

Adorno and history

- a Strawinskyan and Heideggerian modification of critical theory.

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During this article I want to investigate the relationship between T.W. Adornos general aesthetic theory and his actual view on contemporary art. Adornos view on art is centered around concepts like praxis, matter and critique: Fine art is supposed to make it obvious that any understanding of matter always in some way is inadequate. Praxis is always grounded on an understanding of matter, but in hiding this fact it becomes ideological and repressive. The fine arts have to make this visible – they have to criticize the given praxis. This leads him to reject very big areas of the actual contemporary art – e.g. the music of Igor Strawinsky. I will show that this rejection springs from Adornos view on matters that turns out to be too narrow: His view on matter is too physicalistic. He focuses on the fact that Strawinskys music on the pure audible level is not as radical as for example Schoenbergs music. In this critique I think he overlooks that the music material is not just the audible sound. Strawinskys music appears as new - but only if one realizes how history is part of its material. Adornos being unaware of this leads to a modification (through Heidegger and Strawinsky) of his (and the general marxist) concept of history: The marxist (romanticist) view on history as being one-dimensional shows to be repressive! Adornos own methodology (the negative dialectics) therefore demands a modification of his own view on history – and also of his view on contemporary arts.

During my ongoing study of the philosophy of T.W. Adorno, has the relationship between his methodological theories (e.g. in *Negative Dialektik* and *Ästhetische Theorie*) and the way he uses these theories in his writings about the actual arts, been a continuous puzzle: It seems to me that he in the methodological works presents a theory which is wide enough to capture very important aspects of theoretical knowledge and artistic works, but then on the

other hand he feels urged to exclude very big areas of the contemporary artistic scenery as being non-critical – for which reason their artistic value is questioned. Especially well-known is his attack on the music of Igor Strawinsky.

Now this is exclusions which I myself find it very hard to accept – and I am not the only one. The narrowness of Adornos analyses have often been used to reject his philosophy in general. The intention of this article is to show, that there is no necessary connection between the methods and the narrowness. We can maintain his view on human understanding and human arts as “*negative Dialektik*” without having to uphold his narrowness: It is Adornos narrow view on matter, which makes his actual analyses so narrow.

I will try to show this by 1) Giving a short account of what I see as the main issues in his aesthetic theory - centred around terms as praxis, materialism and critique. 2) Showing how Adorno uses these insights in his evaluation of Strawinskys music: The critique of Strawinsky is aimed at Strawinskys “failure” in giving up tonality. Therefore Strawinskys music (as Adorno sees it) fails to be critical. 3) Discussing whether it is Strawinsky who fails to be critical or Adornos conception of materiality that needs modification. I think the latter: Adornos concept is too physicalistic whereby he overlooks some important aspects of it – in this case the historical aspect. 4) Discussing whether this means that we have to give up entirely the element of critique as an important aspect of philosophy and art – which I think not.

1. Art as a critical tool

Adornos general aesthetic philosophy (which is collected in the posthumous *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970)) cannot be thought independent of his general epistemology as it appears in *Negative Dialektik* (1966).

The telos of the latter is to rehabilitate the dialectic method. Hegels mistake was not the dialectics but his endeavour to bring all the elements into identity (Adorno 1966, pp. 17-20). On the contrary Adorno sees the dialectics as a consciousness of the non-identity (Adorno 1966, pp. 17+152). The reason why non-identity is so important is that our thinking always is about something originally non-conceptual, simple and specific. Therefore our thinking can never obtain identity with the subject.

But we are on the other hand inclined to think in identities in our everyday thinking (“This is a horse”, “*Negative Dialektik* is a book”, “Heidegger was a Nazi”, “Love is just electrons jumping around in the brain”). This is perhaps a necessary way of thinking in coping with reality. But it is also an ideological way of thinking because it induces us to think as if the subject matter is identical with the term under which it is subsumed. This kind of thinking has therefore

a tendency to be reductive - i.e.: It forgets what lies outside the subsumption. As Adorno puts it: “*Befriedigt schiebt begriffliche Ordnung sich vor das, was Denken begreifen will*” (Adorno 1966, p. 17). This is the main problem with traditional thinking: It cuts itself off from grasping what it originally wanted to understand.

Now Adorno do not think that one *could* get a full understanding of these matters. On the contrary he states that our thinking never can obtain identity with the subject. This means that the identity-thinking is false (“*Schein von Identität*” – Adorno 1966, p. 17). The more we think that a given philosophical system is complete, the more it has moved away from the original subject.

It is the task of philosophy to show this, and it has to be done by negative dialectics. The reason why this task is important is that the identity thinking confines our understanding of the world and is a source of ideology: If one can convince people that a given interpretation of things is absolute true, one has a great tool of repression.

The way negative dialectics can operate is to draw attention to Praxis (i.e. how a given society copes with matter, tradition and power) instead of Idea, Spirit or Being. This is, Adorno thinks, where many of his predecessors went wrong: In trying to eliminate praxis and arrive at some kind of independent eternity. They go wrong in thinking that one can think of “Being” without “something being” (this is explicit directed at Heidegger – Adorno 1966, pp. 139-40). Therefore philosophy must turn its head to how this “something” (*materie*) is coped with in the given historical and sociological situation. Praxis is a better concept than Idea, Spirit and Being in that it involves a doing of a community and something that is done with.

The philosophical reflection on this has to be dialectic in that it must be a persistent move between concept and matter. The reflection must be negative in that it has to take its starting point in the given praxis and show which elements this praxis does not grasp. Philosophy cannot escape praxis but praxis on the other hand is not immune to critique. When Adorno holds that philosophy has to be materialistic it is because he thinks that this is the only way that critique can be persistent: Matter is per se unadjusted to thinking, and thinking will therefore never finish as long as it concentrates on matter (Adorno 1966, pp. 141+187-93).

Art gets a very decisive role in the negative dialectics. It has two advantages over theoretical thinking: i) It is materialistic and non-conceptual. ii) It is semblance per se – it does not pretend to be real and thereby it can cast new light on praxis (Adorno 1966, pp. 396-7). In *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970) he articulates this role in general:

The main point is that art is to be understood as an institution which develops historically during a persistent critique of the past and the present. This is achieved through its intense focus on the material during creation of artistic works. This focus together with its freedom from external utility¹ makes it possible to see the matter in a new light (Adorno 1970, pp. 71+155+173). As Adorno puts it: It is not necessarily the artist himself who “wants” to be critical but it is the matter that forces him to be so (Adorno 1970, p. 40).

Art is thereby a fruitful alternative to theoretical thinking: In giving us a new unconceptual “understanding” of matter it shakes the theoretical thinking and ensures that it has no opportunity to understand itself as absolute. The artworks shows that there is another possible world than the one known through theoretical understanding.

This is not to say that the artistic view is more complete than the theoretical. But the advantage of art is that it is so obviously semblance. The dichotomy between the artwork on the one hand blowing itself up as something special (namely a critique of praxis), and on the other hand only being a thing in line with other things makes this semblant character obvious (Adorno 1970, pp. 161-6).

The fact that art is independent of external utility should not lead one to think that art is independent of praxis in general (that would make it useless to the negative dialectics). An artwork is only an artwork as long as it has a critical significance in the contemporary society. The artwork therefore has to balance between being trivial (and therefore non-critical) and too radical (so that no one can understand it). This also means that the status of an artwork can change during changes in society (Adorno 1970, pp. 51-6+250-1+272-3).

This dynamic status of the artwork is founded in its own dynamic character. In a passage about beauty (which is only one aspect among others in art) Adorno sums it up as follows:

[...]das Prinzip ist, als Gewordenes, in seiner Dynamik und insofern inhaltlich zu begreifen. Das Bild des Schönen als des Einen und Unterschiedenen entsteht mit der Emanzipation von der Angst vorm überwältigend Ganzen und Ungeschiedenen der Natur. Den Schauer davor rettet das Schöne in sich hinüber vermöge seiner Abdichtung gegen das bloße Dasein [...] Die Reduktion, welche Schönheit dem Schrecklichen widerfahren läßt, aus dem sie und über das sie sich erhebt, und das sie gleichwie aus einem Tempelbezirk draußen hält,

¹ Utility is here understood in the traditional way (to make ones living...). Of course one could object that Adorno sees the non-utility of art as a very useful quality – but that is not what is at stake here.

hat im Angesicht des Schrecklichen etwas Ohnmächtiges [...] Das Furchtbare blickt aus Schönheit selbst als der Zwang, der von der Form ausstrahlt” (Adorno 1970, pp. 82-4)

This passage is, as I see it, Heideggerian aesthetics with inverted terminology. One recalls the *Welt/Erde*-picture in *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* where Heidegger describes art as a struggle between *Welt* and *Erde* (Heidegger 1935/6, pp. 28-34). *Welt* is the opening aspect - the attempt to cast a light on the work and thereby achieving some kind of understanding of it. But the *Erde*-aspect causes that the work shuts itself off from the full understanding of it. This battle shows itself through the *Riss* (sketch, outline, scratch – Heidegger 1935/6, p. 53). Adorno inverts this picture in that the otherness (*Erde/Natur* – matter) is the opening part, and the understanding of it is the closing part.

I am very sympathetic to the picture of art as a dialectic between opening and closing and also that this dialectic is founded in a tension between understanding and the subject of understanding. I do not think that there is one decisive argument that could settle whether it is the understanding or the subject of understanding that is the opening or closing factor in the relationship. The reason why I nevertheless have mentioned the similarity between Heidegger and Adorno at this point is, that Adorno in the following shows a narrowness in how he understands the elements in the dialectic: Adornos concept of matter is much more firm than Heideggers *Erde*. This will show in his critique of actual artworks:

2. Adorno's view on contemporary music

Apart from being a philosopher Adorno also was a music theorist, participating intensive in the disputes about musical problems at that time. One of the most famous and notorious contributions is the *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1949).

In this work he compares the two giants in contemporary classical music – A. Schoenberg and I. Stravinsky representing respectively dodecaphonic (twelve-note) and primitivist/neo-classicist composition. And the verdict is very clear: Schoenbergs music is fine art - Stravinskys music is not!

To say that Schoenbergs music is fine art is not controversial, and it is very much in line with Adornos general aesthetic theory: Schoenberg develops a new musical system to replace the system that have tied music together during the last 300 years - namely tonality. Tonality had at Schoenbergs time become too repressive, and there had been a continuous challenge of it during the 19th. century. Schoenberg took the consequence of this and gave up tonality. At first this led him to total subjectivity – there were no longer any external rules and therefore he only had the subjective need for expression as a guide.

This was his expressionist period (1906-13). In Adornos view this was not a very fundamental break with tonality in that Schoenberg still accepted the foundation of tonality: That music has to satisfy the expectations of the subject. The final break with the tonal- and subjective repression was first established with the introduction of a new system which did not accept subjective satisfaction as its last end – this task was fulfilled by the dodecaphonic system. As Adorno puts it:

Musik, welche der historischen Dialektik verfiel, hat daran teil. Die Zwölftontechnik ist wahrhaft ihr Schicksal. Sie fesselt die Musik, indem sie sie befreit. (Adorno 1949, p. 68)

The reason why the dodecaphonic music is more satisfactory is that it does not try to escape praxis in a radical subjectivism. It springs out of (Schoenbergs interpretation of) the historic dialectics and objectifies itself in an intersubjective knowable system which is itself a possible object of critique.

On the other hand is the evaluation of Strawinsky not very positive at all. At first Strawinsky tried to reform the musical tradition by going back to something he saw as its roots. This led to a style with folklorist and primitivist elements. He also experimented with an extended tonality but he never gave up tonality totally. After the First World War he developed a neo-classic style where he took elements from different periods in music history and used it in a very personal way.

Adorno is not very impressed by this. He accuses Strawinsky of not taking the step that is necessitated by matter - in the praxis of that time, this would mean to give up tonality (Adorno 1949, pp. 16+55-7+140). Tonality has exhausted its critical potential and has become repressive. Strawinsky sees the repression but instead of actively working against it, he tries to discipline it by developing an objective style (Adorno 1949, pp. 154-6).

How is Strawinskys style to be understood as objective? His first try is the return to the so-called roots of music. Strawinsky seems in his primitivist period to think that rhythm is more authentic than the other elements in music, and by focusing on this he is trying to make objective music (this is Adornos interpretation – not mine; Adorno 1949, pp. 136+182). In his neo-classicist period Strawinsky is – according to Adorno – seeking objectivity through the complete artistic styles of the past (Adorno 1949, p. 128 and Adorno 1970, pp. 442-3). As I will show below I do not think this is a correct interpretation of Strawinskys motivation for neo-classicism.

Now Adorno could not be sympathetic to an endeavour to make objective art. As he has shown in *Negative Dialektik* one can never reach any kind of objectivity independent of the grasp one uses to reach it. To think that one has

understood the object as it is in itself is just to remove oneself from the original matter. On the contrary art has to shake any pretension of objectivity.

Schoenbergs move from expressionism to dodecaphony was on the other hand not a removal of the subject. It was an effort to give the subject a frame to compose inside of (Adorno 1949, p. 106). Schoenberg takes it serious that art is not just subjective or just objective, but always a dialectic between subject and object inside a given praxis (Adorno 1949, pp. 195-6).

So Schoenberg made good art and Strawinsky did not?

3. Evaluation of the evaluator

If the above given interpretation of Strawinskys art was adequate, Adornos rejection of it would be justified. But I do not think it is. I think Adornos understanding of matter is too narrow. When one cuts his critique of Strawinsky to the bone, it is a critique of Strawinsky not making atonal music. Therefore he – according to Adorno - does not take the critical demands of the musical matter serious. The narrowness of Adorno's understanding becomes obvious when he discusses the neo-classical turn:

Entscheidend, daß dem rein musikalischen Wesen nach kein Unterschied zwischen den infantilistischen [i.e. the primitivist] und den neoklassischen Werken sich bestimmen lässt. (Adorno 1949, p. 187)

This Adorno states on the background of Strawinsky not becoming an atonal composer through the turn. But is it self-evident that atonality is the only demand of critique that springs out of matter? I think not – I think the art of Strawinsky shows us that there is another demand of critique: The criticism of the common understanding of historicity.

Adornos understanding of Strawinskys neo-classicism takes a wrong turn in thinking that it is a glorification or a return to the classic values. Strawinskys neo-classicism is not a new-classicism but the use of classic material in a new way. Thereby is he not restating the values of classicism – on the contrary by using these values in an unusual context they become so obvious that it is impossible for them to function in a repressive way (which presupposes that they are hidden). By becoming obvious they are shaken in their being classic and self-evident.

Strawinsky shows hereby that the present can change the past. The “present” is not always building bricks upon a wall of tradition. Sometimes it takes some of the lower bricks and places them somewhere else whereby they are given a new function. History cannot be understood as a continuous move forward.

The reason why Adorno cannot see this critical aspect is that he has a too narrow concept of matter – or more accurate: His distinction between understanding as the closing factor and matter as the opening and critical factor is too firm. Heidegger is more cautious and this is the reason why I earlier drew attention to the similarities between the two:

Already in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) did Heidegger show that historicity is not to be understood as a one-dimensional move. Past, present and future is so compound and connected that one cannot think of the one without also thinking of the others (Heidegger 1927, §§65+74). The traditional interpretation of history is therefore metaphysical – a metaphysic that is grounded in a physicalist reduction of time as a collection of “now”s.

Now the *Sein und Zeit*-approach is very subjectivistic (or more correct: *Dasein*-oriented), and Adorno could not (and indeed did not!) have much sympathy with it. However – the modification of history was held on to by the later Heidegger. In the Nietzsche-lectures he says that history occurs/acquires (*Ereignet*) a beginning which still affects the continuity (*Fortgang*) (Heidegger 1961-II, pp. 485-6). The beginning is always-also a parting/leaving (*Abschied*) to something else: The beginning of the past holds a leave to the future in which a continuity can happen in the present. This is not something that “happens”. It is the occurrence of the frame that insures that something *can* happen. Heidegger says “*das Ereignis er-eignet*” (occurrence acquire – Heidegger 1961-II, p. 485). In Heideggers terminology it is Being that occurs in a certain way and thereby setting a frame in which things can happen – e.g. *Dasein* (man) can exist.

This is a *very* short overview of the late Heideggers view on history and does not claim to be complete. What is important in this connection is: i) Heidegger holds on to a very complex understanding of history. ii) History is founded in Being – i.e. it is part of the otherness or frame that is set for human activity.

If one should translate this to Adornoian terminology, Being “is” “something” that cannot be reduced to our understanding of it. In Adornos terminology this is matter.

To say that Adorno is unaware of history would be absurd: Not many other thinkers have stressed the role of history in every connection as much as Adorno. On the other hand is this perhaps the reason why he forgets to make history itself a subject of criticism. It seems to me that he has not quite given up the Hegelian/Marxist understanding of history as a one-dimensional move – or more accurate: a dialectic move – from one (perhaps unknown) origin and forward to a better world.

In fact this understanding of history is a very bourgeois understanding. It arose in the late 17th. century (around the time of the French revolution) and can be seen as the endeavour of the middle-class to legitimate their new status in the society. At this point Marxism is indebted to romanticism: Marx just changed the story from being the story of the progression of spirit (the bourgeois argument for their advancement was connected to intelligence) to the story of material freedom (the proletarian argument was their share in production of material goods).

It was perhaps not the *intention* of these thinkers to be repressive, but history (!!) has shown that the romantic view of history *could* be used to such an ideological repression. Strawinsky and Heidegger shows us how it is ideological – and thereby could need to be criticised.

Perhaps this blindness of Adorno also springs out of his designation of the otherness as matter. This is a concept which during history of philosophy is heavily loaded with physicalist connotations.² This seduces him into only being aware of the sensualistic aspects of otherness. This makes him blind of what is new in Strawinskys music. One can always perceive a tonal centre of gravity in his music (although he in some of his works after *Philosophie der neuen Musik* experiments with “neo-dodecaphony” – e.g. *Abraham and Isaac* (1963), *Introitus* (1965) and *Requiem Canticles* (1966)). So sensualistic speaking one cannot perceive something radically new – compared to the music of Schoenberg.

Nevertheless Strawinskys music appears as new - but only if you perceive history too! That is: Only if you know the tradition on which he is composing – and realises that he is composing *with* it, and thereby shaking it.

4. Is critique possible?

One should always be cautious about juxtaposing Heidegger and Adorno. They belong to two different philosophical traditions (phenomenological/hermeneutic vs. critical theory) using different terminology. By transferring insights from one tradition there is a risk of transferring them all.

The most fundamental difference between these two traditions is the question whether critique is called for and whether it is possible (Adorno 1966, pp. 84-7+93-6). Here I still think Adorno has a point against Heidegger, and I do not think my modification of Adornos view destroys it.

Adornos point is that we are never just a *Dasein*. If we want to investigate

² Heideggers “Being” is just as loaded, but Heidegger spends more time in investigating it, and passes thereby at least some of the traps.

the way Being occurs we have to take into account that this occurrence never occur to me as one subject. Part of Beings ability to occur is that it occurs in a communicative common praxis. Understanding is never just a relation between a subject and an object – but rather a relation between the two *inside* a communicative praxis. I am not a *Dasein* – I am a human being among others. The possibility of being part of such a community depend on flexibility and this flexibility depend on a continuous critique of the present praxis.

Therefore Adorno holds that critique should be a task in every society. It is not a strictly philosophical argument – rather a motivated assumption – but I find it sympathetic. More controversial is it whether the critique is *possible*. How should one be able to criticise from within the praxis one is criticising? Adorno thinks that matter itself – and especially in the artworks - will show the defects in our common understanding – because the understanding will never be adequate.

In fact I do not think that the phenomenological and critical philosophy *have* to disagree on this subject. It is true that Heidegger had no room for critique of Being – just as Adorno would not criticise matter. But all Heideggers thinking can be seen as one big attempt to show how different interpretations of being always have failed - and were bound to. When he for example talks about Being occurring as “*Ver-sprechen*” (i.e. a dialectic between promise and “mis-talk” – Heidegger 1961-II, p. 369) it is exactly that which is at stake: Being occurs both as obliging and evading (*Welt* and *Erde*). Every time we have settled a firm interpretation, Being will evade and critique of the interpretation will become urgent.

Heidegger was in fact very critical of his contemporary society – that is the academic society in the twenties – but he found a solution in another direction than Adorno – namely in Nazism. I will not defend this turn of Heideggers – I despise it – but the question is whether one could give a *philosophical* argument against it? The academic atmosphere was then characterised by a flabby humanitarianism that seemed more and more false on the background of contemporary praxis. So critique was needed, and this was carried out by a Nazist and a Marxist-critical interpretation.

Adorno argues that the Nazist interpretation is wrong because it is founded in a subjectivist view instead of the intersubjective praxis-oriented view. Perhaps he is right, but the lesson one can learn from Strawinsky and Heidegger (or at least Heideggers *philosophy*) together with Adornos general theory is, that critique perhaps both is necessary and possible, but there is no objective stance from where one can execute the critique. It has to be a “*negative Dialektik*” – a negation of the given praxis from within that praxis. And there

is not only one possible negation (p v -p), (1) because the praxis is not simple and (2) there is not only one negation of the different elements (the alternative to p is not -p but rather q, r, s....).³ What is more: The negation is dialectic – i.e. the “result” of it will to some extend be wrong too.

So the above given modification does not cancel the possibility of critique. Critique is still important, but critique that pretends to be objective becomes repressive. Therefore one has to be more humble as to the results of the given critique: Critique is important in shaking the given repressive ideology, but its results are wrong too.

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To sum up: Through the late works of Adorno one learns that philosophy has to be negative and dialectic – i.e. a continuous critique of contemporary understanding of matter. This is important because matter is not adequate grasped by understanding. Therefore understanding is always inadequate – and thereby repressive. Art is important because it shows matter in a new light – independent of theoretical categories. The theoretical understanding is shaken because art shows us that every understanding of art is semblant. The main task of art is therefore to establish a critique of common praxis.

Nevertheless it seems as if Adorno in his actual critiques of contemporary art is blind as to the critical potential of several artistic articulations – e.g. Strawinskys critique of the common view on history and tradition. A modification of Adornos view on the relation between praxis and matter is therefore needed. Adorno seems (at least in his earlier works) to have a too narrow and physicalist view on otherness. This is probably a Marxian heritage. So there is need of a Heideggerian modification of the view on history as not being one-dimensional. Else critique becomes repressive.

This does not mean that we have to give up critique entirely. Rather it means that critique becomes a *negative Dialektik* in a more strict sense: There is not just one (positive!) result of a critique in a given society because there is no objective stance from where one could judge which critique would be the most appropriate. Critique is important *as* a continuous critique – from inside the criticised praxis.

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³ It is only in formal logics that we have bipolarity.

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