

**What is critique? The relevance of Critical Theory to art today**

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The scholar of Benjamin and Adorno's work Susan Buck-Morss, in her response to the *October* art journal's 1996 Visual Culture Questionnaire, provided a pithy formulation for defining the tasks of both art and criticism in the modern era, "[Artists'] work is to sustain the critical moment of aesthetic experience; our job as critics is to recognize this." Two aspects of Buck-Morss's formulation of the work of artists need to be emphasized, "sustaining the critical moment" and "aesthetic experience." The subjective experience of the aesthetic is what artists work on. And they do so in order to capture and sustain, or make available, subjectivity's "critical moment."

Adorno, in his 1932 essay on "The Social Situation of Music," analogized the position of modern art to that of critical social theory. The role of both was to provoke recognition. Furthermore, Adorno warned that there can be no progress in art without that of society. Adorno's posthumously published but unfinished monograph *Aesthetic Theory* can be considered to have a central theme organizing all its discussion of the modern experience of art, the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of art. In this, Adorno was elaborating in the aesthetic realm his thesis in *Negative Dialectics*, the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of philosophy and critical theory. What does it mean to practice art in an epoch of its simultaneous continuing necessity and impossibility? A

clue can be found in Adorno's claim in *Negative Dialectics*, that "philosophy lives on because its moment of realization was missed."

### **Philosophy of art**

Adorno's treatment of philosophy and art are modeled on Marx's treatment of capital. The potential for a dialectical historical transformation, in which capital would be simultaneously realized and abolished, became for Adorno the question of what it would mean to simultaneously realize and overcome the aspirations of modern philosophy and art. What would it mean to overcome the necessity that is expressed in modern practices of art? The Hegelian thought-figure of art's attaining to its own concept while transcending it, through a qualitative transformation, was mobilized by Adorno to grasp both the history of modern art and the desire to overcome its practices.

The Hegel scholar Robert Pippin, in his response to the 2003 *Critical Inquiry* journal's forum on the current state and potential future for critical theory, described postmodernism as a repetition of the "Romantic recoil" from modernity. Specifically, Pippin pointed to modern literary and artistic forms as derived from such Romanticism, of which postmodernism was the mere continuation, but in denial of its repetition. But Pippin also pointed out that such repetition is in fact a "regression," because consciousness of the historical condition of the problem had grown worse.

Hegel had posed the question of the "end" of art. But Hegel meant by this not the cessation of practices of art, but rather their ability to make the activity of "Spirit" appear in a self-contained manner. While religion had been superseded by art, art had come to be superseded by "philosophy." What did Hegel mean by this? Nothing but that art needed

philosophical interpretation to be able to mean what it meant. Art needed criticism in order to be itself. This was a specifically modern condition for art, which Hegel addressed in a rather optimistic manner, seeing such need for criticism in art as a hallmark of enlightenment rather than a disability of art.

But Adorno took this Hegelianism of art and turned it, from a historical explanation of its condition, into a critique of such circumstances of history. Like Marx who had turned Hegel “on his head,” or put Hegel back “on his feet,” Adorno inverted the significance of Hegel’s philosophical observation. Where Hegel had, for instance, regarded modern politics as the realm of reflection on, the self-objectification of civil society in the state, Marx regarded the modern state and civil society distinction as expressing the pathological necessity of capital, in which the self-contradiction of capital was projected. Adorno similarly addressed the complementary necessities of art and criticism, as expressing a self-contradiction in (aesthetic) subjectivity.

As Adorno put it, however, this did not mean that one should aspire to a “reconciliation” of art and philosophy or theory. Just as Marx critiqued the Left Hegelians for their Romantic desire to dissolve the distinction between state and “civil” society, the separation was regarded, by Marx and Adorno alike, as the hallmark of freedom. In a late essay, the “Marginalia on Theory and Practice” (1969), Adorno attacked “Romantic socialism” for wanting to dissolve the distinction and critical relationship between theory and practice, maintaining that, by contrast with traditional society, the modern separation of theory and practice was “progressive” and emancipatory. So was the separation in meaning between art, as “non-conceptual knowledge,” and criticism, informed by “theoretical” concepts.

**Artistic modernism**

So Adorno, like Marx, looked forward, not to a return to a pre-modern or pre-capitalist unity of theory and practice and reconciliation of form and content, as had been the case in traditional culture, but a qualitative transformation of the modern division of meaning in art and criticism, in which each would be simultaneously realized and abolished, as presently practiced. The problem is that, rather than being raised to ever more acute levels, already in Adorno's time there was a retreat from the productive antagonism, the dialectic of theory and practice, or art and criticism.

Adorno drew upon and sought to further elaborate the approach of his friend and mentor Walter Benjamin, who argued, in his 1934 essay "The Author as Producer," that no art could be of correct political "tendency" unless it was also of good aesthetic "quality." Furthermore, Benjamin argued that every great work of art "either founds or dissolves a genre." As Benjamin put it, the work of art that fails to teach artists teaches no one. Artists do not "distribute" aesthetic experience but produce it. New art re-works and transforms, retrospectively, the history of art. Benjamin argued that there can be progress in society without that of art, for necessarily involved in both is the transformation of subjectivity.

**Politics of art**

The history of modern art, as Benjamin and Adorno recognized, presents a diverse multiplicity of practices, none of which have been able to come to full fruition. Benjamin described this poignantly in his *Arcades Project* as "living in hell." Benjamin and Adorno's thought-figure for such historical consciousness of modern art comes from

Trotsky, who pointed out, in a 1938 letter to the editors of the American journal *Partisan Review*, that the modern capitalist epoch displayed the following phenomenon in its historical course:

[N]ew tendencies take on a more and more violent character, alternating between hope and despair. The artistic schools of the [first] few decades [of the 20th century] — cubism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism — follow each other without reaching a complete development. Art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society.

This was because, as Trotsky put it,

The decline of bourgeois society means an intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions, which are transformed inevitably into personal contradictions, calling forth an ever more burning need for a liberating art. Furthermore, a declining capitalism already finds itself completely incapable of offering the minimum conditions for the development of tendencies in art which correspond, however little, to our epoch. . . . The oppressed masses live their own life. Bohemianism offers too limited a social base.

Trotsky said of art that, “a protest against reality, either conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative piece of work. Every new tendency in art has begun with rebellion.” And not merely rebellion against existing conventions of art, but the greater conditions for life in capitalist modernity.

So, what would be a “liberating art?” Adorno addresses this in terms of the aspiration for “artistic autonomy,” or the self-justification of aesthetic experience. This is related to how Kant had described the experience of the beautiful, in nature or art, as the sympathetic resonance the subject experiences of an object, which thus appears to embody “purposiveness without purpose,” or a *telos*, an end-in-itself. Except, for Adorno, this empathy between subject and object in Kant’s account of aesthetic experience, is not to be affirmative but critical. In Adorno’s account of the modern experience of art, the subject recognizes, not the power of experiential capacities, and the transformative freedom of the human faculties, but rather their constraint and unfreedom, their self-contradictory and self-undermining powers. The subject experiences not its freedom in self-transformation, but rather the need for transformation in freedom. Adorno emphasized that the autonomy of art, as of the subject, remains, under capitalism, an aspiration rather than an achieved state. Works of art embody the striving for autonomy that is denied the subject of the modern society of capital, and thus also embody failure. Hence, the history of art furnishes a rich inventory of failed attempts. This is why its history is unsettled and constantly returns. Modern works of art are necessarily failures, but are nonetheless valuable as embodiments of possibility, of unfulfilled potential.

The constrained possibilities embodied in modern art are, according to Benjamin’s formulation, approached by the subject with a combination of “desire and fear.” Modern artworks embody not only human but “inhuman” potentials, or, the possibilities for the qualitative transformation of humanity. They thus have simultaneously utopian and dystopian aspects. Modern artworks are as ambivalent as the historical conditions they refract in themselves, “prismatically.” But it is in such

ambivalence that art instantiates freedom. It is the task of theory, or critique, to register and attempt to bring the non-conceptual within the range of concepts. As Adorno put it, the aspiration of modern art is to “produce something without knowing what it is.” In so doing, art acts not only on the future, but also on history.

### **Art history**

Modern artworks find inspiration in art history. This is the potentially emancipatory character of repetition. Artists are motivated by art history to re-attain lost moments by achieving them again, but differently. Artists produce new works that, in their newness, unlock the potentials of past art, allowing us to re-experience history. But this work on history is not without its dangers. As Benjamin put it, “even the dead are not safe” from the ambivalent “progress” of history, which unfolds in capital as a “mounting catastrophe.” The history of modern art, like that of capital more generally, furnishes a compendium of ruins. The simultaneously progressive and regressive dynamics of history find their purchase in this, that historical forms of experience and consciousness inform present practices, for better or worse. It is the work of critique to attempt to better inform, through greater consciousness, the inevitable repetition in the continuing practices of art, and thus attempt to overcome the worst effects of the regression involved in such practices.

In the Hegelian sense adopted by both Marx and Adorno, the greater consciousness of freedom is the only available path for freedom’s possible realization. Consciousness is tasked to recognize the potential that is its own condition of possibility.

This is why Adorno and Benjamin addressed works of art as forms of consciousness. Art can be ideological or it can enlighten, provoking consciousness to push itself further.

The dialectic of art and criticism is necessary for the vitality of art. The self-abnegation of criticism, the disenchantment of consciousness that characterized “postmodernism” has clearly demonstrated the barrenness of such abdication of responsibility, on the part of critics and theorists even more than artists, who were thus left at the mercy of poor, unclarified concepts. The challenge posed by modern critical-theoretical approaches to art have been warded off rather than engaged and pushed further.

Artists’ work continues to demand critical recognition, whether the “critics” recognize this or not. What such critical recognition, of the work of history taken up by art, would mean is what Marxist critical aesthetic theorists like Adorno and Benjamin pursued, and from whose efforts we can and indeed must learn. For a new condition of art has not been attained, but only an old set of conditions repeated, however without their being properly recognized. The relation between art and social modernity, or capital, continues to task both art and theory. Art is not merely conditioned by, but is itself an instance of the modern society of capital. But, like society, for art to progress, theory must do its work. | §