Utopian Optics: Theodor W. Adorno's *Prisms: Cultural Criticism and Society*

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The English-reading world has recently been offered the alpha and omega of Adorno's systematic works.[1] Not only do *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics* present Adorno's original programmatic evocation and his final methodological summary respectively, but the *Jargon of Authenticity* and *Philosophy of New Music* footnote these with lengthy statements on two favorite leit-motifs: the polemic against Heidegger and the praise of Schoenberg. Yet, one suspects this is all too good to be true; it couldn't happen in America. Paradoxically, it seems, the very culture industry Adorno accused of fostering the uncritical attitude is now dispensing the systematic essence of the most advanced critical theory of society.

But *Negative Dialectics* does not present the core of yet another philosophical edifice, adequately expressed in a systematic summary. Rather, it represents the thorough rejection of such monstrosities, in the end uncritical affirmations of an evil social totality. The methodology of *Negative Dialectics*'s "anti-system" is fundamentally a referral back to those concrete analyses it purports to summarize. Taken in isolation from Adorno's prior investigations, *Negative Dialectics*—meant to formulate the self-consciousness of those instances of critical thought and to establish their priority over the retrospective methodology—is alienated from its object and open to summary rejection as an example of precisely that mode of deranged consciousness it unceasingly battles.

How then is one to bring Adorno's thought into focus without distorting it, without obscuring what is unique and critical in it? The choice of his most systematic works for translation was not the author's. Adorno himself selected an assortment of essays as his gift of gratitude to England and America for housing him during the Nazi era. Perhaps these essays on social science, literature and music contained in *Prisms*—a volume which has for some years been available in polished English without creating much notice—provide a clearer introduction to Adorno's approach than the explicit theses of his later exposition. It is the claim of the following presentation that *Prisms*—and especially its lead essay—reveals Adorno's "system" *in nuce*,

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[1] The following of Adorno's books are now available in English:
Adorno, T. W., Horkheimer, M. (1944/1973) Dialectic of *Enlightenment*. Seabury.
Adorno, T. W. (1948/1973). *Philosophy of Modern Music*. Seabury.
Adorno, T. W., et al. (1950). *The Authoritarian Personality*. Norton.
Adorno, T. W. (1953). *Prisms*. Neville Spearman.
Adorno, T. W. (1964). *Jargon of Authenticity*. Northwestern University Press.
Adorno, T. W. (1967/ 1973). *Negative Dialectics*. Seabury.
Page references in the following are to Prisms.

derives its premises from the nature of its material, and demonstrates the theoretical primacy of its content in the form of its practice.

The first essay in *Prisms*, which gives the book its subtitle: "Cultural Criticism and Society", is especially programmatic. Characteristically, its formulation of Adorno's procedure is at once an example of the critical method at work and a derivation of that method through a process of critique, proceeding from a devastating attack on the existing profession of cultural critic in order to develop an alternative conception. As the essay's title anticipates, attention centers upon the social relationships that impinge on art and criticism. This pivotal point, as the motor force of Adorno's presentation, is itself mobile—both historically and within the essay.

Taking a preliminary overview, we can follow the movement of Adorno's presentation through three stages: A) The profession of cultural critic is attacked for being unaware of its dependence upon society. Not only does the profession necessarily affirm culture as a whole in criticizing specifics—with unrecognized but undeniable social consequences—but in doing so it isolates culture as a realm divorced from material society, distorting culture and depriving it of its truth. B) Culture today, in the form of mass culture, is attacked for its ideological role in society. To preserve its true value, art must respond to contemporary society with a complex interpenetration of autonomy and dependence, avoiding the ideological pitfalls at both extremes: art for art's sake and socialist realism. C) Correspondingly, the simple alternatives for criticism, the immanent and the transcendent approaches, are rejected: the formalist's absolutizing of culture is not overcome by a sociology of knowledge which relativizes culture just as absolutely. Modern art's actual balance of autonomy and dependence within the context of contemporary society dictates a more intricate role to the cultural critics the artist as critical theorist, as artist-philosopher-sociologist.

A. The culture critic

Cultural criticism is a contradictory business, says Adorno. In criticizing cultural products, the traditional critic must presume that he is himself cultured; in rejecting specifies, the evaluator assumes in general a fixed cultural edifice as his standard. Abrogating for himself a position above the masses, the cultural critic confers upon culture an autonomy from the work-a-day world of society, an absolute divorce allowing of no interaction. The attempt to establish a playground for art and critic is, however, a deception, for the critic is no less situated within the marketplace than the products of the culture industry that he evaluates. With its historical roots in the role of reporting on cultural goods, the profession of critic entails pricing—when not blatantly advertising—the cultural wares. Differentiating into low, middle and hi-brow, questioning a work's authenticity, referring to cultural "values": these are bargaining techniques, which make room for both exorbitant price tags and mass sales. The critic’s autonomous objectivity thus stands in the service neither of art nor of audience, but of the dominant economic interests. Criticism's paradox signals its failure. Attempting to judge culture's finest achievements from above, the critic ends up peddling kitsch; claiming autonomy from society for himself and art, he enslaves both to the economy.

The critic’s *hubris* ends tragically, not merely for himself and his profession—art, too, comes crashing down from the pedestal on which the critic enthroned it, shattering like the rigidified idol it has become. Just as intellectual freedom has been forced down a narrow path of self-destruction within the confines of bourgeois society, artistic autonomy has seen its very purpose

contradicted by its development, thanks partially to the efforts of cultural criticism. The critic's pronouncement that the dissolution of feudalism and the rise of democracy had freed the mind and art from external coercion may have annihilated the consciousness of regimentation, but did not eliminate the fact. Instead, argues Adorno, "this regimentation, the result of the progressive societalization of all human relations, did not simply confront the mind from without; it immigrated into its immanent consistency." (*Prisms*, page 21) Precisely now, when the illusion of freedom is prevalent and critical thought should be assisting art in uncovering the unfreedoms which the artist must resist if he is to create, now the critic assumes that utopia has been achieved, that art is as free as he. Helping to weave the veil that obfuscates contemporary unfreedom, the critic unwittingly reduces art to that very ideology which liquidates art. The "culture as such" of the critics, unrelated to society, is neatly incorporated—without protest into a social totality which in fact allows less and less for critical perspective. Further, the freezing of culture into eternal values distorts the critic's judgments of urgent social matters. Contrasting his simplistic notion of culture to material concerns and rational thought, he cannot distinguish between the existing unequal distribution of wealth and the potential to abolish hunger, between the repressive irrationality which today parades as enlightenment and true rationality. No isolated anachronism, the illusion fostered by cultural criticism represents an unfortunate response to the struggle of art in that same social context which conditioned this response and defines its tragedy.

B. Art and ideology

The present social niveau is characterized by an invisible but pervasive form of ideology, and modern culture has had to define itself in this context: pro or con. Previously, men fought and died for ideologies, today they live one; society was once to be transformed in accordance with one ideology of another, now it has become one. Ideology no longer takes the form of a rationalizing theory, but, according to Adorno, presents itself in the everyday praxis of society: "There are no more ideologies in the authentic sense of false consciousness, only advertisements for the world through its duplication and the provocative lie which does not seek belief but commands silence" (34).

The complementarity of the liberal and fascist techniques of control—the stultifying plugging of the status quo which suffocates any transcending image and the arrogant assertion of power which casts off all pretext to rationality—becomes transparent in times of crisis. Even *Time Magazine* (Nov. 5, 1973) revealed something of the affirmative character of mass culture as diversion: From his out-of-town retreat, "Nixon watched the Washington Redskins defeat the St. Louis Cardinals on television and telephoned his congratulations to Coach George Allen. If he had listened closely, Nixon could have heard automobile horns honking outside the White House in response to the signs of protesters: Honk for impeachment."

Professional sports are ideological—not so much for any message they may indoctrinate, but precisely because of their intellectual insignificance, because they fill the TV screen with exciting emptiness and the viewer's mind with information of no personal relevance. Subtle ideological biases of movie producers have consequently become insignificant, dwarfed by the role of the gossip Hollywood fabricates for the nation. Working under the demands of mass culture—that the product be entertaining but non-demanding, distracting but not stimulating,

ever novel yet always familiar—the industry has so distorted culture that even the enclaves of tradition which have been preserved are meaningless. In the new context art must change to maintain its traditional intent. The stance demanded by our age of ideology for any art which hopes to retain its autonomy is one of protest against the latest "opium of the people"—the commodity—which, after the death of God, enthrones the individualized consumer upon the vacated seat of glorification to secure his adjustment while obscuring his subservience to the economy. To maintain creative independence, art must recognize its social dependence; to retain social relevance, it must exercise aesthetic autonomy. According to Adorno's analysts, successful modern art distinguishes itself from kitsch—the subservience of art to its manipulated reception—through negation: unintelligibility.

Adorno's posthumously published aesthetics, which transforms philosophy into aesthetic theory, preserving the mandates of his philosophy while appropriating the experiential content of contemporary art, offers an abstract characterization or art's dialectical relationship to society: "Art negates the determinations categorically impressed upon the empirical and shelters, nevertheless, empirical beings in its own substance. . . . Even the most sublime art work takes a specific stance towards empirical reality by removing itself from its influence—not once and for all, but always concretely, unconsciously polemical against reality's stance towards the historical hour…. The unresolved antagonisms of reality recur in the art works as the inherent problems of their form. That, not the inclusion of objective moments, defines the relation of art to society" (*Aesthetische Theorie*, p. 15f). Roughly speaking, art finds the content of its concerns in society, rejects, however, the form socially imposed upon these contents and re-forms them aesthetically, autonomously. Secondarily, of course, the choice of contents is aesthetically motivated, while, on the other hand, the character of the autonomous rejection and re-formation depends upon the historically specific social context of both the contents appropriated and the artist at work. That which confronts the artist, society as a coercive system of falsity, reappears in the work of art, sublimated in the aesthetic form that the artist created within and against his social confines.

Adorno's formalism is, however, not crudely opposed to expressionism when considered in the context of his social theory. To claim that a work is the expression of its creator's personal outlook is to ignore the fact that an artist's mode of perception is formed by his reactions as a child, student and sensitive individual to the pressures and conditions of society. If Adorno repeatedly argues that autonomous individuality has long since succumbed to pervasive societalization processes, then this is no less applicable to producers in the cultural realm, whether accepted professionals, struggling iconoclasts or hacks. The artist's world-view, displayed in the formal aspects of his work, in the way in which his work organizes its material for perception by solving the technical problems involved, is thus not a merely subjective matter, but is related to objective contents: prevailing social relationships. This is perhaps the most profound way in which the commodity relations that characterize capitalist society mediate modern art.

The artist's attempt to form aesthetically what has been repressed and misshapen socially inevitably involves a struggle with the distortions and conflicts of existing reality. This struggle, crucial to the emancipation of man from a social system that exerts an ideological stranglehold on all aspects of life, may today be confined to the workshops of those artists who actively resist the temptations of the culture industry. The work of art there becomes an image in which the character of society can be viewed as nowhere else: with an eye toward the possible reconciliation of repressive social contradictions. Often necessarily disharmonious by traditional

standards, the aesthetic harmony created by modern art anticipates the order of the good society, one that would reject the contemporary principles of social organization.

C. Dialectical criticism today

Philosophy, midwife to truth according to Socrates, responds to the needs of the day by becoming cultural criticism, not in order to evaluate art, but to help bring its truth into the world. Not that philosophy is reduced to mere *belles lettres*. Rather, it takes into account the developments in society, in ideology, in culture, and redefines itself accordingly. In his time, Marx transformed philosophy into a social theory centered on the critique of political economy because he saw an historically developing increase in the importance of the economy for all aspects of life. Adorno, writing more recently, insists that because of changes in the nature of ideology, social theory now "must absorb cultural criticism, the truth of which consists in bringing untruth to consciousness of itself." (28) To assist art in giving birth to truth, philosophy that concerns itself with culture must, of course, avoid the shortcomings Adorno has accused cultural criticism of commonly incorporating. Philosophical or "dialectical" criticism represents the *Aufhebung*, or synthesis, of traditional immanent cultural criticism and orthodox transcendent critique, retaining the former's respect for the unique work, but transcending it with the latter's concern with the social context, while negating the restrictive dogmatism of each. This form of criticism must incessantly cross the boundaries of the academic division of labor: "Dialectics cannot, therefore, permit any insistence on logical neatness to encroach on its right to go from one genus to another, to shed light on an object in itself hermetic by casting a glance at society, to present society with the bill which the object does not redeem" (33). The untruth which philosophy is to reflect upon is that of culture devoid of artistic transcendence or that of a world which falls far short of the potentials revealed in the artist's pregnant utopian images.

Traditional cultural criticism has either accepted culture in totality and worshipped it as a higher intellectual achievement divorced from menial material production or else the realm of mind has been held in contempt as the battleground for interests based In the economy. However, to ignore the ties to society of culture and its criticism is not only to exclude their potential for importance while ignoring actual distortions, but it is also to reduce thought to ideology unawares. A dogmatic or absolute reduction of culture to social origins or political interests fares no better. Here the possibility that art—or criticism—could reveal anything is denied from the outset. Ideology itself has incorporated this relativizing of knowledge and blunted the critical edge of its accusations. The reduction of everything to the service of pre-defined functions and the characterization of all in the corresponding universal categories is, far from liberating, a trick of the ideological totality. Adorno notes that Marx' critical conception of the dependence of superstructure on base, having been absolutized by Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, has since been fused into the very ideology it was designed to attack: "No notion dares to be conceived any more which does not cheerfully include, in all camps, explicit instructions as to who its beneficiaries are—exactly what the polemics once sought to expose. But the unideological thought is that which does not permit itself to be reduced to 'operational terms' and instead strives solely to help the things themselves to that articulation from which they are otherwise cut off by the prevailing language" (29). The epithets, "autonomous creation of genius" and "mere bourgeois ideology", opposed as they may appear, serve identically to

prohibit the articulation of that which art, operating in the languages of its media, may have managed to experience.

What art expresses in the problems of its forms corresponds, according to Adorno's analysis, to contradictions within the structure of society. Philosophy as cultural criticism becomes social physiognomy, analyzing the society in their own terms by following out the logic of that which confronts and confines the artist. Never absolutely rejecting cultural phenomena for their weaknesses, Adorno scours the uniqueness of their failings for a clue to understanding the society that deprives them of strength. Not naively assuming that the utopian images of art have already been attained on earth, he insists on measuring the distance between those ideals and reality, using the divergence as a standard for evaluating the latter. The task Adorno proposes—and repeatedly carries out—requires the talents of a trained artist, a dialectical thinker and a social analyst. But above all it demands the ability to resist all temptations to ignore the unique or to universalize results without regard for history, society or subject matter. Consequently, each essay in *Prisms* is unique in approach, style and goal. The only repetition is that of the term "hypostatization" being hurled at those weaker souls (Mannheim, Spengler, Veblen, Huxley) who give in to absolutizing concepts or viewpoints—but just as this threatens to bore the reader, Adorno switches to his heroes (Schoenberg, Benjamin, Kafka), who overcome that tendency in their art.

D. Jazz as music

Until now the discussion has remained almost as abstract as those publications criticized on this count at the start. It is the virtue of *Prisms* that it does not end with its introductory essay, but goes on to analyze various cultural products in ways that amplify Adorno's methodological considerations: illustrate, expand and justify them. Particularly convenient for concretizing Adorno's approach is the trilogy of essays on music. The reflections on jazz, Bach and Schoenberg are subtle and the following remarks can only hope to use them to shed some light on the preceding consideration of art and society.

The first analysis of music defines the enemy: popular music, the result of eager adaptation to the requirements of commercialization. "Perennial Fashion—Jazz" begins by rejecting the standard claims for jazz's uniqueness on musical grounds, proceeds to illustrate the irrationality of social controls with the example of pop music and concludes with a social analysis of how this music works to cause its listeners to adjust to existing conditions. Predigested and already comprehended, the stock of techniques used in commercialized jazz is no longer an expressive language capable of innovation, but an instrument for the manipulation of emotional responses on a mass scale, hence no longer an art medium in which one could transcend the given circumstances or even struggle against them. The basic structure of popular music is completely standardized and only the melody is varied, a stimulus calculated to achieve fixed psychological results. The paradoxical twist in the essay's title refers to the demands of familiarity and novelty placed on entertainment as well as to the illusory appearance of society as incorporating continual quantitative progress along with eternal social structures. Jazz stands as a model for a stagnant society. Flattening the universe of possibility to the fact of actuality, it helps those who turn to it for something different—even rebellious—to adjust to sameness by discouraging

critical thought about music or society. “Jazz is the false liquidation of art—instead of utopia becoming reality it disappears from the picture" (132).

"Bach Defended against his Devotees" presents the other, positive side of music, understood not as a cultural monument, but precisely in polemical opposition to those who enthrone Bach without learning from him. The conservative interpretation of Bach claims that he was attempting to conserve what had already become out-dated. This simplistic notion fails, Adorno argues, to preserve what is of value in Bach's music. Not that Bach merely retained something of eternal value, “rather, what was becomes a means of forcing what is towards a future of its own making” (142). Briefly, "what was" was a concern for the essential structure of the musical score in contrast to the performed music's sensual appearance. Already rejecting the subjectivistic emphasis on the surface appearance, which became respectable in the Romantic era and disastrous in pop music, Bach reached the heights of polyphonic composition precisely by continuing to stress the structure while rationalizing the techniques. The process of rationalization—which occurred in manufacturing as the division of labor and the analysis of production into elementary tasks—can be seen in Bach's use of developing variation, which treats the melody as a series of manipulable components. Because Bach’s technical virtuosity remained informed by traditional concerns, it not only contrasts with those modern artists who make technique itself into the goal; Bach’s achievement also stands as a condemnation of capitalism. For in the sphere of material production, the process or rationalization has been allowed to contradict the needs of the producers. The harmoniously composed society would, accordingly, be one which resulted from the subjugation of industrial efficiency to the repressed criteria of social use-value.

Arnold Schoenberg's is "music as the protest of nature against myth" (172). Its best-known characteristics, his twelve-tone system and his technique of developing variation, are not to be explained by Schoenberg's personal inclinations and only partially as a logical consequence of developments in avant-garde serious music. Rather, according to the third essay on music, they represent a necessary reaction against the products of the culture industry. Having reduced musical structure from the beast’s essence to a fossilized skeleton on which to hang alluring sounds, the pop music of AM radio trains its victims not to look more than skin deep.

If a composer today hoped to communicate by means of what had always been the essential structure in music, he would have to eliminate the distracting appearances and forcefully confront the audience with that which music-lovers had once sought out. Where Schoenberg's twelve-tone system effectively annihilated the familiar facade—abolishing traditional melody with the harmonic key signatures—developing variation filled out the essential structure without introducing inessentials. The initial shock of Schoenberg's music, its seeming renouncement of intelligibility, resulted from his rejection of those crutches of easy listening which, having become second nature to the public's ears, obscured the very nature of music as something more than a cover for the silence of contemporary isolation.

Adorno's musical judgments, especially his critique of jazz, seem counter-intuitive to many readers today. However, just as social developments have made the traditional conception of ideology obsolete without thereby improving the clarity of social self-consciousness, so certain jazz-rock groups since the early 1950's (when Adorno wrote the assays in *Prisms*) may, for instance, escape the letter of Adorno's objections to swing without warranting his praise. The Beatles' style certainly incorporated an element of life lacking in previous pop music and the protest songs had undeniable political content, yet the speed with which their melodies were

systematically adapted to productivity-increasing background hums indicates that they had failed to make an aesthetic transformation in the structure of the music itself comparable to Schoenberg's. This may partially explain their end result. More effectively than the blatantly inane earlier pop music, subculture rook organized the discontented into a collective, standardizing their disaffection and thereby reintegrating them into a controllable sector of precisely that mass culture that was to be rejected. If it is nevertheless true that certain avant-garde jazz artists or psychedelic rock groups have broken free of the standardized routines that have come to define their media and that they force their audience to struggle with a creative art form, then perhaps they have achieved something of that potential which Adorno pointed out being systematically repressed by the culture industry. A final evaluation of these musicians would have to deal with their relation to the state of the art in serious music, their stress on interpretive style and expressionistic coloration over compositional technique and the effects of commodity relations on their art, issues on which Adorno's thought remains largely unsurpassed. Such an attempt to problematize Adorno's judgment of pop music by critical reflection under modified cultural and social conditions would, far from constituting a rejection of Adorno, be to adopt his restless spirit.

E. A kaleidoscope of critique

Prisms is the practice which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* called for and *Negative Dialectics* reflected upon. But *Prisms* is itself self-motivating and self-reflective; its essays reveal a correspondence of form to content, an interaction of analysis and object. Its arguments are not open to glib objections, for they are inextricable from the material that they articulate. By contrast, *Negative Dialectics* will undoubtedly be dismissed off-hand as based on presuppositions, try as it may on each of its several hundred tortuous pages to argue that dialectics brings no standpoint of its own to its battles, no standards or ideals. But look at the analyses in *Prisms.* The standards for evaluation and the ideals are culled from the material, in the contradiction between an autonomous development in art and the stunted growth of its social parallel, for instance, or in the effects that the subject matter shows of external repressions. Adorno's ideal consists of a condition in which these contradictions and repressions, today forced upon men by a specific arrangement of society, will disappear along with hunger and distress. No utopian construction in the pejorative sense, Adorno's outlook, rooted in the present, contrasts as sharply with those like Huxley's which stand the problems on their head: "Full of fictitious concern for the calamity that a realized utopia could inflict on mankind, Huxley refuses to take note of the real and far more urgent calamity that prevents utopia from being realized. It is idle to bemoan what will become of men when hunger and distress have disappeared from the world" (116).

Nor does Adorno impose an external problematic. The controversial points have already been raised by a tradition of cultural criticism, which is then subjected to Adorno's critical eye in terms both of the phenomena themselves and of the social context of the criticism. Adorno thus treats modern art the way Marx dealt with capitalist production: where Marx's critique of political economy founded itself in a critical appropriation of the theories of Adam Smith and David. Ricardo, Adorno starts out by taking the culture critics to task. This is the only approach consonant with the insight that consciousness is a social product, i.e., that the way in which a society reflects upon itself and its creations is itself a social symptom requiring analysts.

Consciously situated within the dynamics of social history, Adorno's analyses make no claim to completeness or infallibility, as the form of his presentation shows. An essay is neither a deduction nor a definitive report, but a speculation on some topic which those who insist on certainty would have to ignore. It raises issues, develops aspects, suggests approaches and then leaves the matter partially open. According to his own theory, Adorno can never rest, for not only are the phenomena to be treated as processes of infinite mediation—never exhaustively analyzed if only because they are inextricable from the social totality—but they are historical, changing from decade to decade, if not with the seasons.

The style of Adorno's prose and the structure of his presentations, inevitably as alienating on first encounter as his iconoclastic insights, represent responses to the nature of the subject matter. The clear and distinct notions that form the traditional ideal for philosophical discourse fail to capture the object in its relationships, with its conditional restrictions, and as the result of an historical formative process. For Adorno, materialism implies that the object determine the concepts for its comprehension: "The thesis of the primacy of being over consciousness includes the methodological imperative to express the dynamic tendencies of reality in the formation and movement of concepts instead of forming and verifying concepts in accordance with the demand that they have pragmatic and expedient features" (43).

Further, given the social context which conditions the reading public the same way it determines art's audience, an essay written in a commonsensical style will be casually read like a newspaper, either ignoring the deeper issues or uncritically accepting the prevalent interpretation of them, while a work with several levels of meaning will be grasped only at its most superficial. Like a work of modern art, Adorno's writings attempt to escape the socially imposed “systematic distortion" associated with the expectation of immediate comprehension and the phenomenon of intellectual fads through the technique of "methodical alienation". Convoluted syntax and esoteric vocabulary are only the most obvious features. Suppression of logical connectives forces the reader to reconstruct the arguments, making him pause to reflect and reach his own conclusions. Technical terminology is also lacking, so that the things themselves can appear out of the configuration of descriptions, unhampered by rigidifying concepts, which would be open to endless and irrelevant debate. The theory which structures the material is implicitly present between the lines of description, as inseparable from details in the presentation as it originally was from the aspects of its object. In this way, Adorno tries to escape the threat which hangs over all prose: "No theory, not even that which is true, is safe from perversion into delusion once it has renounced a spontaneous relation to the object" (33). Critical of the unnecessary shortcomings of society and of philosophies that justify them, Adorno does not turn to mere polemic, but radically transforms philosophy's form in response to its context.

Recognizing the necessarily tentative and incomplete character of his analyses, Adorno has never closed a topic, but incessantly returns to the same themes from different angles, in varying configurations. If the essays reviewed here are prisms, each displaying a unique rainbow of ideas from the spectrum of concerns in Adorno’s thought, then his life’s work is a kaleidoscope, blinding at first sight, but enlightening thereafter. Its importance lies in the utopian tint captured in its perceptions of existing reality.

Chicago, May 1974.

Appendix

The following is a translation of a selection from Adorno's discussion of "The relationship of art to society" in his Aesthetische Theorie (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/M, 1970). Including the excerpts quoted above, the selection appears on pages 14 to 16 of the German.

Art and artworks are superfluous because they are not just art, but also something foreign, opposed to it, dependent not merely as heteronom, but right into the structure of their autonomy, ratified by the social positing of labor-dividing and shattered spirit. Its own concept is imbued with the ferment which nihilates it.—The aesthetic breaking remains irrevocably that which is broken; the imagination, that which it imagines. That is especially true for the inherent goal-orientation. In the relation to empirical reality, art sublimates the principle of *sense conservare* (self-preservation), which reigns there, to the ideal of the self-sufficiency of its creations; one paints, according to Schoenberg's statement, a picture, not what it represents. On its own, each artwork wants the identity with itself, which is violently forced upon all objects in the empirical reality as the identity with the subject—and thereby lost. Aesthetic identity is supposed to assist the non-identical, which is repressed by the compulsion to identity in reality. The artwork can only become being to the second power thanks to the separation from the empirical reality, which permits art to mold the relation of whole and part according to its own needs. Artworks are representations of the empirical living in so far as they allow them to receive what is refused them outside and thereby free them from that to which their thingly-external experience directs them. Although the line of demarcation between art and *empirie* must not be eliminated by making the artist a hero, the artworks nevertheless have life *sui generis* (self-created). It is not merely their external fate. The important ones continually bring forth new levels, age, chill, die. That they, as artifacts, human products, do not directly live like men, is a tautology. But the emphasis on the artifact aspect in art relates less to their having been produced than to their own constitution, regardless of how they came to be. They are alive in speaking, in a way forbidden the natural objects and the subjects, who made them. They speak thanks to the communication of everything individual in them. Thereby, they form a contrast to the dispersion of the merely existent. Precisely as artifacts, however, products of social labor, they also communicate with the empirical, which they dismiss, and they cull their contents from there. Art negates the determinations categorically impressed upon the empirical and shelters, nevertheless, empirical beings in its own substance. If it may oppose itself to the empirical through the moment of form—and the mediation of form and content cannot be grasped without distinguishing them—the mediation is nonetheless with a certain generality to be sought in the fact that aesthetic form is sedimented content. The apparently purest forms, the traditional musical ones, date back in all their idiomatic detail to contents, such as dance. Ornaments were frequently once cultic symbols. A tracing of aesthetic forms back to contents, as the school of the Warburg Institute did with the specific object of the ancient after-life, should be carried out more extensively. The communication of artworks with the external, however, with the world against which it closes itself off as holy or unholy, takes place through non-communication; precisely thereby they show themselves to be broken. It is easy to imagine that their autonomous region has nothing more in common with the external world than borrowed elements, which then appear in a completely transformed context. Despite this, the triviality in the history of ideas, that the development of the artistic methods, usually gathered together in the concept of style, corresponds to the social

development, is undeniable. Even the most sublime artwork takes a specific stance towards empirical reality by removing itself from its influence—not once and for all, but always concretely, unconsciously polemical against reality's stance towards the historical hour. That the artworks, as windowless monads, "imagine" that which they themselves are not, can scarcely be grasped other than by assuming that their own dynamic, their immanent historicity as a dialectic of nature and the mastery of nature, not only has the same essence as the external, but in itself resembles that other one, without imitating it. The aesthetic productive force is the same as that of useful labor and has in itself the same teleology; and what might be called the aesthetic relations of production, everything in which the productive force finds itself embedded and upon which it works, are sediments or fingerprints of the social ones. The double character of art as autonomous and as *fait social* (social fact) incessantly infects the zone of its autonomy. In such relations to the empirical, they save, neutralized, what men once experienced literally and undividedly upon their existence and what drove spirit out from there. They participate in enlightenment because they don't lie; the literalness of that which speaks out of them does not deceive. They are, however, real as answers to the question-complex of that which comes to them from without. Their own tension is valid in relation to that outside. The fundamental levels of experience, which motivate art, are related to the objective world, from which they recoil. The unresolved antagonisms of reality recur in the artworks as the inherent problems of their form. That, not the inclusion of objective moments, defines the relation of art to society. The relations of tension in the artworks crystallize themselves purely therein and reach the real essence through their emancipation from the existing facade of the external. Art, *choris* (separated) from the empirically existent, gains a stance to it in accordance with Hegel's argument against Kant, that as soon as one sets a restriction, one already oversteps it in the setting and takes within itself that which was to be forbidden. This alone, no moralizing, is the critique of the principle of *l'art-pour l'art* (art for art's sake), which makes the *chorismos* (separation) of art to its one and all through abstract negation. The freedom of artworks, about which their self-consciousness boasts and without which they would not be, is the cunning of their own reason. They tie all their elements to that whose transcending constitutes their joy and back into which they threaten at any moment to sink.

Translated by Gerry Stahl, University of Frankfurt, May 1973.