” nature and semblance character, through “their methexis in history and the determinate critique that they exercise through their form” (AT, 133). History is factual and, insofar, objective, and truth-content of the artwork constitutes “unconscious writing of history” (AT, 191-192) through “correct [historically] consciousness” of the creator (AT, 191), sedimented in the artwork. Thus, history appears in the artwork as not made, crystallized in the truth-content. The understanding of the artwork’s truth-content “postulates” critique. Critique highlights

¹⁹ See above, note 9.

²⁰ Cf. J.M. BERNSTEIN, *The dead speaking of stones and stars*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, 157.

what the artworks say through the configuration of their elements in their historical relevance, correlation and overcoming; for instance, a new historical era affects their truth-content to the point that they may “decline” and “collapse” (AT, 193-194).

Truth-content, becoming historical as correct consciousness objectified in the artwork, tends also to highlight the artwork’s historicity, letting it “sink into irrelevance” (AT, 132), a fact that criticism brings into attention. Therefore, Adorno’s statement that “the historical development of works through critique and the philosophical development of their truth-content have a reciprocal relation” (AT, 128), means that the ultimate level in the interpretation of an artwork, the understanding of its truth-content “only” to be “achieved by philosophical reflection” (AT, 128), requires the understanding of the work’s “methexis in history” and historical development even until “irrelevance”. Thus, truth-content acquires a value of objectivity.

Through the objectivity of truth-content implied in the artwork and becoming subject for philosophical reflection, Adorno approaches his second task, the outlining of art’s methexis in truth *despite* its semblance character. His considerations on the truth-content could also be related to his consideration on artistic form, social content and on the language character of art; these categories, introduced by Adorno to interpret the artwork, point to an idea of intersubjectivity and social objectivity. In other words, they refer to sociological aspects of the relationship between art and solipsism, mentioned in the introduction. They also point to the truth-content’s concretization, which may clarify his statements on “The problem of solipsism” as related to art. As he states, art “carries out the critique of solipsism through the force of externalization in its own technique as the technique of objectivation. By virtue of its form transcends the impoverished entrapped subject” (AT,

260). The artwork's objectivation means, as such, otherness from the creative subject. However, this objectivation could just constitute a tautological self-projection, though, as mentioned above, it is very doubtful that subjective artistic intentions can remain intact from the immanent inner antagonisms governing the formation of an artwork and molded by the latter. Nevertheless, artistic form, supported by technique, can become the "locus of social content" (AT, 230). The social content becomes the artwork's subject (Stoff) and the "law" of the artistic form reifies and orders fissured elements of the empirical world. The artwork's truth-content depends on its opening to this content — Adorno's example is the ugliness and formal complexity ("inhuman construction": AT, 237) of Picasso's *Guernica*. In that way, art can externalize and reify its latent social content. Is this not just an assertion? Apart from the above outlined correlation between truth-content, objectivity and social content, why should the formal design of an artwork imply a social meaning, even latently? It seems that the real aesthetic addressee of this statement is "genuinely new art"; for the latter, "liberated" form becomes the "anathema to the status quo" thus implying the "political participation of the unpolitical" (AT, 255).

Respectively, the "individual who produces the artwork is an element of reality like others [...] not even decisive in the factual production" (AT, 167). By facing his work, in every correction and departure from the "primary impulse" (AT, 43) and intention, the artist works unconsciously as an agent of society. It is the invisible "social universal [...] watching him over his shoulder" (AT, 231). Insofar, the creative artistic individual remains an "intervening" factor, a "limiting value" (AT, 167), necessary for the "crystallization" of the artwork. In this context any individuation of the artwork which constitutes an emancipation from the creator finally doesn't imply the delusion

of an autarkic *l'art pour l'art*, but a reification of a *fait social*. The “social universal”, as sedimented collective essence, constitutes the language character of the artwork (cf AT, 167). Therefore, the subject who speaks this language is not a syntactical I but a We, once again paradigmatically demonstrated in music: polyphony, counterpoint and “harmonic depth dimension” constitute relicts of the penetration of the “We of the choric ritual” into techniques of Western Art Music (AT, 167). Thus, both, creator and artwork transcend their “impoverished” imprisonment. If this imprisonment constitutes an initial subjective illusion of autarky of creative forces towards the total formation of the artwork, insofar of a solipsistic standpoint, the artwork’s reification acquires “historico-philosophical truth of a solipsism that is untrue in-itself” (AT, 42).

As far as it concerns the second task and the second criterion for evaluation of art’s claim to truth –content, how can art have methexis in truth, apart from the historical and societal objectivity and concreteness of its truth-content? According to Adorno, art is paradoxical because it achieves “what is not made, the truth” through “making of particular works”, that is through objectivation of a specific work and not through “immediate vision” to an abstract, conceptual unity (AT, 131). The “refracted existence” of the “nonexistent” — spirit in the artwork, points to what the artwork cannot be in its pure Dasein as something made and, insofar, in its semblance character. Besides the illusory and semblance character of spirit towards the sphere of being according to his subversion of traditional Aesthetics, Adorno, following Hegel, also acknowledges the truth value of spirit; spirit’s truth is not semblance and illusion. Therefore, the artwork as something made, “has truth as semblance of the illusionless” (AT, 132) by allowing spirit appear in the sphere of being “before the eyes”. Through making of particular works, art

casts a view on truth, the unmade. According to Adorno, one of the most important merits of an artwork, crucial for its success as construction and bearer of meaning, is the coherence it displays through the support of technique. An artwork displays coherence, if its creator succeeds in mastering the resistance of material and the esoteric antagonisms of diffuse elements, thus making them appear as reconciled. Coherence *in* the artwork, becomes an aesthetic value, that makes it meaningful thus letting it appear as true. However, the elements of reality are not thus reconciled. The artwork demonstrates an ideal and illusory “displacement”, a reconciled “constellation” of the elements of reality. Once again, Adorno subverts traditional Aesthetics by claiming that it is reality that should actually imitate this displacement (AT, 132). Wellmer points here to two meanings of truth: the nominalistic truth of the particular artwork (T1) or what Adorno considers “the truth element of nominalism” (AT, 108) appearing as aesthetic coherence, and the general truth of art as loyal representation of the “multiplicity” – the “other” (AT, 131), reality constitutes (T2), identified, according to Adorno, with nature²¹. This conflicting multiplicity appears in art and insofar art is truth in representing it. But since reconciliation of reality is utopic, the truth of the aesthetic coherence of the particular work, supported by form and technique, is illusory, therefore semblance. To continue Wellmer’s distinction between these two kinds of truth and bring it in accordance with Adorno’s idea of “truth as semblance of the illusionless”, artworks point first through their mere existence (T2) and secondly through the demonstration of a reconciled constellation of the latter’s diffuse and antagonistic elements of reality (T1) to the possibility of the nonexisting and possible respectively. Thus the

²¹ WELLMER, *Wahrheit, Schein, Versöhnung*, 145.

truth of art attains a dialectical structure and the artwork an immanently antinomic one:

Art is true insofar as what speaks out of it –indeed, it itself– is conflicting and unreconciled, but this truth only becomes art’s own when it synthesizes what is fractured and thus makes its irreconcilability determinate. Paradoxically, art must testify to the unreconciled and at the same time envision its reconciliation (AT, 168).

Is there any ontological locus for both kinds of truth to merge together as “possibility of the nonexistent and possible”? Due to their semblance character towards the truth of spirit, artworks are endangered to appear as just depended from it and pure manifestations of longing (for truth). Apart from this ontological longing, the power of artworks arises from the objectivity of their truth-content through their methexis in history. This is the way to understand Adorno’s statement that “they would be powerless if they were no more than longing” (AT, 132). In fact, there is a “neediness, inscribed as a figure in the historically existing”, thus also in the *artwork* as historical product. That means, that the artwork’s neediness is an *immanent* and *objective* characteristic that manifests itself as need for change and fulfillment. Repeatedly, Adorno refers to this dimension of artworks and to the history of art as permanent process, not necessarily of “tranquil development”, but of improvement of what “remained unresolved” (AT, 19) in the old, paradigmatically demonstrated in his support and historically holistic view of “New Music”. But the question remains: how is it possible that an artwork, *as semblance and something made, can* express and bear an objective truth? From the objectivity and, thus, ontic autarky of neediness, Adorno returns to the idea of longing of the artworks. The object of that longing is “the reality of what is not” (AT, 132). This is the envisioning of a reconciliation of the irreconcilable in reality. Adorno adheres here to the platonic distinction between the

world of ideas and the world of sensuous being. Accordingly, the artwork's longing for truth is transformed to remembrance, the Platonic anamnesis of the world of ideas. Remembrance refers to a mode of being and not being; to the past, which constitutes a mode of *fulfilled* being (Adorno does not explicate it) that, however, does not *anymore* exist. Adorno considers the object of anamnesis as concretization of utopia without a betrayal in the sphere of existence; utopia namely, does not exist and according to Adorno's philosophical vocabulary, it remains semblance. At the same time, the object of anamnesis remains bound up with reality as cognitive *performance* of a subject, therefore his reference to Proust's *memoire involontaire* (based on external stimuli). By linking semblance to remembrance he can save the former as connected to reality and demonstrate a *privileged* locus for an unproven truth. And an unproven truth can be experienced individually in such a cognitive performance as anamnesis is, in other words, solipsistic. But this has to remain in the realm of the aesthetic. Because, as he states, "extra-aesthetically solipsism confuses aesthetic semblance with truth" (AT, 43).

This constitutes perhaps an additional guilt, art has to carry on.

IV. *Postscript*

Despite his critique, Adorno's emphasis on the subjective point of reference in art reveals Kantian influences. He deliberately separates Kant's statements by emphasizing "universality and implicit necessity" of the aesthetic judgment. Kant's efforts, to establish "a subjective mediated but objective aesthetics" are contradictory not due to his reference to concepts (i.e. universality and necessity) as criteria of aesthetic judgments but due to his reliance on their exclusivity and functionality in validating

objective judgment in the realm of the aesthetic. Actually, universality and necessity arise from an immanent and initial “belief” of the experiencing subject; this of having a “universal voice” that lays “claim to the agreement of everyone”. This kind of belief, constituting an important part of aesthetic experience, implies an initial solipsistic attitude. However, since it “requires agreement from everyone, as an instance of the rule”²² and, insofar, as premise of objective validation, the Kantian theory of aesthetic judgment confirms subjectivism, as *external* to the artwork, *topos*. The tangibility and objectivity of Adorno’s idea of aesthetic truth is, however, located in the artwork itself, especially in the phenomenal transformation of its latent historical-social content and in the ideal constellation of elements of reality, which he masterfully salvages as appearances of truth and concretized utopia. The initial, solipsistic beliefs of both, creator and spectator on their primary intentions and impressions respectively, may find a hopeless verification, thus revealing “most progressive consciousness”.

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