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978-1-107-12159-1 - Adorno's Modernism: Art, Experience, and Catastrophe

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ADORNO'S MODERNISM

Theodor W. Adorno's aesthetics has dominated discussions about art and aesthetic modernism since World War II, and continues to inform contemporary theorizing. Situating Adorno's aesthetic theory in the context of post-Kantian European philosophy, Espen Hammer explores Adorno's critical view of art as engaged in reconsidering fundamental features of our relation to nature and reality. His book is structured around what Adorno regarded as the contemporary aesthetician's overarching task: to achieve a vision of the fate of art in the modern world, while demonstrating its unique cognitive potential. Hammer offers a lively examination of Adorno's work through the central problem of what full human self-actualization would require, and also discusses the wider philosophical significance of aesthetic modernism. This book will be a valuable resource for scholars and students of social philosophy, art, and aesthetics.

ESPEN HAMMER is Professor of Philosophy at Temple University, Philadelphia. He has published many essays and books, including *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (2002), *Adorno and the Political* (2006), *Philosophy and Temporality from Kant to Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 2011), and *The Routledge Handbook of the Frankfurt School* (co-edited with Axel Honneth and Peter Gordon, forthcoming, 2016), and is the editor of *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives* (2007).

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Preface

In the first two or three decades after World War II, as intellectuals were struggling to come to terms with what had happened and assess the cultural and political situation in Europe, Theodor W. Adorno became a towering figure in German philosophy and aesthetics. Like his colleagues in the Frankfurt School, Adorno argued that the catastrophe of the Nazi years represented a historical caesura: from now on, it was thought, it was impossible to just continue, as though the collapse of civilization were a limited national aberration allowing some kind of eventual return to normalcy. There was a sense that *everything* had to be radically rethought – philosophy, politics, codes of behavior, as well as art and culture in the widest sense. Adorno famously gave expression to this sentiment when, in 1951, he stated that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.¹ In the high modernism of artists like Schönberg and Beckett, he found models for how art could nevertheless respond to this predicament, and Adorno's approach became emblematic of the period and came to dominate aesthetic reflection in Europe at least until the 1980s.

In the 1980s, well over a decade after his death, Adorno's reputation as a cultural icon, a public voice of conscience of the kind that Jean-Paul Sartre had been in France, started to wane, and with the rise of postconceptual art and postmodern theory, his modernist commitments grounded in complicated dialogues with Kant and Hegel began to seem less relevant. During the same period, Jürgen Habermas made a big impact with his communication-theoretic reformulation of the foundations of Critical Theory. According to Habermas, while Adorno's thinking had been of tremendous significance for the postwar generation, he had failed to take the required step beyond the so-called philosophy of consciousness and, especially in his aesthetics, had been flirting with mysticism. In the German

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 34.

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context, attempts were made, for example by Albrecht Wellmer, to mediate between Adorno and Habermas.² Wellmer's hypothesis was that many of Adorno's intuitions could be preserved if formulated in different philosophical terms. However, exactly how much of Adorno's aesthetics would be left if transposed to a Habermasian, communication-theoretic register was never made entirely clear.

Over the last three decades or so, an increasing number of interpretations have appeared in English that treat Adorno not simply as a cultural critic but also as providing an actual option for philosophy more broadly considered. Some of this work has been influenced by Habermas's ideas. Other work, such as that of Fredric Jameson, has focused on Adorno's Marxist commitments and tried to reclaim his legacy for the analysis of late capitalist culture.³ However, much of the most interesting reception has taken developments in Anglo-American analytic philosophy into account, interpreting Adorno in dialogue with figures such as Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom, and John McDowell.

In the early phase of the Anglo-American reception, the anthropology and the critique of civilization dominated the interpretations. Then, during the years of debate with the Habermasian paradigm, Adorno's views of rationality and representation became central. There have certainly been pioneering attempts at reconstructing the aesthetics as well. In the early 1990s, responding to recent debates in Continental aesthetics, Jay Bernstein and Lambert Zuidervaat each produced important work dealing with central and systematic aspects of Adorno's aesthetic edifice.⁴ Since then, however, the reception of the aesthetics – which in terms of sheer volume dominates Adorno's output – has mainly taken place in the form of articles.⁵ Overall, the aesthetics may well be the least explored part of his writings. Why this is the case is not clear. However, a likely reason may be that, in the 1970s, the high modernist tradition with which Adorno identified came fairly abruptly to a de facto end as a dominant cultural form. While many artists and artistic trends have in various ways

² Albrecht Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity," in *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 1–35.

³ Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno; or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1996).

⁴ J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); Lambert Zuidervaat, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1991).

⁵ For a noteworthy exception, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2013).

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continued the modernist legacy, the high modernist attention to aesthetic quality and detail has had to compete with a large number of conceptual and postconceptual art-practices.

My aim here is not to discuss contemporary art. Like Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, Adorno is one of the great classics of the European tradition of philosophical aesthetics. With that tradition as my primary context, I want to understand the philosophical implications of Adorno's aesthetics. In particular, I seek to locate his discussion of art within the post-Kantian framework of understanding the nature and prospects of human freedom. However, I also explore the nature of aesthetic modernism – its fundamental claims and commitments, its social and cultural conditions – as it grew out of the post-Kantian tradition. Although the book largely proceeds historically, providing an interpretive reconstruction of Adorno's aesthetics as it emerges in response especially to Kant and Hegel, it is not primarily intended as a historical contribution. Its overall aim is to demonstrate that this is a perfectly "live option," combining, with an almost overwhelming degree of articulation and finesse, a critical account of modern social systems with a philosophically acute and uniquely sensitive approach to modernist art.

Reading Clement Greenberg, the leading American advocate of abstract expressionism and modern art in general, one might think that the achievement of modernist art is purely aesthetic. However, as many post-Kantian thinkers have emphasized, it is also philosophical, albeit not in a straightforward "discursive" sense. Via my reading of Adorno, I hope to formulate an account of how art, precisely in its period of radical doubt and self-reflection, cultivated powers of expression that not only supplemented philosophy as traditionally understood but staked out a sense of freedom and responsiveness going beyond that of everyday existence. The stakes, in other words, that preoccupied these European thinkers and that I view through the lens of Adorno's aesthetics, could hardly be higher. Ultimately, for Adorno, the question modernism raises is whether a meaningful social practice is conceivable. In the demanding Hegelian sense of combining freedom with existential and social meaning, art, he thinks, can be assigned a crucial place in the modern project.

Adorno conceives of serious art as a critical endeavor. He believes that the social catastrophes of the twentieth century have made it impossible to conceive of art merely in terms of its capacity to elicit aesthetic pleasure. However, he tends to be skeptical of art that directly moralizes or

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offers social comment. As in Schiller, art is supposed to play a more fundamental role, one in which reason itself is put under scrutiny. In order to reconstruct such a project, it becomes necessary to understand what Adorno means by reason, how art can critique reason, how art attains the authority to conduct such a critique, what the fate of art in modernity is, and what the nature of aesthetic experience might be. The chapters in this book largely follow this overall trajectory.

Today, some of Adorno's most well-known claims are hard to defend. His analysis of the culture industry, while extremely influential and largely insightful, lacks nuance and threatens unduly to flatten the cultural landscape. His appeal to domination (*Herrschaft*) as an explanatory principle may have been over-emphasized. In the age of neo-liberal hyper-individualism, his theory of the totally administered society (*total-verwaltete Gesellschaft*) seems like something of an anachronism. His ideological analyses of subjectivity and metaphysics in Kant and Hegel should be read with a great deal of caution. His account of language as some sort of classificatory matrix, incapable of responding adequately to particularity, is based on hopelessly rationalistic premises. He should have been more generous towards neo-avant-garde movements and their attempt to make art available for direct political protest, and also, I think, been more forthcoming towards the 1968 student demonstrators. And, yes, he may not have understood jazz very well.

Yet his central claims about art are as powerful as any. He was right in questioning art's *raison d'être* in a world not only of progress but of breathtaking suffering and barbarism as well. His often extreme formulations make sense in light of his intense engagement both with art and society in a time of crisis. As the culture of aesthetic modernism is now being revisited and discussed by leading philosophers and art historians such as Robert Pippin, Michael Fried, and T. J. Clark, it is time to view this culture from the vantage-point of a contemporary reconstruction of Adorno's work.⁶ Nothing less is the aim of this book.

I am indebted to a number of people for help and encouragement along the way. The Aesthetics Reading Group in Philadelphia, which over the years has included Elisabeth Camp, Noël Carroll, John Carvalho, Richard Eldridge, Susan Feagin, and Paul Guyer has stimulated my thinking about

⁶ Robert Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

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aesthetics in a huge number of ways, and I am very grateful for our many discussions.

Material from this book has been presented on various occasions. I should like to thank Paul Grimstad, who organized an outstanding session on literary modernism at the American Comparative Literature Association's Annual Meeting at New York University in 2014. Sections have also been presented at the American Philosophical Association's Central Division Meeting in New Orleans in 2013, the American Comparative Literature Association's Annual Meeting at Brown University in 2012, the New School for Social Research in 2014, and University College Dublin in 2014, as well as the Inaugural Meeting of the American Association for Adorno Studies at Johns Hopkins University in 2012. The American Association for Adorno Studies has offered a number of remarkable occasions on which to discuss Adorno. Its founder, Martin Shuster, has been a great interlocutor, and so have Brian O'Connor, Fabian Freyenhagen, Alastair Morgan, Robert Kaufman, Max Pensky, Iain MacDonald, Henry Pickford, Deborah Cook, Lambert Zuidervaat, Roger Foster, and Gordon Finlayson. Another group with which I have had the privilege of being affiliated, and enjoyed regular meetings with, is composed of researchers related to the collaborative project *Ästhetische Erfahrung im Zeichen der Entgrenzung der Künste* at the Free University of Berlin. I should in particular like to mention Thomas Hilgers and Gertrud Koch.

My many excellent students at Temple University should be thanked. To single out any of them would be unfair. I would nevertheless like to mention Patrick Denehy, whose work on embodied cognition in my seminar on Merleau-Ponty and later in his dissertation has been particularly impressive. The fact of embodiment is of course central to Adorno's account of aesthetic experience.

A number of other people have influenced my thinking about Adorno and the modernist legacy. Ståle Finke has done so for as long as I can remember. Other people whose input has been invaluable include Karl Ameriks, Jay Bernstein, Richard Bernstein, Kari Brandtzæg, Hauke Brunkhorst, Stanley Cavell, Jeannette Christensen, Simon Critchley, Benjamin Crowe, Peter Dews, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Michael Fried, Markus Gabriel, John Gibson, Lydia Goehr, Elizabeth Goodstein, Peter Gordon, Frode Helland, Gunnar Hindrichs, Axel Honneth, Gregg Horowitz, Paul Kottman, Reginald Lilly, Christoph Menke, Joseph Margolis, Andrew Norris, Peter Osborne, Lara Ostaric, Terry Pinkard, Robert Pippin, Gerhard Richter, Tania Roy, Hans Ruin, Fred Rush, Eric

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Santner, Cecilia Sjöholm, Tore Slaatta, Jon-Ove Steihaug, Ingvild Torsen, Arne Johan Vetlesen, and Sven-Olav Wallenstein.

Last but not least I would like to thank my wife Kristin Gjesdal, another traveler in the sometimes murky waters of German philosophy, for her support and patience.