

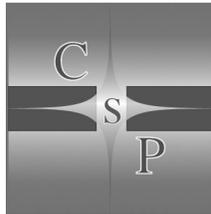
# Adorno's Aesthetics of Critique



# Adorno's Aesthetics of Critique

By

Shea Coulson



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Adorno's Aesthetics of Critique, by Shea Coulson

This book first published 2007 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2007 by Shea Coulson

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-84718-377-8, ISBN (13): 9781847183774

“The Only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with objects – this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.”

~Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Chapter One	
The Inversion of Objectivity: Kant and the Critique of Knowledge.....	16
Part I – Kant and the Primacy of the Object.....	17
Part II – The Aesthetic Inversion of Kant.....	31
Chapter Two	
The Suffering of Objects: History as Negative Knowledge .....	42
Part I – The Aestheticization of Suffering: Aesthetic Tradition in Kant and Hegel.....	46
Part II – The Negation of Knowledge: Adorno’s Critique of Hegel.....	66
Chapter Three	
Culture and the Remnants of Natural History .....	80
Part I – The Idea of Natural History .....	85
Part II – Remnants: Re-Reading the <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i> .....	101
Chapter Four	
Aesthetics’ Mirror: Art and Critique .....	109
Part I – A Critical Laughter: Art and The Irony of Culture Critiques.....	112
Part II – Art and Artworks: The Redemption of Natural History .....	132
Bibliography.....	144
Notes.....	150



## INTRODUCTION

When a theorist discusses society he or she is necessarily beginning in the middle of an interminable flood. Many great scholars have agonized about their relationship to the objects, structures, events, and peoples that they study, and this problematic relationship of thinkers to their objects has raised many concerns over the applicability of abstract knowledge to a world that largely seems to elude its grasp. Marx famously declared that thought was meant to change the world rather than explain it. While modern science seems to have moved in this direction, the demand for effective results has rendered the human and social sciences somewhat inert when confronting the growing crisis of disciplinary asceticism. This increasing agitation has largely become a problem of moulding method and content together in such a manner so as to expose or mend the gap between scholarship and the world it tries to understand. The very rigour and purpose of academic work in the humanities and social sciences is at stake in these debates.

Theodor Adorno, often characterized as an intellectual mandarin who was more concerned with what he saw as ‘authentic’ culture than with the realities of everyday life, saw the crisis of method and content with great alacrity. For Adorno, the abstraction of philosophy had to be rescued from its own demise as a hermetically sealed playground. Despite this stance, Adorno often reacted to early Marxist proletarianism and to the socialist student movements of the 1960’s in a curiously affected way, decrying such radical action as a betrayal of thinking. Adorno’s unusual position highlights a particularly fruitful fissure in the method and content debates that have filled the humanities and social sciences for decades, for he believed that thought itself is a form of action. This was not meant to imply that all thought is therefore action and that the distinction is null. Rather, Adorno was pointing towards his belief that certain kinds of thought are better equipped to articulate a new relationship to the material upon which it works than others. The difference between types of thought could be so intense that the traditional division between method and content no longer made sense to Adorno.

This book will explore the manner in which Adorno came to formulate his own unique understanding of the relationship between form and content in thought and how he used this new conception to come up with

radically new theories about knowledge, history, culture, art, and society. Despite the many interpretations of Adorno's work and the many attempts to provide answers to the method debates of the humanities and social sciences, this work seeks to approach the problem from a different perspective. Its primary focus is to examine precisely how Adorno went about producing his theories from the writings and objects that he meant to critique. Generally criticism is understood as a type of thinking that applies specific criteria to an object and judges whether that object meets those criteria. This is often opposed to scholarship, which is usually understood as the attempt to learn as much as possible about the inherent structures of the object under examination without altering them. The first includes a value judgment while the latter does not. Adorno believed this was a false dichotomy. Instead, he understood that all thought had an ideology, but that ideology alone was not sufficient for describing the inner workings of objects. Ideology, including the ideology of objective observation, is only possible insofar as it interacts with the objects it works upon. And it is this complex relationship between the thinker and what is thought that Adorno came to view as critique. This was and still is a fundamentally new understanding of this concept.

Critique, then, will provide the focus for this study. By tracing Adorno's development of this concept I hope to provide a new perspective to the method and content debates discussed above. However, Adorno was also a theorist and critic of society, and so this book will accordingly also reinvigorate the meaning of his critiques for contemporary society. Doing so will enact the very thesis that the book sets out to understand and will argue for the continued relevance of Theodor Adorno for contemporary life and scholarship.

Adorno spent much of his life studying music and developing an aesthetic theory to talk about his experiences. It is common practice to place his aesthetic theory alongside of his more philosophical and social theories, but the relationship between these different modes is still not well understood. For Adorno, aesthetics actually becomes a specific mode of thought rather than the branch of knowledge and theory that deals with artistic practice and experience. Working to understand the difference in perspective between art objects and regular objects, Adorno's aesthetics actually seeks to develop a kind of theory that would subsist within this difference. Aesthetics is neither limited to art nor is it limited to understanding a specific way of experiencing objects. Instead, aesthetics attempts to rediscover the difficulty of thinking about the world and tries to fashion a perspective that privileges neither thought nor the objects to be thought. As a particular mode of thinking, aesthetics approaches its

objects by finding where the structures of these objects suggest that they are more than they appear to be, and by entering these objects through the process with which they change themselves. Adorno came to understand this process as a kind of natural historical decay, and he believed that objects were so entwined with the thoughts about them that any structural change within the object would also manifest in the way that object was thought about. Accordingly, Adorno focuses his critiques on both abstract philosophies and methods as well as on material objects and manifestations of culture. It is often the case that Adorno scholars ignore one of these two dimensions and therefore miss the important dynamic upon which Adorno's work rests. This book will attempt to mend this too frequent oversight by examining just how the idea of the 'aesthetic' figures in Adorno's philosophical and social-theoretical texts. By focusing on the development of the aesthetic, I will attempt both a universal abstract reading and a focused particular reading of each part of Adorno's thought. Aesthetics articulates a new relationship between the universal and particular and accordingly refocuses the relationship between method and content. This refocusing could be called Adorno's aesthetic *mode*.

The general structure of the book will follow four themes. Theories of knowledge and knowledge acquisition had been an important part of German philosophy for hundreds of years prior to Adorno's birth, and continued to be highly studied during his life. Adorno focused his own critique of knowledge primarily through the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant, whom Adorno had studied since his youth. The second great philosophical influence on Adorno came in the form of the German Idealist G. W. F. Hegel, whose critiques of Kant and previous Idealist philosophy led him to develop a theory of dialectic that came to form the basis of Adorno's own investigations. For Adorno, Hegel was fundamental in opening the question of knowledge to the realm of history, and Adorno rigorously critiqued Hegel's dialectic in order to form his own ideas on this interaction. Midway through his career, Adorno became inclined towards a certain kind of Marxism. It is difficult to pinpoint Adorno's understanding of Marx because he was surrounded by numerous intellectuals who were all influenced by Marx's critiques of capitalism. However, it is clear that Adorno formulated much of his understanding of capitalist society and culture through his readings of both Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin, who both provided revised Marxist understandings of social structures. Additionally, throughout his life Adorno occupied himself with intense studies in music and art. Aesthetic philosophy and aesthetic experience were central to his life and a discussion of art or a specific artwork was never far away from any of his writings. Never one to

simplify, Adorno brought all of these influences together when thinking about problems, for he believed that thought could not isolate itself to singular disciplines, but demanded, in fact necessitated, influence in many facets of life. Thus the four themes of this book are the critiques of knowledge, history, culture, and art that came to form the central nexus of Adorno's writings. It is the interactions between these realms that bore such great fruit for Adorno's own unique mode of thinking, and it is in this central nexus that Adorno's aesthetics of critique finds its full development.

### **Adorno and his Context**

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno was born in Frankfurt on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 1903. His father, a German Jew, was a successful business man and Adorno had a privileged childhood, learning music and philosophy at a young age. The famous film theorist Siegfried Kracauer taught Adorno Kant once a week when he was a teenager, and was a major influence on Adorno's early intellectual development. Adorno's university education did not proceed entirely smoothly, for he was often disillusioned with the academic world. Nevertheless in 1924 he took his doctorate with the neo-Kantian Hans Cornelius, and later published the *Habilitation* on Kierkegaard that he took with Paul Tillich in 1933, after having difficulty with an earlier idea for his dissertation. By then he had already published over one hundred articles on music and had studied with the composer Alban Berg. It was through Berg that Adorno became acquainted with many members of the serialist school of music, including Arnold Schoenberg and his circle. These encounters would have a profound influence on Adorno's writings throughout his career, even though Schoenberg would later publicly decry Adorno and his theories.

In May 1931 Adorno delivered his inaugural lecture – “The Actuality of Philosophy” – as a *Privatdozent* of philosophy. This lecture was a formative moment for Adorno, who outlined the direction he would take for the next stage of his career. It was also at around this time that Adorno began more serious collaboration with the Frankfurt School of Social Research, headed by Max Horkheimer. This collaboration would eventually lead to the publication of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, perhaps the most famous work the Frankfurt School would ever produce.

With the rise of the Nazi party in Germany in the 1930's, the Frankfurt School, mostly comprised of German Jews, began to make preparations for its departure to the United States. Adorno, teaching in England at the time, would eventually join Max Horkheimer, Friedrich Pollock, et. al. in

the United States as a full fledged member of the Institute for Social Research. While in the US, Adorno participated in many empirical research projects, including one on the sociology of radio and one on the social characteristics of the 'authoritarian personality'. Adorno was often at odds with these empirical studies and the methods with which they were pursued, but during this period he developed an in-depth understanding of empirical research and of the American culture in which he was immersed. While it can easily be argued that as an émigré who largely remained in his own community of academics Adorno often held a skewed perspective on American culture, it cannot be disputed that this culture had a profound influence on his subsequent writings and would form the basis for much of his understanding of popular culture and his famous critiques of the "culture industry". After the Second World War, Adorno returned with Horkheimer to Germany in order to reestablish the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. It is telling that Adorno only returned to the United States once in order to fulfill an obligation, and returned to Germany soon after, never to set foot in the new world again. While in post-war Germany, Adorno was very active in publicly lecturing about rebuilding German life and culture and was a vehement critic of many political parties. He also stood his ground against what he saw as the reckless student activism of the 1960's, an act for which he gained the reputation as a theorist who had betrayed his principles. But, for Adorno these things were always far more complex than the caricatures that have been passed down in popular myth, and it would be hasty to accept these characterizations at face value. After gaining exemplary status and recognition as a German academic and leading member of the Frankfurt School for Social Research, and soon after directly confronting protesting students, Adorno died of a heart attack in 1969.<sup>1</sup>

Adorno lived a complex and involved existence, and it is clear that his theories echoed the complexity and subtlety with which he lived his life. Constantly fighting for a better society, but doing so under the radar and with a clear disdain for radical activism, Adorno became an enigmatic social critic and philosopher. It is perhaps for this reason that his theories still have a great deal of relevance for contemporary society, despite their being influenced by the events of nearly half a century ago. Adorno seemed to tap into concerns that have fundamentally maintained themselves over the past several decades.

Much leftist thinking in the past two decades has focused on providing a voice for issues and peoples who have up to now been largely suppressed. The increasing importance and prevalence of race and gender studies, environmentalism, immigration and diaspora studies, and

globalization studies are only some of the newly emerged fields that have come to be so important. What does this movement in academics suggest about changing perceptions of the world around us, and how is someone like Theodor Adorno, whose writings were largely a product of a very different German intellectual tradition, still relevant today? There are a number of ways that Adorno still bears relevance for these kinds of issues, but it is not the purpose of this book to enumerate them explicitly. Rather, the book will focus on Adorno's philosophical development and how his understanding of various philosophers and thinkers helped him to formulate a special mode of thought. Thus, I am arguing for a different interpretation of Adorno's mode, which then could be thought through with other disciplines and regions of thinking.

It is difficult to isolate Adorno's concerns into a neat list, but it is evident that his mode of thought was focused on a certain set of questions and that these questions are still important for us today. Adorno frequently asked how people and things are able to express themselves in an environment that prescribes both thought and actions. He believed that the society in which he lived did not give the individual much space for expressing anything other than what had already been imposed by the various structures of power. He was fiercely opposed to this situation and fought to change it through ideas and by encouraging free thinking. His work therefore also addresses why he believed it is important to provide opportunities for the free expression of both things and people and he constantly asked what it meant to express and to be free. Adorno also combated any line of thought that would isolate the individual from the world around her or him, and thus Adorno constantly questioned how our position in society was related to the way that we think about knowledge, history, culture, and art. These various structures of human endeavor were not isolated for Adorno, but rather integrated themselves into each other and formed a cluster of distinct and yet related activities. Adorno's writings force us to ask whether our contemporary understandings of knowledge, history, culture, and art are adequate to the situation in which we live. Or, do these concepts still need revision, and if so, how can Adorno's thoughts help us revisit them? This book will attempt to find out what happens when these areas of thought are reexamined, reinvigorated, and integrated in order to form a particular aesthetic mode of relating oneself to the world. Therefore, aesthetics is a major focal point for the book. This book will thus also traverse such questions as whether art is still relevant in contemporary society and whether aesthetics provides an adequate set of concepts to tackle the individual's relationship to contemporary social life. Just as Adorno was concerned with the limiting

structures of his own time, it seems that many Westerners often still take their relationship to society, to the natural world, and to ourselves for granted. Adorno asks us if we really understand what is at stake in the articulation of these relationships, and if so, whether we are willing to change them.

### Radicalizing Adorno

Recently many scholars have begun to assert the importance of Theodor Adorno's aesthetics to his philosophy in general.<sup>2</sup> However, much of this work has taken the form of *applying* aesthetics to philosophy or theory or seeing how certain concerns overlap between the two. Fundamentally, this sort of approach can only take the aesthetic dimension of Adorno so far before it falls flat and is unable to defend more than the position that aesthetic concerns are often, for Adorno, also philosophic concerns, and vice versa. If, indeed, "perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light," and "to gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought,"<sup>3</sup> then we might ask how precisely thought is to accomplish this task. While many have attempted to answer this question, none have truly satisfied this possibility within Adorno's thought. And, if this *alone* is the task of thought, it is central to his entire project. A mode of thinking without velleity but also without violence already suggests a non-traditional notion of critique in which objects are not taken apart and critiqued from above. In other words, this non-violent mode of thinking suggests a notion of critique that does not have 'correction' as its main purpose. How might this kind of thinking take form? With what sort of contents would it deal? I propose to answer these questions by reexamining the role of aesthetics in Adorno's work and asserting not simply its centrality but also its fundamental dimension within all thought and all objects of thought. Aesthetics is not a branch of thinking for Adorno, nor is it relegated only to discussion of art and artworks. The aesthetic is exactly what allows critique to shed its violent husk and yet maintain its critical capacity. It is also the primary creative aspect of thinking for Adorno, and yet it remains quite different from the creation associated with the making of art. With all this in mind I have come to term Adorno's approach to critical thinking **aesthetic critique**.

Beyond a critical interpretation of Adorno, I also intend this book to ask what the role of aesthetics is within philosophy or theory at large.

Adorno offers a way of approaching aesthetics that does not involve a mode of thought that attempts to mould its objects into the form it provides. Nor, as some critics have claimed, does it turn all its objects into artworks. Rather, aesthetic critique finds that the aesthetic dimension of objects is crucial to their existence, constitution, function, and development within the world. For Adorno, this aesthetic dimension also implies that experience consists of a subject who judges the world around her and who uses this judgment to make objects possible to experience. This subject mediates the ‘reception’ of the objects she experiences but does not alone constitute them.<sup>4</sup> Adorno uses aesthetics to engage the dominant critical interpretations of knowledge, history, culture, and art which he constantly re-visits from the perspective of the aesthetic dimension of critique. By focusing on this aesthetic dimension this book will attempt to radicalize the dominant interpretations of Adorno and the mode in which he critiques. This is essentially an attempt to push Adorno studies, and critiques of Adorno, in a different direction, suggesting a new role for the aesthetic and a new way of approaching Adorno. For, there is much in Adorno that has yet to be explored, and much of this material has particular contemporary relevance when re-read through aesthetics. The attempt to read Adorno through his aesthetics suggests that Adorno’s work has itself, in a sense, ‘decayed’ with time, that it has not remained a static entity available for interpretation, but has come to form and create different aspects of itself as it has passed through history. One can find this decay in Adorno’s writings by focusing on their tendency to proceed from the ‘object’ of inquiry, which, according to Adorno’s own theories, also decays over time. Since writing is intertwined with what it writes about, if a subject matter changes or decays, the writing about this subject will necessarily also experience the effects of such decay. Decay can be found in the way that texts are rearranged and repositioned through history, and this book will attempt to discover how this has happened to Adorno’s most important works. Thus my interpretation also has the aim of discovering the effects of this decay and approaching Adorno with a method that does justice to this concern.

It is often implied that Adorno’s concern with the ‘object’ is limited to the criteria defined by his critiques of philosophical systems.<sup>5</sup> Insofar as society is repressive and identitarian thinking dominates, it is the task of criticism to discover that which exposes the inherent contradictions of these reifying structures. By turning people into things, so-called “Enlightenment rationality”—Adorno’s favourite term for what he saw as the Western world’s dominant way of instrumentally rationalizing the world—foregrounds objectification as a primary region for critical

activity, and so Adorno believes that: “intellect’s true concern is a negation of reification.”<sup>6</sup> However, it would be an error to conceive of Adorno’s critique as top-down. The method with which he proceeds is hardly that of a ‘rational’ philosopher. Rather, Adorno’s criticism is fundamentally an aesthetic project that does not seek to enlighten the reader or even society.<sup>7</sup> Instead, it concerns itself only with expressing the immanent dynamism of that upon which our intellectual, historical, and cultural gaze rests: the ‘object’.

Through his aesthetics, Adorno constructs the ‘object’ as the locus through which critique is generated. Adorno’s critical philosophy thus proceeds not from the social conditions of modernity but from the ‘object’ of critique. In consequence, critique might be seen as the expression of the ‘object’s’ embedded tradition<sup>8</sup> – indeed, as an “immanent expression.” Adorno’s understanding of the ‘object’s’ immanence is primarily informed by four manifestations within the tradition: knowledge, history, culture, and art. Accordingly, these will form the four axes of inquiry in this book, and each will focus primarily on Adorno’s inheritance from a key philosophical figure (or figures) and the way in which he aestheticizes this inheritance by creating a new configuration of material within the theoretical ‘object’ under discussion. By no means is this book exhaustive of the influences on Adorno or his understanding of tradition; his method makes that impossible. Rather, by explicating some important engagements between Adorno and his influences, namely Kant, Hegel, Marx, Lukàcs, and Benjamin, this book will expose the logic of Adorno’s aesthetics of critique and clarify the role of the ‘object’ in this logic.

Aesthetic critique is thus effected through the various ‘objects’ under critique, which includes philosophical and theoretical objects along with more conventional or every-day objects, such as television or radio. I will focus on the theoretical dimension of this technique, for it is this dimension that forms the basis for aesthetic critique and it is also precisely this dimension that is usually overlooked by other commentators. Adorno’s method involves a certain kind of close reading, which is then condensed into sentences that use very little quotation, instead tending to ‘mimic’ the style of the author under critique. This is the first step by which Adorno actually enters into his ‘objects’ and attempts to let them express contradictions that otherwise remain hidden. Furthermore, this method involves finding what is contemporaneously relevant within traditional texts, which often involves radically re-reading them, but always from within. This means that Adorno never uses neologisms, preferring to reinvigorate old terms. It might seem as though Adorno thus restricts himself and disallows any new thought, but this is a view that can

only be taken from a traditional philosophical standpoint. Adorno's emphasis on critique means that the role of philosophy, or as he calls it in his inaugural address at Frankfurt, the "actuality of philosophy," changes from one of foundation, grounding, and metaphysics to one of mediation whereby previously existing ideas are brought to express their own problematics in new and interesting ways. Adorno does not ground his thought in metaphysics, but instead develops a metaphysics from within a historical trajectory in which 'objects' already exist and already act and operate within the world. Adorno is far more interested in seeing how one can change the way 'objects' operate from within their own logic, especially by inverting this logic internally within the 'object'. This is precisely the aesthetic project. It involves entering into an 'object,' e.g. a text, rearranging its constituent elements, and following this rearrangement to its limits in order to express the implications it has for the 'object', and beyond. As such, Adorno tries to position himself both outside of the 'object' (in order to effect mediation) and inside of the 'object' (in order to avoid violence and work with preexisting material).

An important facet of aesthetic critique is that objects "decay" over time. Decay is a fundamental historical layer of all of Adorno's 'objects' and as such he treats them as decaying 'objects,' which means simply that Adorno's aesthetic critiques involve a certain kind of "redemption" or "rescue" provision that, in a sense, brings 'objects' back from the dead and uses their ruination to effect a new kind of expression within the 'object' itself. If the 'object' did not decay, then there would be no room for aesthetic critique. Thus, for example, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* shows that the ideals of systems of thought never come to pass in an empty time but are always subject to a process of natural-historical decay. As a further example, Adorno's critique of Hegel is a critique of Hegel from within Hegel by Hegel himself (mediated through Adorno), such that certain contemporary critics of Hegel may find it possible to locate Adorno's own positions on Hegel and his interpretations of Hegel within Hegel exclusively. For, the entire point of Adorno's critiques is to let 'objects' express themselves by using their constitutive material in new ways.

My critiques of Adorno follow his own method of aesthetic critique, for it is only by applying this method to Adorno that one can see its relevance for Adorno studies and for theory today. Thus the four axes I chose to focus on in this book are essentially material gathered from within Adorno's work and repositioned in order to make a new argument about Adorno. I also attempt to effect an inversion on many traditional interpretations of Adorno through this method, following Adorno's

inversion and mimetic techniques within my own mode of argumentation. I have, however, also attempted to be more transparent than Adorno, for it is my purpose to clarify the problem quickly and succinctly so that further inquiries into this aspect of Adorno can perhaps take these concerns in directions not traditionally attributed to Adorno studies.

Lastly, of great importance is the effect aesthetic critique has on the notion of philosophy in Adorno, and implicitly on the notion of philosophy in general. Because of aesthetic critique, the creation of ideas and the tradition in which the material for these ideas is embedded are inseparable, but only insofar as “natural-historical decay” opens ‘objects’ up to themselves. Critique uses this decay to bring out the ‘object’s’ immanent contradictions, and aesthetics rearranges the elements of these contradictions to let the ‘object’ express what Adorno would call its “truth-content,” which is anything but a stable unitary notion of truth. This approach would be ‘opposed’<sup>9</sup> to a view of philosophy as concept creation, as in the work of Gilles Deleuze, or to one engaged in an ontological project of peeling away layers within language to reveal the true ground of existence, as in Heidegger, and, in a later manifestation, Derrida.<sup>10</sup> I mention these specific philosophers because I feel that for them art also plays a crucial role within philosophy, much more so than as a branch or specialized field to which one applies philosophy, as the philosophy of art is often treated in the analytic tradition, for example. Within this context, determining the effect of Adorno’s use of aesthetics in philosophy suggests a larger question as to the effect of aestheticization in philosophy in general. Each of the above philosophers would answer differently, of course, but there is an unacknowledged similarity between them insofar as the ‘aesthetic,’ which is not a term that the above three thinkers would likely use, becomes a way of creating ideas. Critique, then, for Adorno, is much more than subsumption or correction; it is inherently creative, and he cannot get to this creative aspect without aesthetics. This point also marks a clear distinction between art and critique, for each ‘creates’ differently and does so within its own tradition, even as each does interact with and mediate the other.

## **The Bounds of the Aesthetic**

For Adorno, the aesthetic exists in such a complex relationship with art that it is difficult to explicitly address what this relationship could possibly be. Traditionally aesthetics was the branch of philosophy that thought about beauty, progressing from understanding beauty in nature to beauty in art. The German Idealists, particularly Schiller and Schelling, took

aesthetics to a new level, using it as a model for thinking about what could not be conceptually understood through reason. Adorno's understanding of aesthetics and art is largely inherited from this tradition, even as he radicalized Idealism's propositions and fused them with certain themes from materialist aesthetics. For Adorno aesthetics was both a specific theory of art *and* a particular manner of thinking about objects. As he argues in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno did not separate the form of thought from the content of thought, for it was in the material relations between the concepts themselves that form emerged. Thus, an aesthetic theory not only discusses artistic concepts and material, but is also necessarily aesthetic itself. Because its content is art, the theory of art itself takes on aesthetic characteristics. But, this still seems clearly to separate aesthetics from philosophy – from theories about things other than art. Art, however, was never a clearly articulated realm for Adorno. While it was decidedly different from philosophy, it did not follow specific categories and forms, but developed these from the material with which it was created. This material was not in any way some sort of immediate pure aesthetic substance for Adorno, but was necessarily part of the social, natural, and historical world. Art's material is therefore mediated by that which is strictly not art: there can be no exact separation between art and the world. Aesthetics differentiates itself from art just as art differentiates itself from the world: both are distinct from and yet mediated by the material upon which they work. It is in the arrangement of this material that they find their particular *mode*.

When discussing Adorno's use of aesthetics it is important to consider the difference between *method* and *mode*. For Adorno, aesthetics provides a particular mode in which to approach objects, but it does not provide a method that would outline the limits and provide the form of thought. A mode, as opposed to a method, is a particular way of bringing form and content together when thinking about an issue – but it does not prescribe a form on top of a content, as does method. Adorno's aesthetic mode gathers its form from the relationships between the content with which it deals, and as such it actually becomes a kind of bottom-up approach, which reaches towards concepts based on the material provided to it by its object. Method tries to make content conform to a pre-determined form, such as in a statistical analysis of voting habits. Mode is a manner of approaching an object that articulates a more subtle relationship between subject and object – it is the way in which one expresses oneself as opposed to the way in which one determines how a problem is to be solved.<sup>11</sup>

While Adorno does differentiate between art and philosophy, his mode of thought approaches its objects with an aesthetic sensibility. Unlike pure

philosophical *ratio*, Adorno philosophizes by finding the gaps and breaks in the constitutive material of the objects in which he is interested, and by providing a vessel through which these breaks are able to express themselves. This is a specifically aesthetic process. Even as it participates very strongly in philosophical ideas and concepts, Adorno's mode is very different from that of a traditional Idealist or Positivist philosopher because it works in fragments and never attempts to construct a whole picture of a given problem. As he discusses in "The Essay as Form", thinking should work by presenting only a partial picture of what is going on, and by equivocating with its concepts in order to exemplify their transience and motile complexity. By being partial, thought is more able to express a total truth.<sup>12</sup> Adorno's mode of critique renders all his 'objects' into aesthetic objects that come to participate in dissonance, expression, semblance, etc. just as artworks do, but do so with quite different material and form. Thus, when I discuss Adorno's aesthetic terminology I am not merely attempting to explain it, which would then render it clearly evident or applicable to artworks such as novels, paintings, or music, but rather I am attempting to show how these terms develop out of 'objects' other than strict artworks and how Adorno's aesthetics is much more than a theory of art.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, my discussion of *Aesthetic Theory* and Adorno's other aesthetic ideas is done so from the perspective of its relevance for aesthetic critique, and not its relevance for a particular artwork or even for a theory of artworks. This does not mean that my assertions have no relevance for these things, but rather that this is not my focus. Much other work has been done in this vein and I am attempting to go beyond the restriction of aesthetics to the realm of art. When I use aesthetic concepts I am not using them as aspects of specific artworks under discussion but rather as aspects of specific philosophical/theoretical 'objects,' whether these concepts are immanent to those objects or reflect upon those objects from outside. As a sidebar, then, even though I do incorporate various examples from the "realm of art", especially in the most abstract sections to facilitate clarity, I must assert here that artworks do not function the same way as aesthetic theory<sup>14</sup> does. Exemplifying theoretical ideas with artworks is problematic in itself because the critique is being effected on the philosophy and not on an artwork, which demands a different mode. However, juxtaposing theory and artworks is occasionally useful, and thus one will find the occasional passing reference to or example of specific artworks in the book.

There is no clear cut aesthetic dimension in Adorno's works. It is difficult to isolate aesthetics from other spheres. This is due largely to the fact that aesthetics upholds a level of discursive radicality by letting the

material of its objects dictate its form in many ways. Adorno does not simply assert this radicality, however, but works it out from the epistemological, historical, and cultural gaps in the theories with which he deals. For example, in his reading of Kant's epistemology Adorno locates a moment in which the epistemological object opens itself to arenas other than epistemology and human knowing. This opening occurs because of a certain aesthetic reading of Kant's epistemology. Thus does aesthetics function as critique; it expands the discourse of a given field or object by rearranging its constitutive elements such that previous demarcations no longer limit the range of the material. Aesthetics is thus very much an expansive mode of thought. However, in addition to eliminating boundaries, aesthetics as a mode of thought – aesthetic critique – is restricted by the structural movements of the object in question. Aesthetic critique is limited to delving into the moments of a theory that have already decayed, or are in the process of decaying. For example, these include moments where a system unravels itself by its own assertions, where a proposition takes on new meaning given its development through varied contexts, or where concepts internal to one idea begin to mean something completely different to what was originally intended insofar as they are juxtaposed to concepts internal to another idea. Aesthetic critique, as a particular mode of thought, works by expanding the deficiencies of concepts such that they come to express something new. Critique provides an outside perspective on internal conceptual arrangements so that concepts can participate in natural historical change, dying out in some ways and being reborn in others.

The bounds of the aesthetic are quite broad. Understanding Adorno's aesthetic mode is far more than a simple academic exercise or a process for gaining new knowledge on an established philosophical figure. Adorno's writings provide the means by which one can change their perceptions of the world around them and the problems that subsist within it. Positivistic modes of thought dominate in the Western world, whether they are understood technically, as in an analytic philosophy department, or intuitively, as in the unflinching belief in rationality and scientific method. These perspectives have a profound influence on the way we live our lives, whether as individuals, or as social and political beings. Aesthetic critique fashions a dialogue between the individual and what she has neglected to expose within and without her. Aesthetic critique intends to express those elements of life that are liable not to be expressed because of predominate thought structures. Furthermore, aesthetic critique recognizes both the transience of all things as well as the ability – even the necessity – for constantly decaying matter to move towards something

more stable, more essential. But Adorno prompts us not to idealize that essential moment and make it into a perfect substratum of existence or a perfect world towards which we should strive. Rather, through his aesthetic mode, Adorno presses us to reconsider the banality and negativity of decay, loss, and destabilization and to re-express their possibilities. Aesthetic critique is a structure of thought that evades structure by constantly working with its deficiencies in order to form new structures. It is not the structures themselves that have primary importance, but rather it is the process by which they are formed that holds the most intense interest for one engaged in aesthetic critique. Adorno believed that it was within these processes that we as individuals and as a society could find the emancipatory potential to free ourselves from prescribed methods of thought. If we constantly work at the structures we know and trust in order to expose them in their moments of decay, then we can ensure that we will never be complacent in the face of destruction, manipulation, and suffering. These are Adorno's primary concerns, and thus must be the primary concerns of any book attempting to understand his mode of thinking. This book is not a treatise nor is it a calling to action; rather it is an attempt to effect this kind of aesthetic critique on a figure who was fundamental for its formation. Its aim is both to open Adorno's writings to new ideas and new forms of thought as well as to encourage readers to think differently about the ways in which they contemplate and understand their lives.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE INVERSION OF OBJECTIVITY: KANT AND THE CRITIQUE OF KNOWLEDGE

Theodor Adorno has been classified as a critic and philosopher of many kinds of problems, but he is overwhelmingly understood as a critic of culture and society. It can reasonably be argued that every side of his thought, from music theory to critiques of bourgeois individuality and even to his philosophy of freedom, always somehow hinges on a social or cultural peg that links all of these problems together. It is accordingly very difficult to separate the various elements of Adorno's philosophy – which he himself never presented as a unified set of ideas – from his overall project, however one may interpret it.

Since this book aims to explore precisely how Adorno came to formulate his critiques of various philosophical, cultural and social ideas and occurrences through an engagement with a certain notion of the aesthetic, it is nonetheless crucial to at least tentatively separate Adorno's various strands of thought from each other before attempting to reunite them. Doing so will allow this book to break away from traditional readings of Adorno as a culture critic, since the artificial separation of Adorno's ideas from each other provides the means by which to recreate the interweaving relationships of his most complex works. In this book I will thus approach Adorno in a similar manner to the way in which Adorno approached other thinkers; that is, I will attempt to find the areas in which Adorno's work immanently expresses that which he does not explicitly make evident. This approach has led me to conclude that the role of the aesthetic in Adorno's work is far greater than perhaps he was able to express himself. However, since this book aims to reconstruct Adorno's work it must proceed slowly and move through each problem carefully as it presents itself.

The first chapter of the book will perhaps be the most abstract chapter since it aims to ground the subsequent enquiries in notions of subjectivity, objectivity, and knowledge as read from both a giant in the German philosophical tradition and Adorno's personal philosophical tradition:

Immanuel Kant. This chapter will thus elucidate how Adorno develops his critique of knowledge through an engagement with the Kantian object.<sup>15</sup> In beginning with Kant I will lay the groundwork for a reading of history and culture in Adorno that differs from traditional interpretations. Kant offers Adorno a theory of the subject-object relation that lies implicitly within the more involved theories of history and culture with which Adorno deals. Furthermore, Adorno views the question of knowledge formation as fundamental for a proper understanding of social and cultural relations, and it would be impossible to reconstruct Adorno's understanding of culture without addressing his critique of knowledge, which finds its primary articulation in his reading of Kant. Even though Kant does not have absolute priority in Adorno's writing, nor does he form the origin or starting point of Adorno's theories, he does provide a critical dialectic that Adorno proceeds to expose and engage in later philosophical and theoretical traditions.

Unearthing this dialectic of knowledge becomes a task of aesthetic critique for Adorno, who finds that the expression of the immanent contradictions of a theory often yields unexpected connections to otherwise hidden precursors. The aesthetic element comes into the picture through the way in which Adorno not only understands Kant, but forces Kantian concepts to reorganize themselves and express something new in the process. Adorno reinvigorates these connections within previous ideas and attempts to find the implications of the persistence of the past within the present. He questions how and why past ideas persist in the present and constantly attempts to reinterpret the legacy of these theories. These concerns ultimately necessitate a philosophy of history, which I examine in detail in the second chapter, a chapter in which the inversion of objectivity in Kant takes on a crucial role in Hegel's philosophy of history. Adorno emphasizes and critiques Hegel's philosophy in order to dialecticize "knowledge" and "history". I examine the results of this dialectic in the third and fourth chapters, which focus primarily on culture and art. Thus, each stage or chapter of the book progressively builds on and complicates the previous chapter(s). However, each chapter must also be read together with all the others, since it is in the interactions and relationships between the various ideas at play that Adorno forms his aesthetic critiques.

## **Part I – Kant and the Primacy of the Object**

What Adorno understands as the problem of the object in Kant arises in the crucial distinctions between the Kantian notions of appearances, the

thing-in-itself, phenomena, noumena, and the transcendental object. Adorno first begins to develop and express his specifically aesthetic critical mode within and between these distinctions. If, as Tom Huhn suggests, Kant brings into view the *a priori* structures of subjectivity only by suppressing the object,<sup>16</sup> then Adorno's attempt to begin from within Kantian doctrine is a reclamation of this epistemology from the perspective of the object. It is from this suppressed position that Adorno wishes to compel Kantian concepts "to acknowledge the fact of *non-identity*,"<sup>17</sup> a demand that only becomes clear once we have understood the distinctions between the various 'objects' listed above.

As Adorno states in his essay "Subject and Object", entering into the object is only viable insofar as both subject and object "have reciprocal need of each other."<sup>18</sup> This reciprocal need becomes the impetus for a certain kind of critique. This chapter aims to show how Adorno's reflection on the Kantian subject from within that subject's object becomes an aesthetic reflection. In other words, this chapter will demonstrate how the reflection that Adorno effects from the 'object' is that 'object's' expression of its immanent amphibolies insofar as the inner relations of this 'object' are reorganized through a set of reflective historical judgments. Thus does critique become an expression of the aestheticization<sup>19</sup> of the Kantian object. To carefully engage Adorno's question of the 'object's' reflexive capacity, this chapter will concentrate on a close analysis of the "amphiboly of the concepts of reflection" in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, a section concerning which Adorno repeatedly states the significance throughout his oeuvre.

Before proceeding directly into Adorno, however, I will provide a very brief outline of the general character of Kant's system of knowledge. Kant divides the necessary elements of knowledge into three general components. Firstly, there is sense, the apparatus by which a subject can receive a synthetic appearance from the 'world', which is generally conceived of as dissonant and unorganized for the subject without the use of the organizing cognitive faculties. Secondly, the imagination acts as the process by which the subject organizes the appearances according to the categories of understanding, which provide the pre-determined rules for understanding the given sensuous material of the world. Lastly, apperception is the underlying unity of the process of reception and organization – or, in other words, it is the identity of the pure I and that which sustains the subject as a single subject over a series of experiences. Experience is governed by all three of these elements at the same time, which means that they do not follow a linear temporal sequence, but rather are spontaneous.

The question of objectivity in Kant's theory of knowledge arises in the demand for permanent genetic conditions of possibility that would govern a subject's ability to encounter the world around him. Kant's famous limitation of reason to the world of experience in the first critique is precisely what Adorno finds most important in this theory of knowledge, since it provides a break between what Adorno might call 'enduring objective identity' and real subjective experience. The very objective possibility of experience is restricted, and following Kant, Adorno tries to explode this restriction within the realm of subjective experience. Many interpretations of Kant lead to claims for a theory of 'two worlds' in which the world of experience is distinct from the unknowable world of things-in-themselves. Adorno was uncomfortable with such a division because he believed it prompted an idealist longing for the "in-itself" that would manifest as either absolute systematization or as stark metaphysical longing. Thus, in his critique of Kant Adorno meant to rediscover the meaning of the split between the knowable and the unknowable world and to find a new way in which to approach this problem.

By focusing on reinterpreting the traditional 'two world' understanding of Kant, Adorno was attempting to reinvigorate the idea of objectivity in the contemporary world, which he believed had succumbed to the understanding of objectivity as a neutral and permanent truth. For Adorno, this notion of objectivity was only possible because of the split between the knowable objective conditions for experience and the unknowable ground of appearances first established by Kant. Objectivity came to belie its own unknowability because this unknowability was transposed into the transcendental realm, thus rendering the realm of experience free of this concern. The subject was then given purview to assert its objectivity through morality, which ultimately served as the only link into the unknowable substratum of experience. In his writings on Kant Adorno thus came to attempt a recapitulation of the problem of knowledge from the transcendental realm back into the experiential, or as he came to understand it, empirical realm. In this way he came to assert that the seemingly transcendental distinction between the 'two worlds' was actually a distinction present within experience and within the current moment. Any demand raised by this 'two worlds' theory was actually a demand in this world, here and now. This sufficiently translated the problem of genetic primacy into a normative problem demanding the reconstitution of objectivity and experience in the present society. However, this normativity was always subject to diremption by history, which Adorno used dialectically to undermine the notion of objective permanence. Thus Adorno came to negate otherworldly utopia and any

morality that served to support this idea by reconstituting the very bounds of knowledge and objectivity.

In his lecture course *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* Adorno delineates the construction of objectivity in Kant as proceeding from an analysis of the objectivity of individual “things”, to the connections between “things” and finally to the “objectively valid concept of a world” (KCPR 94). Insofar as individual “things” are concerned, the possibility of cognizing an object, says Adorno, is identical with the conditions of subjective unity. The *a priori* operations of the faculties of cognition are both the conditions for knowledge (of any given object) and the conditions for the transcendental unity of apperception. According to Adorno, this has the result that one must conceive of the object of knowledge and the subject of knowledge “in tandem”. In order to clarify what he means, Adorno shifts to an explanation the second construction of objectivity – the connections between “things” – and asserts that a “thing” is the “law of its *possible* experiences” and that law is “the *form* in which things are necessarily connected with one another” (KCPR 94-95) [My italics]. Both of the key words that I have italicized point to a unique structure of the “thing”: it is that which must relate to the subject (as possible experience) and it is that which must unify these relations in the subject (law as the form of experience). What does this amount to in the Kantian system expounded in the first *Critique*?

In the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant distinguishes between cognition and thinking. In order for a subject to cognize an object, that object must be *possible*,<sup>20</sup> which means that it must be an object of experience. Experience requires its objects to be objects of sensible intuition, which means that they stand under the *a priori* forms of pure intuitions – space and time. These objects are called the appearances. Thinking an object, on the other hand, does not require that it be possible in experience, but only that it is possible for thought. This means that not all objects of thought have to conform to the *a priori* forms of pure intuition. The Kantian “thing” for Adorno is thus not simply an object of thought but is also an object of experience. This is fairly well-known. However, turning to Adorno’s second assertion, that the “thing” is, as law, “the form in which things are necessarily connected with each other”, the problem of Adorno’s reading of the object of cognition in Kant takes a surprising turn.

We might wonder why Adorno refers to the Kantian object of cognition as the “thing”; it is important to understand that he is not conflating the terms. In fact, the “thing” arises from the expression of a problem that Adorno does not explicitly address in his lectures: the

distinction between the appearances and phenomena. Adorno states that “the most general proposition in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that is of relevance here [in relation to “things”] is one that states that the law governing phenomena is the law that actually regulates the connections between my ideas” (KCPR 96). These laws are the Kantian categories – the pure concepts of the understanding – that Kant declares, in a passage cited by Adorno, “are concepts which prescribe laws *a priori* to appearances, and therefore to nature, the sum of all appearances” (KCPR 96). Adorno’s turn to the Transcendental Deduction at this juncture quickly glosses over an amphiboly in his understanding of the “thing” that, when examined, exposes part of the expressive force of his reading of Kant’s object of cognition.<sup>21</sup> In the Deduction, Kant refers to the categories as laws that govern *appearances*, whereas Adorno sees them as laws that govern *phenomena*. What must be understood here is how Adorno’s seeming slip in terminology is actually a subtle shift in the use of the concepts of reflection explicated in the “amphiboly of the concepts of reflection” of the first *Critique*.

Kant states at the beginning of the amphiboly that “reflection does not have to do with objects themselves, in order to acquire concepts directly from them, but is rather the state of mind in which we prepare ourselves to find out the subjective conditions under which we can arrive at concepts” (CPR A260/B316). Reflection, then, is the possibility of distinguishing between what is possible for cognition and what is not possible for cognition. It does not relate objects to a given faculty, but is the condition by which these objects are determined as relating to sensibility or understanding. This “transcendental reflection” thus determines the very manner in which objects relate to each other. It is crucial to understand that transcendental reflection does not abstract from the objects of cognition, which would be mere *logical reflection*, but “goes to the objects themselves” (CPR A263/B319). Transcendental reflection, then, is necessary to determine the *a priori* laws of cognition that seemingly determine objects of knowledge. It does so by bypassing the object that accords with the categories and by “exhibiting” representations “in all their manifoldness, which precedes the concepts of things” (CPR A269/B325). Transcendental reflection distinguishes representations as being either objects of understanding or objects of sensibility – or rather, as things-in-themselves or appearances. In this manner, as Henry Allison explains in *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, the amphiboly shows us that appearances and things-in-themselves are two sides of the same “thing” – appearances insofar as they are objects for sensible intuition, and things-in-themselves insofar as they are the same objects for the pure

understanding.<sup>22</sup> The distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves is therefore analytic and not synthetic – a transcendental and not an empirical distinction. Henry Allison’s interpretation of Kant is quite controversial since he attempts to eliminate the distinction that allows for the ‘two worlds’ theory. Instead, he espouses a kind of one world theory, but does so from a transcendental perspective, even as he argues against a splitting of the empirical world. Allison therefore provides an interesting counterpoint to Adorno’s own reading, which attempts to eliminate the distinction in a different way – namely from an ‘empirical’ perspective – a perspective that Adorno calls “immanent” to the ‘object’. Nonetheless, Allison provides a good means by which to understand certain aspects of Adorno’s argument, which begins by questioning the transcendental distinction from a transcendental perspective before making the move to the empirical.<sup>23</sup>

Adorno’s concern is not with the imposition of the *a priori* laws of cognition on objects, but rather with the lack of distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves. This leads to two important points. First, both appearances and things-in-themselves are transcendental versions of an empirical “thing”. Second, form – “everything that makes a thing what it is” – disallows that a content be given to us prior to its formal organization because this is seated in the subject *a priori*. If both of these assertions are true, then transcendental reflection does not retain the possibility of distinguishing things-in-themselves from appearances insofar as its reflection is premised on going “to the objects themselves”, which would seem to decry a separation between the two terms. Rather, the transcendental reflection occurs from an already mediated object, an object “apprehended in intuition” (KCPR 98). This already mediated object is the phenomenon.

For Kant, the difference between appearances and phenomena is subtle and often confused; however, it is crucial for Adorno’s approach. Appearances, as objects of a possible experience, are the raw data of empirical intuition.<sup>24</sup> Adorno notes this as the first type of appearance at the end of his first lecture on the “thing”. This would mean that appearances are empirical objects insofar as they are given in sensibility. As noted above, Allison demonstrates that appearances and things-in-themselves refer to one and the same empirical object, and thus appearances should not be seen as the empirical object as such, but as the transcendental division of the empirical object into that part of it which is given in the senses. Appearances are “undetermined object[s] of empirical intuition” (CPR A20/B34), which, if we are to follow Allison’s interpretation, means they are the empirical object given in the senses only