

Notes on Adorno's Aesthetic Theory

Introduction

- Art is always under the impress of its semblance, unlike metaphysics which has no semblance but yearns for it.
- Art is an existent form of spirit in the sense that idealism asserted extra-aesthetic reality to be.
- Art inheres spirit without possessing it, the crystallization of the process between spirit and its other, the spirit of artworks is not pure.
- Aesthetics is the determination of spirit in artworks, or that is its highest task
- The knowledge of artworks is guarded by their own cognitive constitution: They are the form of knowledge that is not knowledge of an object. Art's medium is the obviousness of the incomprehensible
- The sense of accessibility of past art must be destroyed for one to comprehend it, e.g. Mona Lisa
- One cannot understand Beethoven either purely musically nor purely through knowledge of its resonances of the French Revolution. Philosophical aesthetics requires not just experience but thought that is fully saturated by experience.
- Experience in the real is a question of universals that are unmediated, art mediates particulars. Knowledge questions the possibility of universal judgment, art questions how particulars are possible in the face of universals.
- Art always contains universals; even in the case of polemical strategies to remove universals they remain my virtue of their negation.
- Valery: the purest artworks are on no account the highest; the best in the new corresponds to an old need.

Art, Society, Aesthetics

- Art is defined by its relation to what it is not, it acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of. Our context is defined in relation to and in rejection of the past context. Past beauty holds an ideal but we cannot idealize that in a programmatic manner because we cannot betray the specificity of now vs. then.
- Art's substance could be its transitoriness.
- Aesthetic identity seeks to aid the nonidentical, which in reality is repressed by reality's compulsion to identify.
- Art negates categorical determinations applied by the external world but harbors what empirically exists in its own substance.
- Art opposes the empirical through form, but form and content are mediated by aesthetic [?] form as sedimented content. Art develops alongside culture. Each expresses and formalizes the other.
- Artworks, even masterpieces can only be understood through their own historicity. (Conversely, this is how to revive the past, by an approach to it through the contemporary condition rather than an academic/classicist/romanticizing one.)
- To observe art strictly aesthetically is to aesthetically misperceive art.
- The unreal/nonexistent in art is not simply invented arbitrarily but structured by proportions of deficiencies and potentialities that exist.
- The separation of the aesthetic sphere from the empirical constitutes art.
- Even the most subjective, instinctual components of art are metamorphosed and negated.
- Aesthetic (subjective) pleasure is accidental in viewing an artwork. An artwork demands knowledge, knowledge that does justice to it, for its truth and untruth to be grasped. Happiness in artworks would be the feeling they instill of standing firm.

Situation

- The contemporary commercial viewer expects to see themselves reflected in art. They perceive art's

inadequacy to the present society (but not the untruth of society). They project their impulses arbitrarily (Sentimental Aesthetics). This process is like Jonathan Rosenbaum's theory of Hollywood's decline by "knowing what audiences want." The consumer does not lose themselves in a work, they project and see themselves, a process exploited by the culture industry. This deaestheticizes art, removes its qualitative dimension and reduces it to the level of an object.

- In an age of incomprehensible horror, Hegel's principle (and Brecht's motto) that truth is concrete suffices only for art. A darkened world makes the irrationality of art rational.
- Romantic and Baroque fictions present nonempirical worlds as empirical, which works because empirical reality creates those fictions (myths, etc.). Modernity overwhelms with the empirical so there is no longer an escape to pleasurable fiction.
- Newness (relevance) unites contemporary mimesis of abstract reactions to the present with rationality.
- Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent; this is why art no longer tolerates the innocuous.
- The old has refuge only at the vanguard of the new.
- The new becomes a fetish, the abstractly new can stagnate and fall back into the ever-same.
- The new want nonidentity, yet intention reduces it to identity.
- Experimentation comes from an emphasis of construction over subjective imagination. However, because experiments are undertaken subjectively, they cannot divest art of its subjectivity.
- The most radically modern works have absorbed the lessons of history more than the moderates.
- Among the dangers faced by new art, the worst is the absence of danger.
- The new is the longing for the new, not the new itself. The new is like a child at the piano seeking a new never-before-heard chord. A utopianism caught up in impossibility utopia. Like Hegel's "End of art". The yearning for the ideal and the way it is gestured towards but never achieved.
- In that the idiosyncrasies of artists become sedimented in the canon, within art the particular is the universal.
- Conceptual construction vs. expressive mimesis, the two poles of modern art. They are not synthesized, though, because in the extremity of one pole comes the realization of the other. ex: Bresson, or Picasso's cubism expressed coldness far more successfully than middlebrow cubists who tried to preserve warmth.
- Artworks become beautiful by their fixity, they freeze and oppose the overwhelming undifferentiated state of nature. The representation of a moment, but as a thing, a quality, not a unique singularity.
- The idea of artworks is eternal life, attained by the annihilating of all that is living in its domain. The more integrated an artwork is (formal, Apollonian) the more it disintegrates the elements (natural) that constitute it.
- The way of relieving art from ideology is through form, as in the Renaissance when art was freed from cultic religious heteronomy through the development of composition and perspective.
- Art now functions in a process of disenchanting a disenchanted world. Art postulates the existence of what does not exist. Only that which does not fit in the world is true.

Natural Beauty

- 19th century aesthetics eliminated natural beauty through concepts of freedom and human dignity; Subjectivism. This freedom of subject is also the unfreedom of the other. Aesthetics vs. Idealism.
- The force of dignity within nature becomes a subjective usurpation of nature's potential that is not subordinate to the individual. The artwork is the plenipotentiary of the thing in itself.
- The 19th century brought about the cultural landscape, the specific which is opposed to natural beauty in general, a "beauty" by recognition of the specific landmark.
- Natural beauty is not in fact ahistorical but actually historically tied to periods where nature has been relatively neutered, viz. agriculture. New settlements rarely allow for appreciation of nature because it

is an immediate practical object or untamed and terrifying.

- Earlier societies enjoyed symmetry in nature, gardens, because it neutralized the threat of the untamed. Natural beauty that appears is in itself image. Its portrayal is a tautology that, by objectifying what appears, eliminates it.
- A reconciliation of art and nature as in Corot, Courbey, is tied to the evocation of the momentary. An everlasting fragrance is a paradox.
- Natural beauty is ideology where it serves to disguise mediatedness as immediacy.
- "Oh how beautiful" disturbs the silence of nature's beauty but is appropriate for the tense concentration via artworks.
- Beauty in nature is involuntary, but pure immediacy does not suffice for aesthetic experience. All beauty reveals itself to persistent analysis, which in turn enriches the element of involuntariness, indeed, analysis would be in vain if the involuntary reside hidden within it.
- Art imitates not nature but natural beauty.
- The spectacle of clouds represent Shakespearean dramas. Art does not reproduce those clouds but attempt to enact the drama of the clouds.
- Idealist philosophy (Hegel) imitates art, not the other way around, because art dominates by transforming aesthetic attitudes.
- Great/beautiful art exists as necessary, not historically but in its being unified in itself as distinct and particular. A being-in-itself, not an imitation of something real, a self-determining of an object/artwork as itself.
- If the language of nature is mute, art seeks to make this muteness eloquent.

Art Beauty

- Art creates its own transcendence, rather than being its arena, and thereby is separated ones again from transcendence.
- Art achieves transcendence through the nexus of its elements. Art betrays transcendence when it seeks to produce it as an effect.
- Transcendence is an other mediated by the nexus but divided from it.
- Art surpasses the world of things by what is thing-like in a work, by the force of semblance as a thing/appearance (i.e. representation, perspective). They are things whose power it is to appear.
- The spiritual apparition of art is most achieved (when Adorno was writing) in art that seeks to avoid its apparition and is ashamed of it, as with Beckett's plays. He cannot extinguish the aura, the raising curtain, the set, the costumes. One achieves a sense of, for instance, the sublime not by showing itself as sublime but through the countertendency of art in its formality, its thingness.
- The more hidden the signification of an artwork, the more determinant it is.
- Idealism reduces art to symbols that excise the spirit in that artwork. Romanticism grasps the quality of the apparition, but reduces art's scope to the specific, inward personal experience. It thought by focusing on this experience the ethereal quality of art could be captured.
- The language of art is caught up in and constructed by a collective undercurrent, which applies especially to the stigmatized or walled up in "the ivory tower."
- Artworks are the true subject of a society.
- The spirit of artworks is bound up with their form, but spirit is such only insofar as it points beyond that form.
- The spritualization progressively excises spirit from art. Symbolism, neoclassicism, etc., reduction of thematic/formal techniques to inherently meaningful formulas.
- Spiritualized art distances itself from the childish desire to please, they pursue what they are in themselves with an indifference to the viewer.
- Ugliness in the modern is a test of the limits of spiritualization and its opposition in which the spiritualization proves itself.

- Modern art thrives on a literalizing of the previously symbolic, a refusal of intentionality that endows the spiritual element ultimately.
- Art is the intuition of what is not intuitable.
- The untruth attacked by art is not rationality but rationality's rigid opposition to the particular.
- The doctrine of intuition is false because it attributes to art what it does not fulfill. Rather, art comes from the tension of the intellect and intuition.

Semblance and Expression

- Emancipation from harmony is a revolt against semblance.
- The 19th century is the height of semblance; it aspired to art as a fact and was therefore ashamed of traces of mediation and its production (Wagner).
- The romantic is an embarrassing attempt to capture phantasmagoria as man-made, modernism tries to shake off phantasmagoria, reduce art to its production, to eliminate illusion.
- The mimesis of artworks is their resemblance to themselves.
- No artwork is an undiminished unity; each must simulate it and thus collides with itself.
- Meaning summons into appearance what appearance otherwise obstructs, the construction of an eloquent relation of a work's elements.
- The theological heritage of art is the secularization of revelation.
- The paradox of the aesthetic: How can making bring into appearance what is not the result of making; how can what is according to its own concept not true nevertheless be true?
- Content is distinct from semblance, but artworks only have content through semblance, through the form of semblance.
- In artworks, appearance itself belongs to the side of essence.
- Dissonance is the truth about harmony, dissonance is expression.
- Expression is a compromise, an objectification of the non-objective. Art makes a subject speak by becoming an object that as artifact of subject speaks, but as its own subject as object. Art expresses the objective subjectively, it makes the object speak through its mediation.
- Art only imitates objective expression. By expression it closes itself off to being-for-another (i.e. activism, coherent "moral of the story") and becomes eloquent in itself.
- The true language of art is mute, its muteness takes priority over poetry's significative element.
- Expression is the gaze of artworks.
- Artworks bear expression where they reverberate with the protohistory of subjectivity, of ensoulment.
- The subject imagines itself as unmediated but is itself mediated.
- Subjective paradox of art: to produce what is blind, expression, by way of reflection, that is, through form, "to make things of which we do not know what they are."
- Spontaneity amid the involuntary is the vital element of art.
- Sense of form is the blind vehicle of an objectivity closed to itself, the necessity in the object. The irrationality of the expressive is for art the aim of all aesthetic rationality.
- Aesthetic rationality must plunge blindfolded into the making of a work.
- There is no middle position between the self-censorship of the need for expression and the concessiveness of construction.

Enigmaticalness, Truth, Content, Metaphysics

- Aesthetics is for the comprehension of art's incomprehensibility.
- Art negates the spirit that dominates nature, so its spirit does not appear as spirit. It ignites on its materiality, its opposition to representation of spirit, mimesis.
- Classicism is inadequate because it represses the ridiculous and the clownishness of aesthetics, which is present even in the greatest works and is inextricable from their significance. No art is utterly pure, perfect, it is always to some degree excessive, inept, etc., which is the nature of representation.

- New Age is like classicism, it seeks to negate the ridiculous through pure permissiveness and is therefore corny.
- The ridiculous in art comes from art following inner logic; the more logical it is the more empirically ridiculous it becomes. The logic of art is a critique of real logic.
- Ridiculous elements in art are closest to their intentionless levels and therefore are closest to their secret, in great works.
- The better an artwork is understood, the more it is unpuzzled on one level and the more obscure its constitutive enigmaticalness becomes.
- Artworks are puzzles in that what they hide is visible, and in being visible, is hidden.
- In German they say one understands something of art, not that one understands art.
- Art judges exclusively by abstaining from judgment. But it contains elements derived from judgment, is correct/incorrect, true/false. That “answer” is always mediated, never definitive, silent and only given a voice through philosophy or criticism.
- By being beyond discursive knowledge art contains truth, but only as something incommensurable with art.
- The enigma of artworks is their fracturedness. If transcendence were present in them, they would be mysteries, not enigmas; they are enigmas because through their fracturedness, they deny what they would actually like to be.
- Truth content is the crystallization of history within the work.
- In seeking to preserve the transitory in the artwork, art kills it.
- Art is the ever broken promise of happiness.

Coherence and Meaning

- Artworks are not conceptual or judgmental but they are logical, they have an internal logic.
- Logic is all the less constrained when the obliquely preestablished styles provide the semblance of logicity and unburden the particular work of the need for its manufacture.
- Music's compression of time, painting's folding of spaces into one another, by manipulating the real qualities of time and space, make it clear that reality can be other than it is.
- There is nothing in art that is not derived from the world, and nothing that remains untransformed.
- Mathematization becomes a method only in historical periods where traditions of form have dissolved and no objective canon is available.
- Form is the seal of social labor, fundamentally different from the empirical process of making.
- The hermetic critique of the existing more fully than those that stage intelligible social criticism with conciliatory forms.
- The division of high art and low art: its decisive reason is that culture is unsuccessful for precisely those who produced it.
- Material means without which there would be no form, undermine form.
- In relation to art, idealism's eternity is unmasked as kitsch, to which he who clings to idealism's inalienable categories is consigned.
- All modern art after Impressionism has abjured the unity of subjective reality (Now this old subjectivism has reappeared in sentimental aestheticism, the equating of an artistic style with a supposedly cohesive subjectivity.)
- Modern art, with its vulnerability, blemishes, and fallibility, is a critique of traditional art. Traditional art is in many cases greater, but it is the critique that succeeds as a critique of success.
- The classical is the idea of pure form, neither particular nor universal.

Subject-Object

- Aesthetic feeling is not the feeling that is aroused; it is astonishment vis-a-vis what is beheld rather than vis-a-vis what it is about.

- It is as labor, and not as communication, that the subject in art comes into its own.
- The tool is the extension of the arm, the artist is the extension of the tool, a tool for the transition from potentiality to actuality.
- In art it is a We that speaks, not an I, all the more so when the work does not adapt to the external We of society and idioms.
- Genius is the element of self-alienness that creeps into the material. Art's authenticity is its blindedness, which is juxtaposed with the freedom of the emancipated individual. Genius seeks to reconcile this, Genius is false because works are not creations and humans are not creators.
- Neoclassicism is overdetermined: By subjecting itself to past conventional forms as supposedly objective they only accomplish a negating of their subjectivity, a voluntary taming, enslavement.
- Artworks become relative because they must assert themselves as absolute.

Toward a Theory of the Artwork

- Art is a process of the attempt of fixing otherness through the articulation of a formal language. This is an irresolvable antithesis and can never be brought to rest.
- Fashion is closely related to art for its transience.
- Regarding historical works: What is considered to be intelligible to all has become unintelligible, what the manipulated repel as too strange is secretly all too comprehensible, like Freud's dictum that the uncanny is repulsed only because it is all too familiar.
- Foreignness to the world is an element of art: Whoever perceives it other than as foreign fails to perceive it at all.
- Art as tour de force recalls the circus: the effort to defeat gravity, its absurdity, "why go to all this effort?"
- Average artworks are already bad. Their self-identity mocks the idea of "more or less."
- Academic works fail for their apparent unity, which comes from a lack of counter-impulses and therefore of synthesis. This is dryness, an absence of feeling for work.
- A work that is true is successful. Even apparent "mistakes" can be integrated into an authentic whole. This is the problem of rules of harmony, etc., which is obvious today because they now hold no weight. We are left to only judge a work's success on its internal truth, rules being cast aside. But without rules the determination of success is an obscure one.
- Good artworks reconcile the irreconcilable, or point towards a possibility of reconciliation. At the same time they are constitutively irreconcilable and must be so.
- Criticism is not trivial, it forms the historical content of works themselves which is integral to their meaning.
- The sublime is unassuaged negativity, stark and illusionless. This is also the legacy of the comic, the opposition to and mocking of power and grandeur.

Universal and Particular

- Attic tragedy is the reconciliation of myth.
- Spirit is the universal.
- Novels in the bourgeois age are the height of the paradox of the nominal and universal, that universals are best expressed through subjectivity. This is a loss of authenticity for modern art along this dialectic: its aspiration towards universality is desubjectivizing and therefore leads to banality (minimalism, the square, circle as profound, etc.).
- Bach and fugues: forms are just as necessary as it is to push against them. Bach always subverted the strict rules of the fugue but he is the master of the fugue.
- The power of the subject resides in its sharing in the universal, not a simple declaration of existence as individual.
- A work fulfills its type in its specificity, forms are followed until the coherence of the work

overcomes the form.

- The mimetic impulse through which art speaks also resists speaking, causing the paradox of art speaking and not speaking its meaning.
- The antinomy of bourgeois art/freedom is that freedom is promised but formally prohibited.
- Style was never an adequate concept; style itself is the unity of style and its suspension.
- Progress in art is neither to be proclaimed nor denied.

Society

- Art was more social before the emancipation of the subject. It opposed domination in society but was not yet aware of its independence.
- Just by existing apart from society art critiques society, which is why puritans despise it.
- "Art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society." This is outdated because the individualist paradigm of independence is now mainstream and society is no longer (coherently) determinate.
- Art's uselessness is its mask of truth.
- All art of value insists fetishistically on its own coherence, but it is threatened when it recognizes its fetish character and persists in its obstinate insistence.
- Art's relation to society is in its production, not its reception.
- Great art is internally revolutionary, and at the same time every artwork has a tendency towards social integration. This does not imply progress, however, because work is usually only critical in its own time and its radicality worn away in the public eye in later reception by the public.
- Asociality is the political legitimation of art; Beckett's plays are banned for their asocial character.
- Kitsch expresses emotions no one is feeling, a parody of catharsis. Ambitious art, however, also does this.
- Art's truth content cannot be separated from the concept of humanity.
- Praxis fundamentally stands for violence in the practical world, art is nonviolent and denounces the narrow untruth of the practical world.
- Brecht preaches to the choir. His alienation effect is supposed to provoke thought, but his works are authoritarian in their didactic resistance to the actual ambiguity that provokes thought.
- Artworks only exercise a practical effect not by haranguing but by the scarcely apprehensible transformation of consciousness. Art cultivates consciousness only by renouncing persuasion.
- The more sensitized art becomes towards the sensual immediacy of it, the more critical it becomes to reality.
- Student activists and avant-gardists, the last to admit they want to abolish art, nevertheless do because they do not want its inextricable difficulties and isolationism.

Paralipomena

- Aesthetics are the study of an artwork's value, i.e. criticism.
- Aesthetic positivism, by assuming art is a pure in-itself, draws attention to the dialectical fact that no artwork is ever pure.
- An absence of naivete requires a degree of naivete because one must be open to spontaneous reaction to works. To have no naivete is to be totally dogmatic and fixed.
- The sovereign artist would like to annul the hubris of creativity.
- The new is pernicious, but ever since Wagner, Manet, Baudelaire, it is impossible to do without it. Fighting it only highlights it.
- Newness has paradoxically become permanent. Its invariance is its weakness.
- Beauty is inherited culturally or is a naturalistic, organic, unplanned outgrowth, viz. cities like Perugia and Assisi.
- As mere things artworks no longer speak, present something that one surrenders to. Irony art,

aestheticized installation objects, posit something unsatisfying, lesser, unrewarding. Irony art, at best, presents a nihilistic morass, sentimental aesthetics presents an already existent logic to surrender to, it invokes and points towards something without engendering it by itself. It does not come to an aesthetic through its internal logic, it comes pre-formed and adheres to the preexisting aesthetic idea. They are subjective receptacles for viewers to project themselves onto instead of an active assertion.

- Art's autonomy comes through imitation, not its avoidance.

- The Baroque is not decorative, it ceases to decorate anything and is nothing but decoration.