John Frow

MEDIATION AND METAPHOR: ADORNO AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF ART

In a famous exchange of letters the Frankfurt School philosopher, aesthetician, and sociologist Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) once elaborated a critique of the operations of mediation between disparate social realms used by his colleague Walter Benjamin in an unfinished work on Baudelaire. Adorno’s letters are of interest not only for the accuracy with which they penetrate Benjamin’s methodological weaknesses but also for the light they throw on the very similar problems caused by inadequate models of social correlation and of historical teleology in his own work.

In the first part of the exchange Adorno singles out for commentary the motto which Benjamin had affixed to a summary of his work on nineteenth-century Paris (the “Passagen” fragments): “chaque époque rêve la suivante” [“Every epoch dreams its successor”]: the commodity is the collective “dream” of the capitalist epoch, and this false dream leads inevitably to its cancellation and resurrection as Utopia. Beginning with the implications of this sentence for Benjamin’s conception of historical time, Adorno then moves into a more general examination of Benjamin’s analysis of the commodity and of the dialectical embedding of commodity-character in cultural objects. The motto “implies three things: a conception of the dialectical image as a content of consciousness, albeit a collective one; its direct—I would almost say: developmental—relatedness to the future as Utopia; and a notion of the ‘epoch’ as the pertinent and self-contained subject of this content of consciousness.”

Benjamin is fixed within an “immanent” conception of the dialectical image and so misses the contradictory character of social movement—compensating the missing complexity through theology. And by displacing the dialectical image, as dream, into consciousness, he surrenders “that objective unlocking power which could legitimize it materialistically.”
The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather, it is dialectical in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness.  

This critique seems to me an adequate summary of many of the key weaknesses of Adorno himself: his often monolithic conception of "society" or "the social"—as a unified subject—-the consequent ontologization of history; and the frequent failure to catch the interaction between the "fact of consciousness" and the objective structures which produce consciousness.

The dialectical nature of the process of production of consciousness, he goes on to argue, means that the fetish-character of commodities is not simply "copied" as dream or illusion, but is answered by desire or by fear. In failing to grasp this active moment of reception, Benjamin falls into the objectivism of mechanistic reflection-theory: "it is precisely this dialectical power of the fetish character that is lost in the replica realism [Abbild-Realismus] (sit ventia verbo) of your present immanent version of the dialectical image." To conceive of the dialectical image as a collective representation of commodity-fetishism is to be able to reveal the Saint-Simonian conception of the commodity-world as utopia, but not its reverse, the secret representation of hell. For the nineteenth century the commodity is an ambiguous dream, the death's-head of capitalist allegory which functions both as an alienated object in which use-value dies, and as a survivor of this death, promising immortality—but not for men. In order to grasp this ambiguity, the dream must not be hypostatized as a "collective consciousness"; this falsifies the differential function of the commodity, and dissolves the dialectical dichotomy of objectivity and alienated subjectivity.

The second part of Adorno's critique is directed to Benjamin's essay "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire," and here it is the lack of mediation that Adorno notices. "Throughout your text there is a tendency to relate the pragmatic contents of Baudelaire's work immediately to adjacent features in the social history of his time, preferably economic features." Instead of a fully theoretical investigation of the complex links between disparate series, Benjamin—and here again this reflects on much of Adorno's own practice—establishes purely metaphoric connections. The basis of Adorno's objections, then, is "that I regard it as methodologically unfortunate to give conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a 'materialist' turn by relating them immediately and perhaps even causally to corresponding features of the infrastructure. Materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated
through the *total social process*. And this theoretical inadequacy is condemned as a capitulation to empiricism, as the symptom of a magical belief in pure facticity.

We might take as exemplary of Adorno’s own manner of operation that point in the *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1948) where he proposes an equation between the regressive and self-repressive character of the twelve-tone row and the alienation inherent in the general system of capitalist production. Through the metaphorically-established equivalence of the system of artistic production to the system of material production, the contradictions operating within the (musical) text are seen to be in some way identical to those called into play by the historical incongruity of the forces and relations of production. This method of forcing together “two incommensurable realities, two independent codes or systems of signs, two heterogeneous and asymmetrical terms: spirit and matter, the data of individual experience and the vaster forms of institutional society, the language of existence and that of history,” illustrates an act of decipherment by which Adorno moves, not towards a concrete socio-historical characterization of the work of art, but rather to a clarification of the historical dialectic itself. The categories through which this dialectic realizes itself are the historically developing poles of the individual and the general, of freedom and system, and of subject and object. All the phenomena of social life converge at any one point in time on the historically specific relation between the categories of subject and object. From here the conceptual path is opened to a grasping of the social function of the individual and the balance maintained between it and the social order; of the interdetermination in art of form and content, which is both equivalent to and a measure of the relation of subject/object; and of dialectical thought itself, which reflects in the process of its formation the central shifts in the movement of history.

History is thus marked by a totalizing and immanently developing logic, a central energy which shapes all secular manifestations around itself. The possibility of an identification through analogy of heterogeneous moments of the social whole is given in the retention by Adorno of this Hegelian principle of coherence and cohesion, the two interpenetrating aspects of which we can still call—despite the attempted marriage of an idealist with a materialist terminology—by their maiden names of *objective spirit* ("...the spirit which is irrevocably modelled on the domination of nature and material production") and *absolute spirit*. But the cost of this postulation of a central subject of history which endows with significance all the fragmented sectors of the social formation is that the work of art must be read as
the transparent sign of a spiritual necessity: "In Adorno's theory works of art stand directly, dialectically but not historically mediated, for what he designates as Truth and what his anti-Hegelian rejection of the systematic prevents him from calling absolute Spirit." There is thus an absolute difference between art and ideology, and this leads, particularly in Adorno's post-war writings, to a kind of cultural chiliasm and a fetishization of legitimate art-forms. What this conception does allow, however, is a perception of the internal historicity of the work: the development of its material corresponds (as the "answer" to a "problem") to the necessary stages of the self-realization of the spirit, so that—despite the lack of an immediate historical evidence—all its specific characteristics are indications of the historical process. The higher the degree of historical necessity present within these specific characteristics, the less directly legible they become as historical indications (and vice-versa). The material functions as "sedimented spirit," and—in musical as in literary production—"therefore the altercation of the composer with his material is the same as an altercation with society, precisely to the extent that it finds expression in his work, and does not simply face his product as consumer or opponent—a mere external and heteronomous factor."

The immanent determination of the truth of the work through its relation to the historical development of its material (of "style") demands, then, an uncompromising rejection of (opposition to) extra-aesthetic considerations: only as a totally-closed monad separated from the empirical world is the work truly a social fact. Social concepts cannot be applied "from outside" but only deduced from the work's formal structure, and "it is only in the crystallisation of its own law of form, not in the passive reception of objects, that art converges with the real." Through its formal structure the work negates the empirical, and thereby hides empirical substance in itself. In Adorno's "ontology of negativity" the degree of 'negation of identity' becomes the criterion for the real and paradoxical identity of the work with social being: communication takes place through the denial of referentiality implicit in the closedness of the work, and the rescuing of empirical experience occurs through its neutralization in the fictional. Because of this constitution of the work of art through difference, "the unresolved antagonisms of reality return in works of art as immanent formal problems. . . . Relations of tension in works of art are crystallized in a pure form there and, by their emancipation from the factual facade of the everyday, encounter the essence of reality." There is thus within the work a dialectic of immanence and otherness, in which the one term presupposes the other in its
very absence: "it is related to the world through the principle which it contrasts to it and through which the spirit fitted out the world itself."\textsuperscript{25}

Rather than being "about" the world, reflecting it as content, the work of art acts as a negative witness. Its value as contestation lies in the integrity of its denial,\textsuperscript{26} in its registration of the "anxiety of the lonely,"\textsuperscript{27} a closed subjectivity testifying through its withdrawal from the world to the social pressures forcing this retreat. Form becomes the privileged medium of this anxiety (and the form/content dichotomy and the valuation given to it by orthodox materialism are thus secretly maintained): "even traditional art perceives all the more, the more deeply it expresses the contradictions present in its own material—thereby offering evidence of the contradictions of the world in which it dwells."\textsuperscript{28} The correspondence between text and social formation is an inverse relation; this inversion retains the notion of a "pre-established harmony between historical and aesthetic content [Gehalt]," based on the presupposition of "the Hegelian objectification of absolute Spirit in art,"\textsuperscript{29} but at the same time salvages the radical autonomy of the work of art in its pure difference from ideology. Adorno's theory "drives the bourgeois interpretation of art as a surrogate for reality to the extreme of its critical self-negation. The negation of reality, intended only to salvage the rights of the image, refers thought back to art."\textsuperscript{30} As an abstract "negative utopia"\textsuperscript{31} the work keeps alive—as it does for Bloch and Marcuse—the possibility or the premonition of that freedom which can no longer be wrung from the world by revolutionary praxis; it replaces organized collective action with an aestheticism whose promise is ultimately political. But this denial of praxis itself falsifies the integrity of the work of art: "In this hypostatization of a reality which is paralyzed, reified and controlled in its most intimate impulses . . . we can perceive already the possibility of ideological integration of that autonomy of the negative work which was supposed to be the last line of resistance to it."\textsuperscript{32} The absoluteness of the difference of the work of art from ideology opens the way, in such a conception, for its absolute inscription within ideology.

Werckmeister notes that Adorno's archetypal sociological model of the artist is drawn from one historically specific type (Baudelaire, George, Beckett, etc.), and that the revolutionary impulse of art is fitted by this model into an apolitical and individualistic framework.\textsuperscript{33} Modernist art holds a key position in Adorno's thought and marks the decisive distinction from, in particular, Lukács: but his analysis of the modern is not a simple defense. Rather, he is concerned to
stress the full ambiguity of the work of art in the age of imperialism and of commodity production. Here again the paradox of simultaneous extreme non-identity and identity comes into play: in its espousal of total subjectivity the modernist work takes on the alienated objectivity of the commodity, "the absolute work of art coincides with the absolute commodity." Baudelaire is the supreme case of this negative penetration into the heart of the experience of alienation in the capitalist mode of production (Adorno’s analysis closely follows Benjamin’s): "Baudelaire neither struggles against reification nor seeks to portray it; he protests against it in the experience of its archetypes, and the medium of this experience is poetic form." Similarly, the rationalistic over-organization of Schoenberg’s music corresponds, on its own level, to that “rationality” which is for Adorno one of the central features both of the development of capitalism and of the growth of the Spirit itself; it is in this sense that modernist art “reflects” the contradictions of late-industrial rationality. The uncompromising work is both a total resistance to control and takes on the form of that which it opposes. The modern in fact is defined by the situation of a progressive integration of art by the culture industry, and by the necessity for and the impossibility of escaping this integration. The pole against which modernism sets itself off includes both the aesthetic commodities produced by the culture industry, and the neutralized art of the past, the critical substance of which has been destroyed: "Not until the era of the sound film, the radio and the singing commercial began was [music's] very irrationality expropriated by the logic of the business world. Just as soon as the industrial management of all cultural goods had established itself as a totality, it also gained power over whatever did not aesthetically conform." The synchronic aesthetic system is thus structured by the diffusion of standardized norms, and by the fusion of those sunken norms with the mass-production of the present. Between this immediate social manufacture of reception and the isolation of radical modernist art there is a direct causal connection. Comparing the music and the painting of this period Adorno writes: "The liberation of modern painting from objectivity, which was to art the break that atonality was to music, was determined by the defensive against the mechanized art commodity–above all, photography. Radical music, from its inception, reacted similarly to the commercial depravity of the traditional idiom. It formulated an antithesis against the extension of the culture industry into its own domain.”

But with this postulation of an antithetical relation between conformist and radical art the paradoxical ambiguity of the modernist work becomes a bad paradox: rather than a dialectical sociology.
we have a static opposition of the integrated and the non-(dis-)integrated; that is, the stress comes to be laid only on the moment of radical non-identity, non-conformism. This extreme dichotomy is in fact cognate with the extremeness of the internal duality of the modernist work in its simultaneous rejection of and correspondence with the commodity-form; the sheer dichotomy of pure subjectivity/pure objectivity is transposed on the sociological level into that of radical freedom/radical conformity. In both cases Adorno finds it increasingly difficult to see contemporary aesthetic production as a single dialectically-structured field, rather than as a mutually exclusive opposition of two dissimilar modes of production; nor can he distinguish between the contradictory moments of production and assimilation, but rather telescopes them into the one process (and this leads, ultimately, to an apocalyptic vision of the end of the modern, that is, of art, in which the moment of untruth contained in the modern coincides with the absolute untruth of the commodity produced by the culture industry). In the end, Adorno's demonization of the manipulative forces of capitalism leads to a very conservative hypostatization of "high" culture and to an elitist scorn for the consumers of "mass"-culture. The degradation of the Spirit—"the free spirit," which is situated in the past ("once") and the massive violence of "the manipulated condition of the Spirit" lead to the paralysis of all possibility of a break with the teleology of history, and ultimately even revolt itself (within the context of the total automatization of language, that is, of reason) can only strengthen the given order. The work of art has lost its connection with Nirvana and can only imitate the increasingly narrow circles of that wheel of incarnation which is history.

_Murdoch University_  
_Murdoch, Western Australia_

**NOTES**


2. Adorno, "Correspondence with Benjamin." 56.

3. _Ibid_.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 58.
7. Ibid., 57-58.
8. Ibid., 70.
9. Ibid., 71.
10. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 32.
18. Ibid., 33-34.
24. Ibid., 16.
25. Ibid., 19.
27. Adorno, Philosophy of Modern Music, 43.
28. Ibid., 125.
30. Ibid., 30.
32. Heinz Bruggemann, “Theodor W. Adornos Kritik an der literarischen Theorie
34. Adorno, Aesthetische Theorie, 39.
35. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 10.
38. Ibid., 5-6.
39. Ibid., 5.
41. E.g., Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. J. Cum-
ming (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 152-54; or Adorno, “Theorie der Halbbildung.” in
Soziologische Schriften I, 110-12, where he both fetishizes and warns against the
fetishization of high culture.
42. Adorno, “Spätkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft,” in Soziologische Schriften I,
364.
43. Ibid.
44. Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, xiv.
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FROW, JOHN

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