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Art's "double character" and its critical potential against total society in Adorno

Abstract

The paper analyzes the reciprocal mediation of art and society, to show how Adorno interprets the aesthetic as the last possibility of spontaneous and critical human expression within the reified world of advanced capitalism as dehumanizing "total society". Art, for Adorno, fits paradigmatically into the dialectic between participation to and divergence from the social totality, as it is marked by a "double character". On the one hand, art takes place in the material and empirical society, while, on the other, by virtue of its ineliminable reference to the "nonidentical", it maintains a marginal range of autonomy. Art can thus become immanent critique and, when not politicized and traced back to ideology, one of the last possible forms of opposition and resistance to the (social) existent.

Keywords

Double character of art, Immanent critique, Total society

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1. *Total society*

One of the aspects on which Adorno's *Aesthetic theory* insists the most, whether it is treated explicitly or implied in argumentation, is the ongoing mutual mediation of art and society. Firstly, I will sketch how the relationship between art and the socio-historical dimension is generally configured in Adorno's thought. Secondly, I will analyze in more detail how Adornian aesthetics interprets the role of art in the present world, with reference to some paradigmatic examples.

Without too much of an exaggeration, it can be said that, in a broad sense, all of Adorno's philosophy cannot be fully understood if one does not take into account the sociological component that almost always forms the background to his thought, even in the most strictly theoretical considerations. This sociological component is primarily to be understood as social critique. The very concepts of totality and universality, to which Adornian negative dialectics opposes fragmentarity and particularity, are never conceived of in abstraction from their social correlates.

Totality and universality, in particular, always refer back to what appears in Adorno's eyes as a "total society", especially in the contemporary world of advanced capitalism and reified consciousness, and then even more so in the aftermath of World War II. This total society, in fact, seems very close to being shaped as a new and insidious form of totalitarian system. It encompasses and subjugates to its domain, based on the now universal principle of exchange, all individuals, making them a homogeneous, indistinct, and defenseless mass, as well as all the relationships between them and all the aspects of their lives, heterodetermining them and nullifying their spontaneity.

Instead, the residuality of all that is partial, fragmentary, asystematic, "nonidentical" refers to the only (increasingly fleeting) hope of saving some elements of existence, in which resist those differences that the neutralizing power of the whole has not yet managed to reduce to the principle of invariance. For Adorno, to save the subsistence of these differences means, at the same time, to emphasize their immanent critical force, to prevent everything from being swallowed up by the prevailing process of rationalization, and thus by the disenchanted world to which this process inevitably leads.

2. Double character

Art, in the Adornian perspective, fits paradigmatically into this dialectic between participation to and divergence from the social totality/total society and, indeed, is perhaps one of its best representations. On the one hand, works of art take place in society and can never completely detach themselves from the socio-historical dynamics that run through it and determine its essential characters, whether they go along with them or, on the contrary, contribute to disrupt them. On the other hand, by virtue of their ineliminable reference to the nonidentical, works of art manage to maintain their own margin of autonomy from absolute identity with the present reality.

Art assumes, thus, the traits of immanent critique and, when not politicized and traced back to the dominant ideology, comes to represent for Adorno one of the last forms of opposition left to humans in the completely administered world. At the heart of Adornian aesthetic theory lies, in fact, the conviction that, in a reality in which life itself is damaged, to the point that truly living seems almost impossible¹, art can still hold (often without even having the awareness or the intention) a chance to resist its distortions and to glimpse, albeit on an opaque and almost imperceptible horizon, its future redemption.

The Adornian aversion to politically committed art is indeed quite strong. The 1962 essay *Commitment* is unequivocal on this point. Adorno's idea, in extreme synthesis, is that political commitment reduces art to an ideological instrument, a mean of persuasion, and a propagandistic vehicle, very easily manipulated by the social dynamics of domination. Art thus ends up employing, in the construction of the works themselves, pre-

¹ Emblematic for Adorno is the epigram by the Austrian writer Ferdinand Kürnberger "Life does not live", also chosen as the motto of the first part of *Minima moralia* (Adorno 2005: 19). The theme of life that no longer lives because it has been transformed, in the reified world, into a rationalized, schematic, predetermined, blocked, and therefore unlivable life, also finds interesting variations in *Aesthetic theory*, where Adorno associates it, for instance, with the interpretation of the artistic phenomena of impressionism and cubism: "What is qualitatively new in cubism is that, whereas impressionism undertook to awaken and salvage a life that was becoming numb in the commodity world by the strength of its own dynamic, cubism despaired of any such possibility and accepted the heteronomous geometrization of the world as its new law, as its own order, and thus made itself the guarantor of the objectivity of aesthetic experience. Historically, cubism anticipated something real, the aerial photographs of bombed-out cities during World War II. It was through cubism that art for the first time documented that life no longer lives" (Adorno 1997: 301).

fabricated messages and ideas that positively conform to the existent, rather than negatively resisting it, to the point where, eventually, "political flaws become artistic flaws, and vice versa" (Adorno 2019a: 356).

In Adorno's view, only art that is able to renounce the very idea of commitment is truly "committed", since "art is not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather of resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings". As soon as artworks become politicized, "present decisions to be made and make those decisions their criteria, the choices become interchangeable" (Adorno 2019a: 351) and commitment shifts to the political opinion of the artists or those on their behalf (on commitment see also Adorno 1997: 246).

The dialectic enclosed in the interplay of art and society, which simultaneously binds and disassociates them, determines what Adorno in *Aesthetic theory* defines and describes several times as the *Doppelcharakter der Kunst*: "The double character of art – something that severs itself from empirical reality and thereby from society's functional context and yet is at the same time part of empirical reality and society's functional context – is directly apparent in the aesthetic phenomena, which are both aesthetic and *faits sociaux*" (Adorno 1997: 252).

On the one hand, the immanent dynamic of aesthetic phenomena causes them to acquire meaning as autonomous facts, in themselves independent from the empirical social reality. On the other hand, it simultaneously causes them to be social facts, in all respects intrinsically embedded in society, from the moment of production to the moment of fruition, and then up to the moment of criticism, as well as strictly dependent on historical factors in their multiple facets. Therefore, argues Adorno, "although the demarcation line between art and the empirical must not be effaced", in their relationship with the surrounding world "artworks nevertheless have a life *sui generis*", which "is not just their external fate" (Adorno 1997: 4).

3. Social fact

That an artistic fact cannot but be a social fact is for Adorno a fundamental point. Indeed, the very existence of an artistic fact in the world always depends on the mediation of the empirical life that takes place in it. Empirical life, in turn, is mostly determined, or at least always mediated, by the existing social reality and the social relations that shape it.

That art is something socially mediated is, in fact, so constitutive of its essence that, according to Adorno, "the immanence of society in the artwork is the essential social relation of art, not the immanence of art in society" (Adorno 1997: 232). This means that the relationship of art and the world consists first and foremost in the fact that the latter enters into the former, rather than the opposite.

Works of art already contain, collected and sedimented within themselves, the external reality, the essence of the empirical life of the world to which they belong, even before they concretely become part of it. Hence, for Adorno, the undeniable historical value of art. Since world's actual reality is sedimented in it, "history is the content of artworks", so that to enter into relation to them, and to analyze them in their depth, "means no less than to become conscious of the history immanently sedimented in them" (Adorno 1997: 85).

As already grasped by Hegel, since history and society also belong to the same unitary dimension, which accounts for the distinctive features of every era, likewise for Adorno, in the general historical constellation of art and reality, "the truth content of artworks [...] is indeed their social truth" (Adorno 1997: 227).

In Adorno's dialectical conception of art, however, the way in which society penetrates the content of the work is quite peculiar. In attempting to describe it, in *Aesthetic theory* Adorno let sparsely emerge the idea that social reality can become part of art only in an extremely mediated way, as if it were completely transfigured by the art form itself.

For Adorno the true work of art is never a literal and immediate representation, a faithful and realistic reproduction of the reality sedimented in it. Rather, it is structured as a complex composite of a broad series of mediations and transformations, which in turn participate in the construction and the internal configuration of the work itself, determining together both its form and its content.

This is precisely why the work of art is thought by Adorno as an enigmatic constellation. The solution of the enigma, through which the content of truth unfolds, is never clearly written in the work and is never unambiguous. Rather, it transpires from the different configuration, always open to new rearrangements, of everything of which the constellation itself is composed.

The true work of art does not speak a denotative and immediately comprehensible language. Rather, it expresses itself through a ciphered code, in which nothing is obvious, and appears as a sort of "rebus", in which every image is an allegorical trace of something that is never shown in its clear

evidence and whose reading depends on the arrangement of all the elements at play in the overall composition. Social content, as well as whatever else is involved in the constellation of an artwork, "penetrates to its core, though not literally, but rather in a modified, fragmentary, and shadowy fashion" (Adorno 1997: 310).

Moreover, according to Adorno, this is the reason for that sense of the indeterminate that we always perceive when we encounter great art. This is, in other words, "the true affinity of artworks to dreams" (Adorno 1997: 310), in which everything is opaque, blurred, and intermingled with everything else, in which everything happens without rational logic, in which any attempt of understanding requires, indeed, a work of interpretation and decipherment.

4. *Autonomy*

Precisely because true art is never an immediate reproduction of social reality, it somehow manages to make itself autonomous from it. In spite of its essential bind to society, in fact, art is likewise capable of separating itself from the empirical reality and of disentangling itself from the social chain that regulates all relations between things and humans. Its connection with the external world consists, thus, in this particular form of independence within dependence. This duplicity allows art to always maintain a margin of autonomy from the social totality, while, in fact, participating in it. To put it with an oxymoronic formula, which nevertheless sums up very well its double character, "art is the social antithesis of society" (Adorno 1997: 8).

This double character of art clearly takes on even more significance if the empirical reality consists of an authoritarian society, in which the possibility of diverging from the principles that govern it is all but to be taken for granted. According to Adorno, in fact, the social tendency in the present world is that of a prevailing totality, whose uncontested hypertrophy threatens to nullify all differences and, by endlessly self-perpetuating, to subjugate every individual to its own domination. In other words, advanced capitalist society ends up corresponding precisely with that totality which, contrary to the Hegelian idea that "the true is the whole", is untrue at the very moment it claims to affirm its own homogeneous and total truth by mutilating the heterogeneous existence of the parts.

Such a social totality represents for the intransigence of Adornian philosophy the primary target of critical thinking, that is, of that conduct which

aims to do justice to the real, and thereby to truth itself. The importance that its double character confers to art appears now clear. By bearing mediated within itself the sediment of heteronomous society, but at the same time keeping itself autonomous from it, so as not to fall completely into its system, throughout this unique and peculiar agility that art possesses, it becomes the best example of the only kind of still potentially effective critique, i.e. immanent critique. This, in the world's condition of despair, is the only one that allows hope for the possibility of contrasting the all-pervasive ideology of the existing, without being absorbed by it.

Art, in short, "becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art" (Adorno 1997: 225). By constituting itself as something that happens in society and at the same time escapes its heteronomous and brutal logics, "by crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful', it criticizes society by merely existing" (Adorno 1997: 225-6). Art thus becomes a denunciation of the very brutality in which it is forced to exist. In the present world, "art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society" (Adorno 1997: 226).

5. *Immanent critique*

For Adorno, what is peculiar about the dialectic operating in the double character of art is the fact that, embedded in artworks, lies the possibility of unmasking society's fractures, antagonisms and damaged relationships, simply by representing them and making them visible – especially in the eyes of those who have become bewitched by the dominant ideology. If art maintains itself properly autonomous and "refrain[s] from adaptation to the market", it then "involuntarily becomes an attack" (Adorno 2019a: 359), without having to configure itself as such even before constructing itself as an artwork.

In fact, by virtue of its double character, art's critical power is intrinsic to it and does not need to be coercively instilled in it from the artist or whoever else. According to Adorno, autonomous works "explode art from the inside, whereas proclaimed commitment only subjugates art from the outside, hence only illusorily". Moreover, autonomous works truly induce us to that "change in attitude that committed works only demand" (Adorno 2019a: 360).

The dialectical tension that art keeps alive finds, thus, its fundamental socio-historical correlate in the tension with which the reality of the un-

reconciled world is permeated: "The basic levels of experience that motivate art are related to those of the objective world from which they recoil. The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society" (Adorno 1997: 6).

For Adorno this also means that artworks express the truth, because, by entering into a relationship with the world, they uncover and communicate its un-truth, understood by the philosopher of negative dialectics as un-reconciliation. That is, artworks testify and, at the same time, denounce the untruth inherent in the illusion of the actual and present realization of a true world, in itself reconciled and right. Illusion, this, which today's society seems to assume as universal principle, trying to propagandize it, while concealing its very illusory character. True artworks, on the contrary, highlight the absence in present reality of that kind of world. Thus, "their own tension is binding in relation to the tension external to them" (Adorno 1997: 5) and gives us back *ex negativo* a truthful image of the existent.

In a nutshell, autonomy of art never means its absolute separation from reality. Firstly, because it is from reality that art draws its materials. Then, because whatever configuration art takes, this will always inevitably be mediated by the configuration of the social totality within which the artwork is shaped. Finally, because that of art is, as argued, an immanent critique: only by confronting *vis-à-vis* reality, art can effectively critique its contradictions.

To completely separate from society would mean, instead, to leave reality totally unchanged. In this sense, art would lock itself up in an ivory tower, detached from reality, and critique would end up in fruitless snobbery and conservative defense of an elitist and exclusive culture, disconnected from society – and therefore devoid of the meaning that art and culture in general should, rather, have.

Art that wants to be autonomous and not degenerate into mere social fact must, therefore, take care not to hypostatize its own critical attitude. Rather, it must always remain dynamic and dialectical: participating in society, but without adapting to it; penetrating reality, but in order to criticize it from the inside. Only in not allowing itself to be absorbed and not perverting itself into acquiescence and apology of the existent, consists, for Adorno, the critical power of true art.

However, the fact that art is intrinsically intertwined with prevailing social relations, brings the significant risk that it submits to them, turning from critique of society into functional reproduction of society. On the

one hand, "artworks are able to appropriate their heterogeneous element, their entwinement with society, because they are themselves always at the same time something social". Nonetheless, on the other hand, "art's autonomy, wrested painfully from society as well as socially derived in itself, has the potential of reversing into heteronomy" (Adorno 1997: 238). Potential that, in today's society, where everything seems to be regulated by the principle of exchange, appears increasingly real.

In particular, according to Adorno, in the age of technological reproducibility of art, this happens when the latter is perverted into a commodity in order to respond to the logic of advanced capitalism and the new global devotion to consumerism. In the reified world, true art remains only that which manages to escape total commodification and become representative "of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity" (Adorno 1997: 227).

Thus, in total society, a form of true art and a form of untrue "pseudo-art" coexist. The latter is what in Adornian philosophy goes under the name of "culture industry" and which owes its character of untruth to its being an organized product and accomplice of the untrue unreconciled society. The former, on the contrary, corresponds mainly to what Adorno defines in *Aesthetic theory* as "black art", whose character of truth lies in being a reveal and a critique of the illusion of living a colorful life. I will, then, elaborate on these two concepts.

6. *Illusion in technicolor*

In the critical and certainly not optimistic view of Adornian philosophy, today's society, determined by the myth of capital, is characterized by increasing processes of general instrumentalization, reification and standardization of all things. Under all these processes, as well as that of the fetishization of commodity, unfortunately falls art as well. In the age of advanced capitalism, in fact, it is quite evident how much even art is being integrally introjected by the world of mass production and converted into a mere commodity. Such conversion is where the roots of the phenomenon of the so-called culture industry, more and more extreme and widespread in the Western world, are to be found.

That of culture industry is a complex issue, at once aesthetic and social, and widely debated by scholars. Adorno addresses it philosophically in a number of short essays, especially in relation to music critique, but perhaps the most comprehensive and surely best-known elaboration on

this topic is the chapter explicitly dedicated to it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. To go into the details of the question would require a paper of its own. I will here highlight only a few key points, so as to focus on the aspects that, according to Adorno, make culture industry a paradigmatic example in the present world of untrue or pseudo-art.

In a broad outline, culture industry can be described as the process whereby the industry, governed by the strict principle of profit and devoted to the pervasive cult of entertainment, turns what used to be the products of culture into nothing but a proper business. Artistic creations, within this process, lose in authenticity and autonomy in proportion to their commodification, that is, to their progressive metamorphosis into consumable goods. The experience of such objects has nothing left of the active and enriching *Bildung* which was once typical of art. Rather, it is reduced to passive enjoyment, if not even to effortless adoration of glossy and glittering images, which serve as advertisement and apology of the very same total society that heteronomously determines them.

Culture industry means, from the point of view of production, the reification and commodification of art and, simultaneously, from the point of view of fruition, the neutralization of humans' consciousness and their distraction from the real problems that affect them. It is thus a manifest epiphenomenon, as well as a perfect case study, of the new forms of administration and domination that characterize the mechanisms of social oppression in the contemporary world, which are all the more insidious and obscure the more they proliferate.

In fact, culture industry is untrue art precisely because it does not possess the double character that for Adorno is the essential property of true art. In other words, by perverting itself into a commercial product heteronomously directed by the market, art becomes totally unbalanced on the side of its dependence on the predominant social logics, from which it no longer has any autonomy.

Society, in this case, introduces itself into the products of the culture industry not as an opaque and mediated element, but entirely and immediately, determining a priori any of its aspects. These pseudo-cultural commodities actually have a predetermined effect on the subjects who are to consume them and in general on the gigantic industrial machine that controls their production and circulation.

In this sense, the products of the culture industry are a kind of artificial and socially administered parody of true artistic facts, reduced to mere social facts, quantitatively integrated and qualitatively reshaped by total society. The universal reification of the world, in this way, "integrates art

into empirical reality as a synthetic dream and excludes reflection on art as well as the reflection immanent to art" (Adorno 1997: 312).

Moreover, according to Adorno, "the perpetuation of existing society is incompatible with consciousness of itself", because the latter would reveal the concealed horror of the former. Consequently, "art is punished for every trace of such consciousness" and "ideology – false consciousness – is socially necessary" to neutralize the critical and subversive power of true art. This is achieved through its standardization, which nullifies all possible elements of divergence from identity and totality, depriving the isolated moments of artistic works of their traits of insubordination.

More specifically, the untruth of pseudo-artistic phenomena, widespread in the society of consumerism, consists in the fact that they do not give any justice to the nonidentical, to the particular, to individual differences, as true art does by its very essence. On the exact opposite, they are only functional in bringing any residual partiality back to the identity with the whole, to the universal that has its own law in profit, to the invariance that mortifies originality. In fact, every "outsider" is condemned to failure, and everything ends up getting standardized according to one and the same model, determined at will.

If they become commodities of consumption, entertainment, and diversion from the inhumanity of the human in the reified world, aesthetic-artistic phenomena lose their double character. And, with it, they lose their critical power, their truth, their connection with the nonidentical, in a word, their very essence. We witness, in short, the "deaestheticization of art" (see Adorno 1997: 16 ff.). Whereas true art should unveil the true brutality of the real, the products of culture industry veil it behind shimmering advertising and images, in which is depicted a happy life that, as Adorno often notes, everyone believes they can live, but no one is actually living.

In this sense, "those who have been duped by the culture industry and are eager for its commodities were never familiar with art: They are therefore able to perceive art's inadequacy to the present life process of society – though not society's own untruth – more unobstructedly than do those who still remember what an artwork once was". In a never-ending vicious cycle, they not only suffer, but also "push for the deaestheticization of art" (Adorno 1997: 16).

The autonomy of art, for Adorno, has to do with its striving for the other and the further, as if true art possessed a yearning for what could be different and better, yet has no actual existence. In the system of monopolistic capitalism, all this is reduced to mere commercial gimmick, aimed at

the calculated, schematic and rigid construction of products that preserve nothing of the free spontaneity of artistic creation and true aesthetic experience. These products recognize the law of being-for-other only as the exchange principle.

Thus, says Adorno, "nothing remains of the autonomy of art – that artworks should be considered better than they consider themselves to be arouses indignation in culture customers – other than the fetish character of the commodity" and "what is consumed is the abstract being-for-other of the cultural commodities, though without their actually being for others" (Adorno 1997: 17).

7. Splendor in darkness

Considering all of the above, Adorno's aesthetic theory thus questions how art, in the total commodification and deaestheticization that affects it, can maintain its character of social antithesis to society, without falling back into ideology. In today's reality, dominated by the indefinite repetition of the same prefabricated models, which true art can still survive? In a paragraph in *Aesthetic theory* entitled *Black as an Ideal* Adorno argues that "to survive reality at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality". Therefore, whereas "much contemporary production [...] childishly delights in color", "radical art today is synonymous with dark art" and "its primary color is black" (Adorno 1997: 39).

Adorno emphasizes that no matter how much the culture industry attempts to portray today's society as a paradise on Earth, in reality the world administered by instrumental reason is exponentially progressing in its metamorphosis into a new (but no less brutal) form of barbarism. To counter this seemingly unstoppable social trend, one requires an art that is capable of disentangling itself from the patterns imposed by it. Such, according to the critical thinker, can only be that art which exaggerates the deformity of the world in order to witness and denounce it. For this very reason, art itself must become deformed, black, ugly, absurd, incomprehensible and senseless.

In particular, for Adorno, art today should have as its primary concern to embody freedom within unfreedom by its simple existence. This is possible only if art is capable of expressing despair, turning itself dark and despairing, but at the same time associating with this despair a promise of happiness – and the hope of keeping this promise. Art, in other words,

must not indulge in darkness, as if this were the ultimate reality to be resigned to. In fact, "black art bears features that would, if they were definitive, set their seal on historical despair", but "to the extent that change is always still possible they too may be ephemeral" (Adorno 1997: 40).

On the one hand, the work of art bears within itself the trace of the violence and horror in which the mutilated and damaged life of contemporary humanity is consumed. On the other hand, through this trace, it also gives a glimpse of the possibility of a different reality. Naïve colorful and joyful art falls, instead, into kitsch, which for Adorno is one of the best examples of untrue art. Kitsch, in fact, is "the beautiful as the ugly, taboo in the name of that very beauty that it once was and that it now contradicts in the absence of its own opposite" (Adorno 1997: 47-8). Kitsch, so to say, sugarcoats reality to conceal its bitterness.

Serious art, on the contrary, incorporates suffering into its content of truth without, however, validating it. For this reason, at least in the force with which it must stress the unreconciled contradictions of the real, "seriousness should be demanded of any work of art. As something that has escaped from reality and is nevertheless permeated with it, art vibrates between this seriousness and lightheartedness. It is this tension that constitutes art" (Adorno 2019b: 499).

For Adorno, instances of true art in this sense are, for example, twelve-tone music and the literature of the absurd. Twelve-tone music, in the compositions of Schönberg, Berg and Webern, expresses the anxiety, solitude and discomfort of contemporary individuals through musical dissonances and disharmonies. These, by reflecting the dissonant and disharmonious society, remind to the listeners, most often distracted by the cheerful and standardized rhythm of the latest radio hit, the alienating feeling of not being able to feel at home in the world.

The literature of the absurd, especially in Kafka's novels and Beckett's theatre, produces works that are "as crepuscularly grey as after sunset and the end of the world" (Adorno 1997: 81), that seem senseless, and that are frequently labeled as incomprehensible and/or enigmatic. These thus make a ruthless portrayal of the increasingly extreme absurdity of the world, the incomprehensibility of existence, the meaninglessness of relationships between individuals, the incommunicability of language, and the absolute powerlessness of the single agent within the a priori determined totality.

In Adorno's view, this kind of art contains the possibility of opening the eyes of those who experience it on reality. These artworks represent reality indirectly, encapsulate it in its own formal configuration, and exagger-

ate its negativity, without thereby adapting to it or approving it. In this way, a kind of longing and yearning desire – a *Sehnsucht* – for a different reality is awakened in those who are subjugated by the prevailing reality.

With Adorno's words: "There is more joy in dissonance than in consonance [...]. The caustic discordant moment, dynamically honed, is differentiated in itself as well as from the affirmative and becomes alluring; and this allure, scarcely less than revulsion for the imbecility of positive thinking draws modern art into a no-man's-land that is the plenipotentiary of a livable world" (Adorno 1997: 40). In this no-man's-land is hidden the cipher of a real and effective reconciliation, that would be true in the proper sense.

The discordant in art assumes, then, a whole new meaning: now only "in the absorption of the ugly, beauty is strong enough to expand itself by its own opposite" (Adorno 1997: 273). Think also of the abstract or conceptual works of the most recent artistic production, in front of which our first reaction is often to find nothing beautiful and to fail to grasp their meaning.

To a certain degree, art must be ugly and meaningless because only by incorporating ugliness and meaninglessness into its own structure can it reveal their actual existence, to which it opposes. Art becomes thereby a materialistic immanent critique: "In the penchant of modern art for the nauseating and physically revolting – in objecting to which the apologists of the status quo can think of nothing more substantial than that the world is ugly enough as it is and art therefore should be responsible for idle beauty – the critical material motif shows through: In its autonomous forms art decries domination, even that which has been sublimated as a spiritual principle and stands witness for what domination represses and disavows" (Adorno 1997: 49).

In conclusion, for Adorno the fact that true art makes ugliness explicit does not at all mean that it renounces beauty. Rather, addressing what is rejected and repressed, true art deplores the illusion of a beauty that may even be reassuring, but remains nonetheless fictional, artificial, conventional, untrue. In this way, artworks bear in absence the key to a virtual true beauty, perhaps currently intangible, yet not condemned to ultimate impossibility.

By welcoming the (social) existent into their own constellation, and thanks to their dialectical double character, artworks become asymptotic expressions of the not-yet-existing. In their dark and desolate negativity, "artworks make a promise" (Adorno 1997: 135). As Adorno writes in one of *Aesthetic theory's Paralipomena*: "Aesthetic splendor is not just affirma-

tive ideology; it is also the reflected glimmer of life free of oppression: In its defiance of ruin it takes the side of hope. Splendor is not only the cheap tricks of the culture industry. The higher the quality of a work, the greater its brilliance, and this is most strikingly the case in the instance of those grey-on-grey works of modernism that eclipse Hollywood's technicolor" (Adorno 1997: 296-7). The ugliest of artworks could, then, paradoxically, be the truest and most splendid.

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