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Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: Aesthetic Display of the Empirical Reality

Abstract: Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* illuminates the basic question of the aesthetic claim to truth. Adorno's text presents key philosophical questions about the nature of aesthetics. Through grounding Adorno's aesthetic theory in Hegelian logic, this article explicates why and how the veracity of a modern artwork dwells in its claim to the truth of its own untruth. What is the relation between aesthetic truth and the objective truth of empirical reality? Can aesthetic truth disclose the truth of empirical reality? By relating negatively to what Adorno calls the empirical reality, modern artworks not only become identical to their nonidentity, but also present that which they are nonidentical with as their formative ground. If the truth of an object is mediated, aesthetic truth must disclose the degree of objectivity found in empirical reality. Consequently, aesthetic truth becomes for-itself a mediated truth, and aesthetic truth comes to reveal the mediatedness of empirical reality.

Keywords: Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, Aesthetic Negativity, Mediation, Aesthetic Identification, Aesthetic Pleasure.

Adorno'nun Estetik Kuramı: Ampirik Gerçekliğin Estetik Görünüşü

Öz: Theodor Adorno'nun *Estetik Kuramı* estetik gerçekliğin ne olduğunu incelerken estetiğin doğası hakkında temel felsefi sorular sorar. Bu makale, Adorno'nun estetik kuramını Hegel mantığına dayandırarak modern sanatın gerçekliğinin ne olduğunu araştırmaktadır. Estetik gerçeklik ile ampirik gerçeklik arasındaki ilişki nedir? Estetik hakikat, ampirik gerçekliğin hakikatini gösterebilir mi? Ampirik gerçeklik ile değilleme üzerinden ilişki kurarak modern sanat kendiyile özdeş olmayarak kendine özdeş olur, modern sanatın biçimlendirici temeli bu özdeş olmama durumudur. Sonuç olarak, estetik hakikat kendisi için dolayımlanmış bir hakikat haline gelir ve ampirik gerçekliğin dolayımını ortaya çıkarır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Adorno, Estetik Kuram, Estetik Değilleme, Dolayım, Estetik Özdeşleşme, Estetik Haz.

In *The Science of Logic*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel delineates spirit as a consciousness whose actuality is determined by its self-aware knowledge (1812/2010: 17). Theodor Adorno formulates consciousness as self-awareness in his *Aesthetic Theory* and illuminates the basic question of the aesthetic claim to truth. Adorno's text presents key philosophical questions about the nature of aesthetics. What is the relation between aesthetic truth and the objective truth of empirical reality? Can aesthetic truth disclose the truth of empirical reality? Through grounding Adorno's aesthetic theory in Hegelian logic, this article explicates why and how the veracity of a modern artwork dwells in its claim to the truth of its own untruth.

The truth-claim of artwork rests in its aesthetic claim, which exists inherent to the structure of a work of art. Such creations function as self-enclosed systems structured according to a rationality posited by its aesthetic truth. The basic governing principles of anything structured, its rationality, inhere in the thing's form. This basic principle is known as objective necessity according to Hegel. The nineteenth-century philosopher's logic claims that the objective necessity is a conceptually mediated necessity. Thus, if the truth of an object is mediated, aesthetic truth must disclose the degree of objectivity found in empirical reality. By relating negatively to what Adorno calls the empirical reality, modern artworks not only become identical to their nonidentity, but also present that which they are nonidentical with as their formative ground. Consequently, aesthetic truth becomes for-itself a mediated truth, and aesthetic truth comes to reveal the mediatedness of empirical reality. It is here, following Adorno, where art and philosophy converge: "For contemporary consciousness fixated on the tangible and unmediated, the establishment of this relation [philosophy's] to art obviously poses the greatest difficulties, yet without this relation art's truth content remains inaccessible" (Adorno 1997: 131).

In Hegelian philosophy, objectivity refers to how a concept mediates the principles of an object, thus rendering the objectivity of an object as always signifying more than the object itself. Anything existing “for-itself” envelops the excess within its structure by means of becoming identical to that which makes it nonidentical with itself. The puncticity of the thing is determined by the limits both in and beyond which it is defined. Beyond these limits, there is the other, or everything that the thing is not. However, against common logic, this beyond is immanent to the thing itself, because that which constitutes the essence/ground of the thing is the other. The thing becomes “for-itself” by negating everything that it is not; the thing becomes itself by negating its own negation. This second negation posts the other as the other while the thing declares itself as the other of this other (Hegel 1812/2010: 90). According to Hegel, the thing preserves its self-identity through negatively relating to its determinate existence. Hegelian logic manifests itself explicitly in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*: “Indeed, artworks are only able to become other than thing by becoming a thing... mediation in the strict sense that each and every element in the artwork becomes manifestly its own other”. (86-87) Considering the notion of immanent mediation from this perspective necessitates identifying the process of objectification as the formative, formal principle of something’s becoming. Artworks manifest as self-identical and preserve their self-identity through their inner dialectical movement: “The purity of form....constituting itself, becoming conscious of itself, and divesting itself of the nonidentical: it is a negative relation to the nonidentical” (Adorno 1997: 162). Hegelian method also delineates the formation of a thing in terms of the immanent self-referring negativity. Adorno points out the mediatedness of everything that *is* as follows: “The artwork becomes objective ... by virtue of the subjective mediation of all its elements.” (1812/2010: 168). The failure and subversion of an identificatory or recognition-based interaction with an artwork forms the substructure of aesthetic negativity. All objective and aesthetic truths double as mediated truths, thus the truth content of an artwork exists as a mediated truth:

“The truth content of artworks ... is mediated in itself” (Adorno 1997: 129). A concept becomes objectified by means of this self-referring negativity. This notion of mediatedness denotes the processual becoming of things.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno explicates that the “artworks are something made” (1997: 179), declaring every artwork to be a construction. A work of art transforms into such an object at the end of its process of formation when its contents and form are posited:

if art opposes the empirical through the element of form - and the mediation of form and content is not to be grasped without their differentiation- the mediation is to be sought in the recognition of aesthetic form as sedimented content. (5).

The construction process of an object reveals the thingness of an artwork rather than being given becomes. Adorno believes the function of art lies in returning us to the constructed mediation of empirical reality: “Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them” (4). This movement of empirical experience derives from and is driven by the experiences of identity and identification: “Adorno terms this mode of experience identificatory... identity-oriented quality of nonaesthetic experience” (Menke 1998: 30). An identity-oriented experience of empirical reality finds its roots in the identity of the concept within the object. Concept here neutrally represents objective reality and, consequently, the reality of object exists independent of any conceptual mediation. Non-aesthetic empirical reality denies the understanding that objective truth is a conceptually mediated truth and that every object is an idealized, constructed object. Adorno’s idea of reconciliation refers to the overcoming of this socio-historically constituted disintegration of concept and nature. The claim that the objective truth exists as a mediated truth never means that the empirical reality is a purely subjective, conceptual construction. Rather, this claim asserts that the concept determines its own objectivity. A recursion occurs: subjectivity constitutes itself objectively while, at the same time, objectivity constitutes itself subjectively. If the object is a subjectively mediated entity, then

the concept is also an objectively mediated entity. Conceptual thought transcends itself by claiming it is already beyond itself and that its essence is object-ive. When Wellmer indicates that philosophy strives to transcend the concept by means of itself, he suggests philosophy aims to reveal that the concept is already objectively mediated. Adorno focuses on the transcendence of the concept through which rationality involves a mimetic process. It is through this mimetic process that rationality reveals the irrationality inherent to it (Wellmer 1991: 8). This perspective represents a progressive distancing from the object. From this subject-object dichotomy that Adorno mentions about, one can infer that the concept can only transcend itself and touch the object by way of a mimetic process. It is through this mimetic enactment that concepts no longer represent the objective realm but they become incorporated into the objective realm. They become embodied, reintroducing irrationality into the picture. Mimesis here denotes the forms of dialectics of subjectivization and aesthetic semblance (Wellmer 1991: 10).

Adorno defines the relationship between concept and object as a mimetic movement wherein the concept is material and material is conceptual: "In his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno attempts to characterize this self-transcendence of the concept as a process by which conceptual thought acquires a mimetic quality" (Wellmer 1991: 4). The mimetic relation between concept and object obscures the representative relation between them. The identity of a concept and an object typifies this representative relation. But, when concept and object relate to each other mimetically, the connection between them operates as a sensual, expressive and communicative one. An object determines the concept while being determined by it and vice versa. By means of the conceptually mediated object and the objectively mediated concept, the identity-oriented quality of the relation annihilates itself. Aesthetic experience redeems the empirical reality by reconstituting it as a mediated reality. Foregrounding the role of aesthetic experience in aesthetic negativity means shifting attention from the content of an artwork to the distinction between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic realities.

Art's autonomy lies in its distinction from what is not art. This distinction between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic reality subverts the identificatory mechanisms between the artwork and the reality it is supposed to imitate. In contrast to any identificatory process that takes place in the process of aesthetic experience, the aesthetic negativity developed in Adorno's theory explicates the notion of aesthetic difference. From this perspective, aesthetic pleasure is aroused by non-identificatory processes (Menke 1998: 16).

Adorno's concept of aesthetic negativity refers to the distinction between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic reality. The non-aesthetic realm denotes the empirical reality, the first world, and the aesthetic realm is the second world, the world of art. Aesthetic autonomy endures in the form of the relational negativity of the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic. Aesthetic reality negates the other, the non-aesthetic empirical reality of an object and constitutes itself as its own: aesthetic reality metamorphoses into non non-aesthetic reality or, following Adorno, "by its difference from empirical reality the artwork necessarily constitutes itself in relation to what it is not, and to what makes it an artwork in the first place" (7-8). Through these means of negation, aesthetic reality constitutes itself and posits the aesthetic realm as a world "in-itself." Double negation defines the aesthetic realm as the non non-aesthetic reality, which is what Hegel calls "determinate negation." Through this operation, the aesthetic realm shifts towards a state of being "in-itself" and the empirical reality turns into the ground of the aesthetic world. Adorno, following Hegel, comes to see that aesthetic reality "constitutes itself in relation to what it is not" (Adorno 1997: 7). The non-aesthetic reality thus consists the aesthetic reality's essence and an artwork's truths: "Artworks have no truth without determinate negation; developing this is the task of aesthetics today" (129). An artwork's truth lies within its immanent negativity. Its negative, or empirical, reality, serves as its essence and, as a result, the work's other becomes immanently posited. Therefore, as Adorno states, the constitution of an artwork depends on its "relation to what it is not," and does not occur as identical with

itself, negating that which constitutes itself, and thus remaining in a state of negation. This self-referential loop of negativity moves towards an artwork's being "for-itself" with what it is not identical to: a work of art evolves from its initial identity into its nonidentity. What is the self-identity of art according to Adorno? What does it mean for an artwork to preserve this self-image as the means of its own negation? And finally, how does such erasure correlate with the truth content of an artwork? Aesthetic negativity functions here through aesthetic autonomy. No longer can a work of art be conceptualized as mere imitation or as mimetic relationship between art and non-art. Dialectics of aesthetic semblance brings a new perspective to understanding the self-identity of art. It is precisely within this framework, Wellmer argues, we can explicate the interrelationship between semblance, truth, and reconciliation in Adorno's theory (1991: 10).

An interrogation into what constitutes a work of art will reveal what Adorno means by the self-identity of art: "In its relation to empirical reality art sublimates the latter's governing principle of *sese conservare* as the ideal of the self-identity of its works; as Schoenberg said, one paints a painting, not what it represents" (Adorno 1997: 4). According to Adorno, what defines art is its difference from what is not art, painting's identity, to extend the example, forms around the movement of canceling itself out. Such a self-referential invalidation typifies the formation of a painting. Adorno thus characterizes modern art as works exemplifying the production process or, to put it another way, as works in progress: "new art accents the once hidden element of being something made ... work in progress" (26). Modern art thus illustrates both its own constructedness and the process of its construction: "The concept of construction, which is fundamental to modern art" (24). Modern artwork itself *is* the process of its formation, not the end-product of the process. The interior force of the thingification of an artwork is its self-referring negativity. It is this modern differentiation between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic realms that art sets itself apart from that which is not art. Aesthetic pleasure lies in the capacity of

experiencing pleasure in something that in reality would cause displeasure. Aesthetic pleasure results in the aesthetic negativity inherent in modern artworks (Menke 1998: 11). Following Schoenberg's statement, painting does not represent. Rather, painting depicts its creative generation, preserving its generative identity instead of assuming external meaning; a painting determines and displays itself as in process. Unlike earlier paradigms, modern artworks do not conceal their constructedness behind representation, iconography, or symbolics but instead may be equated with their becoming. A modern painting's reality lies in its being a painting, not in an imitated empirical reality. Since a painting is made and created, it can only preserve its identity by foregrounding something its identity as made and created, not by hiding the reality of its constructedness: "as the obligation to resemble its own objective ideal..aesthetic semblance is truth...mimetic impulse, which is an impulse toward self-likeness" (Adorno 1997: 104). Modern artwork's truth is in its claim to semblance to the process of its formation. Modern artworks hold onto their identity by declaring what they are, that is, by being nothing but an articulation of production, nothing but constructed objects.. An artworks' aesthetic claim to objective truth lies in its reenactment and aesthetic subversion of an empirical reality that insists upon it being more than the methods that birthed it. This aesthetic negation of empirical reality does not add anything what is not already there and merely discloses what already exists in the empirical reality has remained hidden according to conventional logics. Aesthetic reality releases the immanent negativity of the empirical reality. Through emphasizing its composition, an artwork's status is not ready made as an unmediated representational object, or how ordinary consciousness perceives art to be. Something becomes "for-itself" only by means of this immanent, negative dialectical movement. The immediate truth of a thing is always mediated by its manufacture not by its post-production meaning. Modern art redeems its empirical reality by giving it back what belonged to it since its origins, its design.

Mediation may be seen as coming from Adorno's negative dialectical movement of something becoming "for-itself" by which a work of art is not an immediately given, found object imbued with symbolic meaning, but instead conceptually attached to their inherent, already realized fabrication. The dialectical relation between the concept and object of a created work of art suggests that aesthetic reality not only designates objects as conceptually mediated things, but also presents concepts as objectively mediated ideas: "to undergo subjective mediation in its objective constitution" (Adorno 1997: 41- 42). Artworks' detachment of themselves from empirical world and their bringing forth another world remains elusive if not explained through the concept of mediation that lies in aesthetic negativity. It is the dialectical movement in Adorno's notion of aesthetic negativity, the enactment of aesthetic understanding, through which one can define the formation of aesthetic objects. The aesthetic enactment of objects occurs processually. The complex relationship between aesthetic semblance and the negation of this semblance demands new ways of thinking about the notion of negative processuality (Menke 1998: 48). A dynamic negative interplay between concept and object leads to the emergence of an artwork. In Adorno's aesthetics, a concept is objectified, while an object is conceptualized, creating a dialectical movement of becoming. The result of this negative mutual development generates a work's meaning. Within the aesthetic realm, objective mediation may be equated with subjective, conceptual mediation, or, as Adorno states, "subjectivity is itself a piece of objectivity." Therefore, aesthetic derives from a mediated, dialectical truth whereby these two, usually distinct philosophical categories merge and are defined by "the mediatedness of the truth content" (129). Aesthetic truth reveals the objective truth as it *is*: "Art completes knowledge with what is excluded from knowledge and thereby once again impairs its character as knowledge, its univocity" (54). Aesthetic reality corrects empirical reality by subverting its obsession with representative relations between the concept and object. Instead, aesthetic reality dialectically negates the modern subject-object dichotomy: "Art

corrects conceptual knowledge...what conceptual knowledge in vain awaits form the nonpictorial subject-object relation..." (113). Concept and object simultaneously imitate each other and give rise to an idea of their mutual negation.

The standard, modern object-subject dichotomy established an unmediated relation between concept and object whereby concept neutrally signifies an immediately given object. How does the aesthetic reenactment of the nonaesthetic reality subvert the representative relation between the concept and object? How does the aesthetic reality ensure its empirical reality appears in its mediated form? Aesthetic reality reconstructs the nonaesthetic objects as negotiated things that are generated through a creative process: Sensuality as the mimetic reenactment of the processual constitution of the object...is the reenactment of the process of its formation" (Menke 1998: 97-98). It is only from this perspective that one can speak of the reconcillation that becomes sublated through aesthetic negativity. What is thus overlooked in Adorno's theory is this sublation of identificatory and mimetic enactment that takes place during any aesthetic experience. The constructedness inherent in a work of art becomes released through the sublation of any identificatory mechanism underlying the relationship between concepts and objects. This mimetic enactment is first sustained and then negated in aesthetic experience. This shows how negative processuality that takes place during an experience of a work of art is related to the sublation of mimetic identification. It is in this very state of negative processuality that the distinction between art and non-art reveals itself. The negativity of aesthetic experience is directed and oriented only through this form of aesthetic experience (Wellmer 1991: 44). By releasing the negativity inherent to its objects, the aesthetic enactment of the empirical reality gives back its construction. This self-referential, negative dialectic, a force of becoming, is usually obscured in the empirical reality prescribed by standard dialectical relations. Aesthetic experience discloses what Adorno sees as hidden through reconstructing the objective truth of the objects. Such a reality disentangles the unity of meaning ensured by the signifier-signified

relation of the concept-object pair. Concepts are not the mere signifiers of already formed objects, but rather objects establish themselves as objects through a series of actions through which concepts materialize via objectification. Adorno puts forward the self-mediation of matter through form and of form through matter as follows: “form is essential to art, that it mediates content” (142) and “yet it implies the distinction of form from content...Form is constituted...only in that it is different from the nonidentical” (162). Hegel also designates the determinations of matter and form in terms of their self-mediation through each other: “form determines matter, and matter is determined by form...Thus the determination referring each to the other is the self-mediation of each through its own non-being” (1812/2010: 393). Aesthetic experience reveals the self-mediation of concept and object through each other; it discloses their relation as an immanent dialectical process of becoming.

Adorno differentiates the two realms of the aesthetic and nonaesthetic as alternate orders of reality. The relation between these two realms reveals the hidden truth of empirical reality. As a result of this formation, an artwork annihilates itself when its function is over. Modern art not only deconstructs the identity-oriented, dialectical relation between concept and object, but also reconstructs the objective truth of empirical reality, moving beyond subjectivity. The reality of the aesthetic realm becomes the reality of the nonaesthetic one. What Adorno calls an artwork's self-consciousness is its consciousness of its own invention rather than its subjective interpretation. To give back the empirical reality its quality of constructedness, artworks must distinguish aesthetic reality from nonaesthetic reality. Only by means of the estrangement and distancing are artworks able to be distinct from empirical reality and constitute a negative, dialectical relation with it. Through such a relationship, the hidden truth of the nonaesthetic reality *appears*. The negative relationality between these two orders discussed earlier in the paper emphasizes how artworks, by rejecting empirical reality, also negate their own reality and hence are capable of evincing true

consciousness. For the emergence of the true consciousness within the empirical realm to occur, one must acknowledge the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic as distinct but related orders of reality. Adorno claims artworks' self-consciousness encompasses unreality as their essence. Artworks preserve their self-identity by dialectically negating it. Thus claims that "...artworks stand in the most extreme tension to their truth content. Although this truth content...appears nowhere else than in what is made, it negates the made" (131). The self-conscious negativity of artworks therefore functions as their truth content because they differentiate themselves from the empirical reality only by means of negatively relating to their other, the empirical reality, their negated essence. According to Hegel, things become for themselves through their self-referring negativity. Thus, an aesthetic truth cannot be understood without the determinate negation, that is, the negative self-referentiality of the aesthetic realm. The aesthetic truth of a work of art and its relation to the objective truth lies in sublating the identification between art and non-art. The process of dialectical aesthetics lies in conserving the self-referring aesthetic negativity in artworks. Art's distinction from the empirical world is maintained here in order to be transformed in and for itself. Art makes any meaning only through this dialectical movement through which a work of art distinguishes itself from what it is not art. Aesthetic truth lies not in what a work of art is, but rather what it has become during this processual transformation. Negative processuality is thus the key concept to understanding Adorno's notion of aesthetic negation. Aesthetic negation is thus the means to explicate the truth claim of an artwork (Menke 1991: 49).

In the remaining part of the paper, I would like to explore how the truth content of artworks is their self-referring negativity, their spirituality. Artworks' embrace of their unreality, through their self-consciousness, enables them to both differentiate themselves from the empirical reality and to redeem the empirical reality through their negation. This empirical reality may thus be posited as the essence of aesthetic truth and metamorphoses into something altogether new:

“Artworks become appearances – that is, as the appearance of an other – when the accent falls on the unreality of their own reality” (Adorno 1997: 79).

Adorno refers to the modern “art’s emergent self-consciousness,” which means that the modern artworks are conscious of the fact that they are not non-art because they are made and invented. As aforementioned, a work of art’s spirit is its self-consciousness:

In no artwork is the element of spirit something that exists; rather, it is something in a process of development and formation. Thus, as Hegel was the first to perceive, the spirit of artworks is integrated into an overarching process of spiritualization: that of the progress of consciousness. Precisely through its progressive spiritualization, through its division from nature, art wants to revoke this division form which it suffers and which inspires it. (Adorno 1997: 91-92)

Self-consciousness denotes a work of art’s self-identity, the “being-for-itself” of the artworks. An aesthetic object relates to an everyday object negatively and posits something more exists in an aesthetic object, which Adorno refers to as “this artifactual more....[under which] artworks become artworks in the production of this more; they produce their own transcendence” (78). Spirit inheres in this “artifactual more”: “That through which artworks, by becoming appearance, are more than they are: This is their spirit” (86). By means of the spirit, every artwork exceeds its own self-definition and generates a self-consciousness within an “artifactual more.” Such a denotational excess does not transcend the structure of an artwork but rather acts as the immanent logical necessity and rationality of the thing-ness of an artwork, its metaphysical substantiality. The spirit of an artwork lies in its metaphysical physicality and therefore in its objective necessity. Works of art make truth-claims by the virtue of their objective necessity through their logic and rationality. Art’s self-consciousness denotes the awareness that lives as something which has been constructed. An artwork makes a truth-claim by both embracing and negating its own generation and existence. Following Adorno’s negative dialectics again, an artwork becomes real by the virtue of positing itself as unreal, by working against itself. Hence, a work of art becomes identical with what

it is nonidentical with and declares its empirical reality as its other. Such an other is the limit where an artwork ends, but, as Hegel also denotes, something begins where it ends precisely because the other constitutes the artwork as the other of the other. By being the non non-aesthetic reality, by referring to itself negatively, an artwork wills its empirical reality appear in its mediated form: "The spirit of artworks is their immanent mediation....mediation in the strict sense that each and every element in the artwork becomes manifestly its own other" (87).

An artwork's construction is an artifactuality whose essence posits itself as real only by means of its self-negation: "Every artifact works against itself" (106). Artworks assume the form of self-enclosed systems through possessing aesthetic truths that are a language *sui generis*: "The condition for the possibility that art philosophy and art converge is to be sought in the element of universality that art possesses through its specification as language *sui generis*" (131). Aesthetic truth can, then, display the objective truth of empirical reality by disclosing its own truth of becoming "for-itself" through a self-negating process. Art's "language *sui generis*" constantly dis-plays itself as something made. Adorno delineates artwork's spirit by referring to this act of self dis-playing: "Truth content cannot be something made. Every act of making in art is a singular effort to say what the artifact itself is not and what it does not know; precisely this is art's spirit" (131).

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