

Dignity of the Particular: Adorno on Kant's Aesthetics

Theodor Adorno wrote at the crossroads of modernity and postmodernity, during a time when our heretofore unmitigated love of enlightenment became tinged with an element of fear as to where it might lead. Enlightenment rationality, which once had been assumed to be emancipatory, had become our jail-keeper, enchaining every nook and cranny of modern life, from large-scale politics to interpersonal relations. Technology, in the guise of instrumental reason, brought us Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Greenhouse Effect, and a host of other horrors, creating a dystopian nightmare. It is in the face of this "brave new world" of technological progress that Adorno turned to modern art, which he believed mitigates the excesses of instrumental rationality by self-consciously interrogating its own meaning in relation to such rationality. In its transcendence of and protest against instrumental rationality, modern art identifies and undermines our reified world, suggesting a new model for emancipation based not on technology or bureaucracy, but upon the celebration of difference and a questioning of the rigidity of both culture and subject. This art functions dialectically, showing the "falsity of that essence" of our enlightenment reality by reminding us of the "memory of what has been vanquished or repressed." In this way, modern art exists in "an anticipation of what is possible" (366).

As we shall see, Adorno argues that modern art emphasizes difference and intimates a possible future based on non-instrumental rationality. It emphasizes difference in its refusal to subsume the particular under the universal, and it intimates an emancipatory future insofar as it "speaks a language of insubordination" in the face of the hegemony of enlightenment rationality. In order to explore the emancipatory potential of modern art, Adorno turns to Kant, whose *Critique of Judgment* provides him with critical tools for exploring aesthetic rationality.

In Kant's *Third Critique* we see an appeal to a type of thought which is open-ended and which grants dignity to the particular. What Adorno finds most appealing about Kant is

that his aesthetics insists upon *reflective* judgment, which, as opposed to determinant judgment, does not give a universal under which a particular might fall. Instead, the universal arises out of the particulars, which proclaim the truth of universality of the bureaucratized world. Art, when it gets to this universal moment, tells the truth about society. The best works bring to light the hidden irrationality of a seemingly rational world.

While it provides Adorno with a way to explore and challenge the dominant forms of rationality in the modern age, his turn to aesthetics does not go uncontested. Many critics argue that in turning to aesthetics as his model of emancipation, Adorno inappropriately tries to solve the dilemmas of modernity through aesthetics instead of directly through politics. That is, that he provides only the illusion of emancipation that could be obtained more concretely in the realm of politics. For instance, Albrecht Wellmer criticizes Adorno's reduction of rationality to instrumental rationality. He follows Habermas in distinguishing instrumental and communicative rationality. This allows him to claim that there is already an emancipatory potential in our democratic societies and legitimacy principles. He argues that since we can achieve reconciliation from within our democratic institutions, we do not need to rely upon art. Thus, Wellmer faults Adorno for overloading the work of art as a model of reconciliation, arguing that if art presents an unreconciled reality as a way to lead to true reconciliation, then it can achieve aesthetic validity only by "turning against itself and calling its own principle into question--it must do this for the sake of truth which may not be had except by means of this principle." That is, art must present a synthesis which is simultaneously reconciled and unreconciled. "The modern work of art must, in one and the same movement, produce as well as negate aesthetic meaning, balance itself as it were on the razor's edge between affirmative semblance and illusionless anti-art."

So, modern art is radically ambivalent. For Adorno, this is a strength, but Wellmer sees it as a weakness leading to an irreconcilable antinomy. To avoid this antinomy, Wellmer reiterates Habermas's suggestion that we ought to consider art as a *medium of communication* rather than a *model of reconciliation*. Wellmer believes that rather than

appeal to aesthetic reconciliation we can appeal to unconstrained communication. In other words, Adorno could have solved the problem of reconciliation by proposing a theory of communicative praxis instead of an aesthetic theory.

In contrast to this view, my argument in this paper will be that Adorno's turn to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is not a turn away from politics into the realm of some idealized aesthetics, but that he enters into aesthetics as a way to confront political problems in an emancipatory way, that is, to offer a model of politics which refuses to reduce the particular to the universal in the name of any movement or ideology. Further, art speaks the language of suffering and speaks for those left out of even democratic discourse. Thus, modern art addresses unmet needs and unfulfilled desires. For Adorno, modern art speaks a language of suffering and any appeals to an "ideal speech situation" *a la* Wellmer and Habermas slights the importance of this suffering and unfulfilled desire. Ultimately they unwittingly speak the language of instrumental rationality once again.

For Adorno, the only way out of that language is through aesthetic expression and a rather unconventional philosophical reflection (although a philosophical reflection which is in many ways closer to art than philosophy) on art and aesthetics. In order to make this argument, I will show how Adorno reads Kant's categories in a unique light which makes them suitable for political emancipation.

In this paper I examine Adorno's turn to aesthetics by focusing on his reading of Kant's *Third Critique*. In doing so, I intend to address criticisms of Adorno by Albrecht Wellmer, Habermas, etc., which fault him for appealing to aesthetics rather than politics for an emancipatory model. I argue that these critiques, by appealing to a communicative rationality which is said to be already embodied in democratic institutions, ignore the profound between reality and utopia which is emphasized by modern art. In order to make this argument, I first will examine the motivations behind Adorno's aesthetic turn and the criticisms of this move. Next I examine Adorno's reading of Kant's *Third Critique* in detail, focusing specifically on his interpretation of the Kantian concepts of "purposiveness,"

"disinterested interest," "the conceptless concept," and "genius." I will also address Adorno's challenges to Kant's subjectivism and show how he offers a historical critique of aesthetics which he finds to be lacking in Kant. Finally, I respond to the criticisms of Adorno in terms of these re-worked Kantian categories.

The Link Between Politics and Aesthetics

Is it possible to conceive aesthetic freedom as not merely as a *goal* of politics, but as the *ground* of it, insofar as the way we make aesthetic judgments could be seen to inform the way we make political ones? If this were the case, we would need to ask what it is about the aesthetic realm that also could apply to politics. Further, we would need to distinguish an emancipatory use of aesthetics from a repressive one, distinguishing this emancipatory view from the one that sees the state as a work of art, with the individual moments deemed important only insofar as they contribute to the whole of the "beautiful state." Instead, we would have to conceive political judgments in the same way that we conceive aesthetic ones, having a concern for freedom such that the aesthetic would offer a model of emancipation.

World War II, and the concomitant rise in industrial capitalism, brought on pessimism about the future of rationality and an end to the belief in solidarity with the proletariat for those schooled in the Marxist tradition. Adorno and Horkheimer addressed this pessimism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They followed Weber's analysis that as reason became secular, it became instrumental. This meant that reason lost all redemptive and reconciliatory power and became purely instrumental. The thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that enlightenment and its promise of emancipation has become the principle of domination. Increases in rationality have brought no corresponding increases in actual freedom, despite the ideological claims to the contrary.

They argued that the only way out of our imprisonment in instrumental rationality is through mimetic expression. Like enlightenment rationality, mimetic expression is an

objectifying activity, but one which differs from instrumental domination by giving a "simultaneous voice to objectivity." Thus, it can render nature cultural in a non-destructive way. Art confronts culture with the self-knowledge that it is in reality simply alienated nature. That is, artistic production involves the use of mimetic impulses in an expressive, vs. domineering, way. As Adorno notes,

[a]rt amends conceptual knowledge in that it attains, on its own and in complete isolation, what conceptual knowledge vainly expects to learn from its focus on the ...subject-object relation which is that an objective quality discloses itself through subjective effort (113).

Thus, there is space for resistance in our contemporary realm of instrumental rationality in the guise of authentic/autonomous art. Because it cannot be easily subsumed under universal concepts, this art can provide a politically liberating, if ephemeral, site of refusal. This is because in enlightenment rationality, nature must be mastered by labor. Art can resist mastery because of its commonality with magic: they both have a specific area removed from the context of profane existence where special laws apply. In art, image is contrasted with animate existence, and thus, modern artworks replace primitive magic. They allow for the appearance of the whole in the particular.

As we have seen, enlightenment leads to an impasse and it is because of this impasse (i.e., that emancipation cannot be achieved through cognitive rationality), that Adorno turned to aesthetics. As David Rasmussen puts it "[t]he wager on aesthetics would keep the emancipatory hypothesis with which critical theory began alive, if in muted fashion." Thus, while *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with its condemnation of rationality, seems to undermine the possibility of critique, the introduction of mimesis here and in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* overcomes this problem by offering a critique which avoids reference to cognition. Rasmussen continues, "[i]f *Dialectic of Enlightenment* could be read as a critique of cognition, art represents for Adorno a way of overcoming the dilemma established by cognition." Aesthetic rationality, unlike cognitive rationality, represents the non-representational.

The explosive power of art remains in its representing that which cannot be represented. In this sense it is the non-identical in art that can represent society, but only as its other. Art functions then for Adorno in the context of the program of critical theory as a kind of stand-in for a cognitive theory, which cannot be attained under the force of instrumentality.

The problem is, how can art both critique instrumental rationality and maintain its claims of intelligibility? That is, if society is thoroughly instrumentalized, how can art do other than merely reflect that instrumentalization? Adorno addresses this problem with the concept of mimesis, which stresses the way art goes beyond mere representation in favor of reconstruction---representing the non-identical. In this way, art becomes something rational containing a non-rational moment. It eludes and transcends instrumental rationality--offering a non-dominating type of rationality in its place. Thus, out of the critique of instrumental rationality in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, art's noninstrumental rationality assumes a cognitive role.

Adorno continues to emphasize the noninstrumental rationality of art in his *Aesthetic Theory*. It is in this light that Adorno's interest in the nondiscursive cognition of works of art becomes manifest. Since all discursive cognition has become repressive at the time of late capitalism, we must rely on art to oppose the universalizing forces of science and technology. However, Adorno agrees with Kant that artistic and discursive rationality are linked. Thus, paradoxically, the aporias of enlightenment can only be overcome by enlightenment itself. Modern art can encourage this enlightenment because in such art identity arises reflexively rather than being determinately posited. This is seen clearly in the mimetic link Adorno finds between magic and nature: magical influence respects the multiplicity of nature while science aims at reifying and controlling it. Art, like magic, imitates itself, and contrasts this pure image to reality, whose elements it has absorbed.

As we see, art is introduced as emancipatory here insofar as it provides the mimetic link to a non-instrumental way of life. This theme will continue in Adorno's later work on aesthetics. However, before moving on to discuss these works, perhaps we should

confront some of the criticisms of this formulation as it occurs in *Dialectic and Enlightenment*.

As we shall see, many critics disagree with the central tenants of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For instance, in the *Theory of Communication Action*, Habermas argues that Adorno and Horkheimer inappropriately transform Lukacs's concept of reification--detaching it both from its "special historical context...the rise of the capitalist economic system" and from "the dimension of interhuman relations altogether." Thus, they generalize reification temporally and substantively, which "leads to a concept of instrumental reason that shifts the primordial history of subjectivity and the self-formative process of ego identity into an encompassing historico-philosophical perspective."

He further faults their use of mimesis--a speechless "impulse"--to overcome the perceived contradictions of enlightenment because they preclude theoretical knowledge of mimesis, yet offer such a theory. That is, Adorno and Horkheimer, "would have to put forward a *theory* of mimesis, which, according to their own ideas, is impossible." Thus, he claims, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has a "performative contradiction" insofar as it must "make use of the critique that has been declared dead." That is, "[i]t denounces the Enlightenment's becoming totalitarian with its own tools."

Horkheimer and Adorno find themselves in the same embarrassment as Nietzsche: If they do not want to renounce the effect of a final unmasking and still want to continue with critique, they will have to leave at least one rational criterion intact for their explanation of the corruption of all rational criteria. In the face of this paradox, self-referential critique loses its orientation.

Habermas concludes that if Horkheimer and Adorno "still want to *continue with critique*, they will have to leave at least one rational criterion intact for their explanation of the corruption of *all* rational criteria." That is, Horkheimer and Adorno must salvage at least enough rationality to ground their own critique.

Is this a fair criticism? Is the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* really the Nietzschean repudiation of reason Habermas claims it is? Although it might appear to be to be the case,

a closer reading leads us to see that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is hardly irrational. After all, as Robert Hullot-Kentor points out, the book is concerned with the recuperation of reason, albeit in a transformed appearance. This is evidenced in the preface of the book where Adorno and Horkheimer state their intention as the conceptualization of a "positive concept of enlightenment."

Thus, contrary to Habermas's concern that Adorno and Horkheimer have abandoned the claims of critical theory in a "totalizing" critique of rationality, it seems that they turn to aesthetics to save rationality in an increasingly instrumentalized world. That is, they believe that art expresses a form of rationality which transcends instrumental reason "by expressing its non-identity with itself." Thus, instead of abandoning critical theory, Adorno and Horkheimer transform it, believing that art can anticipate the emancipation both promised and precluded by cognitive rationality because it is art which sides with the non-identical.

Further, while conceding Habermas's point that perhaps Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of reason uses some of the very same critical tools the authors denounce, I agree with Rocco's conclusion that the "charge of performative contradiction misses half the depth and complexity of a multivocal text that can be read two ways: both as an attempt to rescue enlightenment thinking and as an attempt to deconstruct it." While remaining critical of reason, the authors do not seem intent at its complete destruction. Thus, what Habermas sees as an impassable aporia in Adorno's work "...is in fact an effort to keep the tension between a modern defense of reason and its postmodern critique alive and so avoid the premature closure that marks all conceptual systems."

The disintegrating structure of the *Dialectic* arrests the direction of its theoretical intentions by joining in opposition two ways of pursuing social critique: the book thus reverses its theoretical claims in order to reverse the reversal of enlightenment itself. Horkheimer and Adorno acknowledge the necessity of comprehensive theoretical knowledge that makes the whole intelligible and, like its postmodern critics, suspect the functionalizing, hierarchizing and systematizing mentality that is part of the theoretical and political problem they seek to mitigate.

It is against this background that Adorno turns to Kant's aesthetics. Adorno finds that art has a politically emancipatory function. Since it is non-discursive, it can encourage liberation from oppressive social structures. Although indirectly, art is socially deviant, this is what provides its political justification.

Because of events of this century, it is certain that we must articulate emancipation without concomitant concepts of historical necessity. This is why Adorno turns to Kant. For Adorno, the *Critique of Judgment* can be seen to be emancipatory insofar as it concerns the problem of how freedom intersects with nature. Kant's formulation of the aesthetic judgment as one where there is a non-subsumptive relationship between the subject and object and the universal and particular shows it to be a relationship free of coercion. It articulates a relationship of reciprocity between the idealized particular subject and the idealized particular object. Further, the aesthetic links reason to freedom and to sensibility.

Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is one template Adorno uses to gauge the political ramifications of art and the relationship between the aesthetic and political realms. Adorno's relation to Kant on this matter is far from a simple adaptation of his views, however. While greatly indebted to Kant for raising aesthetics to the level of critique on par with theoretical knowledge and ethics, Adorno is critical of Kant's separation of aesthetics from theoretical and practical reason. Contrary to this view, Adorno would have combine all three realms, finding both a rationality and an ethical mandate in art.

While agreeing with Kant that art has a "purposiveless purpose," since it provides a "disinterested interest" and highlights particularity, Adorno disagrees with Kant's emphasis on the subjective nature of the aesthetic experience. Essentially, Adorno augments Kant's aesthetics in order to develop both an unconscious and a historical/anti-ideological moment in his reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

T.W. Adorno, **Aesthetic Theory**. Translated by C. Lenhardt and edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London and New York, 1984.

²Wellmer, Albrecht. "Truth, Semblance, and Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity," *Telos*, no. 62 (Winter 1984-85), p. 90.

Ibid. p. 96.

See Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, p. 284

When referring to the eighteenth century movement, I will capitalize the term

Enlightenment. I will use a lower case form, enlightenment, to speak of the enlightenment

rationality detected as early as ancient Greece by Adorno and Horkheimer.

David M. Rasmussen, "Critical Theory and Philosophy," in the **Routledge Dictionary of the History of Philosophy, Volume Eight**. Ed. by Richard Kearney. Routledge: London, 1993, pp. 254-289.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Jürgen Habermas, **The Theory of Communication Action, Volume One: Reason and the Rationalization of Society**. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Beacon Press: Boston, 1984, p. 379.

Ibid., p. 379-80.

Ibid., p. 382.

Ibid., p. 119.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 126-127.

Ibid.

See Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno," in **Telos**, No. 81, Fall, 1989.

Chris Rocco, "The Politics of Critical Theory: Argument, Structure, Critique in **Dialectic of Enlightenment**."

Ibid.

Ibid.