

## *Adorno's Failed Aesthetics of Myth\**

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In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue that reason, which claims to lead to truth, is always instrumental reason — a form of domination based on violence. Enlightenment, which aspired to emancipate society from the violence of myth, ends by reenacting this violence and turning back into myth.<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas attacks this argument for falling prey to an unbridled scepticism that fails to appreciate the achievements of modernity.<sup>3</sup> For him, Horkheimer's and Adorno's radical critique of reason is analogous to Nietzsche's critique of science and morals in *On the Genealogy of Morality* to the extent that a claim to truth is unmasked as ideology — a form of power (PD 120-26). Because such a critique assumes a difference between truth and power, when Nietzsche, Horkheimer and Adorno carry out such a critique of the concept of reason as a basis for truth, they risk undermining the distinction on which their whole critique is based.

Habermas outlines how Nietzsche, Horkheimer and Adorno pursue two alternative courses in dealing with this contradiction, both of which lead to an aesthetic understanding of truth that fails to recognize “the traces and the existing forms of communicative rationality” (PD 129). With respect to Nietzsche, Habermas argues that the aestheticization of truth

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\* Parts of this article have appeared previously in David Pan, “Instrumentalizing the Sacred: From Alfred Bäumler to Manfred Frank” in *Wendezeiten — Zeitenwenden: Positionsbestimmungen zur deutschsprachigen Literatur 1945-1995*, ed. by Robert Weninger and Brigitte Rossbacher (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1997), pp. 233-247.

2. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. by John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), pp. 11-14. Cited hereafter as DE.

3. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, tr. by Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1987), p. 121. Cited hereafter as PD.

destroys the concept of truth. What remains is a theory of power in which the world falls “back into myth, in which powers influence one another and no element remains that could transcend the battle of the powers” (PD 125). But Horkheimer and Adorno, remain bound within a paradoxical situation of continual, determinate negation in which all theoretical solutions are rejected. Consequently, Adorno’s late philosophy becomes a hermetic and circular movement between paradox and artistic mimesis, *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* (PD 128- 29). While Nietzsche’s version of aestheticization destroys truth by merging it with power, Adorno’s rejection of theoretical solutions amounts to a surrender to the rule of power.

Habermas’ alternative is to develop an idea of communicative rationality in which values are separate from empirical considerations and thus free of power dynamics. They are determined only by “the unforced force of the better argument” (PD 130). He assumes that modernity has divided truth into three different spheres — science, morality, and art — and that “expert cultures” within each are able to collectively arrive at intersubjectively valid judgments. Yet, because truth is attained only within these expert cultures, there is a danger that the isolation of truth within research communities will lead truth claims, to become “esoteric in character and endangered in being split off from ordinary communicative practice” (PD 113).

This separation of truth from everyday life is precisely the problem that Nietzsche’s, Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s aesthetic understandings of truth attempt to address. Whereas Habermas links art in the modern world to the emancipation of the subject “from the imperatives of purposive action and from the conventions of quotidian perception” (PD 113), for them, art must remain involved in everyday life in order to maintain a strong connection between truth and experience. The link between the experience of art and everyday experience is essential, because they conceive of moral truth, not as the special preserve of researchers and philosophers who speak as representatives of the rest of society, but as imbedded in the personal experiences of all people. Since they assume that moral truth grounded in experience cannot be based on reason, which is objective and abstract, Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Adorno turn to art as the carrier of a specifically aesthetic form of truth that maintains an intimate link to subjectivity and particularity. Because beauty and the sublime cannot be constructed intersubjectively by means of arguments and dialogue, but must be received through a process of inspiration, art provides an opening to a type of truth that is given, rather than constructed, intuited, rather than proven.

Yet, this aesthetic form of truth is not arbitrary, i.e., dominated by power and manipulation as Habermas suspects (PD 124-25). Instead, as Peter Uwe Hohendahl has demonstrated, Horkheimer and Adorno envision an aesthetic mode of truth that, though not based on reason, has its own basis for legitimacy: mimesis.<sup>4</sup> They describe mimesis as the specific method of myth as opposed to science. In contrast to reason, which reduces all of nature to an undifferentiated raw material, “[t]he world of magic retained distinctions whose traces have disappeared even in linguistic form. . . . Like science, magic pursues aims, but seeks to achieve them by mimesis — not by progressively distancing itself from the object.” (DE 10-11) Whereas Habermas understands myth only as violence and domination, this view of magic as mimesis emphasizes the positive aspect of myth. Not only does magic still maintain the qualitative differences in nature that have been eradicated by science, but it provides a way of relating to nature and experience that is based on imitation rather than manipulation. From this viewpoint, the modern separation of value spheres, which Habermas contends is the basis for intersubjective truth, destroys the totality of experience created by myth. The mythic unity of cognition and mimesis has become fragmented into the mutually exclusive spheres of science and art in the modern world. Neither is able to mediate to the individual an experience of totality. Instead, truth has been separated from sensual experience, and everyday experience no longer has truth value (DE 17-18).

Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s outline of an aesthetic understanding of truth attempts to overcome this alienation and to reconstruct the totality within the particular: “It is in the nature of the work of art, or aesthetic semblance, to be what the new, terrifying occurrence became in the primitive’s magic: the appearance of the whole in the particular” (DE 19). By leading art back toward the mythic function of magic, they seek to recover a totality for subjective experience and with it an experience of the absolute and of ultimate values that has been lost with the domination of reason. The mythic totality they envision is not a rational totality, in which “[d]isqualified nature becomes the chaotic matter of mere classification, and the all-powerful self becomes mere possession — abstract identity,” but an aesthetic totality based on “specific representation” and the particularity (rather than the exchangeability) of human experience (DE 10). This distinction between a rational totality and an aesthetic totality is crucial for

4. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 205-209 and 241-42.

conceiving of a culture free of reification, in which the specificity of individual experience is not eliminated to make way for the universal domination of reason.<sup>5</sup>

For Horkheimer and Adorno, 20th century works of art are attempts to create the mythic experience of totality in a modern situation, where myths have lost their validity. The contradiction between mythic totality and modern alienation becomes the defining one for modern art. Yet, the differentiation between a modern art of alienation and a mythic experience of totality raises a fundamental problem concerning the status of myth. Because Horkheimer and Adorno assume a fatal dialectic of culture in which myth is overtaken by enlightenment, but in which simultaneously enlightenment turns back into myth (DE 11-14), they are unable to imagine the possibility of a positive return to myth. Modern art, because it is predicated on a situation of alienation, cannot be a model for a return to a mythic totality. Instead, it is shot through with the same contradictions that have created the modern experience of alienation of truth from experience (and thus its transformation into falsehood) in the first place. An overcoming of this alienation would suggest either a replacement of modern art with myth as a mediator of truth and experience or a reevaluation of modern art as a contemporary form of myth. But the idea of a dialectic, in which myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment turns into myth, undermines the possibility of establishing a stable mythic totality.

Horkheimer and Adorno are left in a predicament similar to Habermas when it comes to an evaluation of the status of art and myth. Art must remain isolated from life in order to maintain its negative character in relation to the alienation that pervades everyday experience. In the end, a mythic totality is impossible in the modern world for Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno. For the former, the loss of totality is a sign of progress in the creation of expert cultures capable of determining intersubjective validity. For the latter, this loss is the cause of a permanent alienation of truth from individual experience. Because art can no longer function in the same way as myth once did, myth is relegated to an irretrievable past.

Though *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides a critique of enlightenment that leaves the metaphysical dimension of myth and religion as the only alternative to the alienation of modernity, Adorno is unable to build upon this critique of modernity. In his subsequent work, he attempts to

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5. For a more elaborate description of this distinction between a rational and an aesthetic totality, see Carl Einstein, "Totalität," in *Werke*, Vol. 1, 1908-1918, ed. by Rolf-Peter Baacke with Jens Kwasny (Berlin: Medusa, 1980), pp. 226-29.

conceive of art as a secularized version of the metaphysical experiences found in religion and myth. His dialectical method henceforth becomes a sophisticated means of equivocating between two incompatible projects: affirming the transcendent qualities of myth and religion, on the one hand, and maintaining the primacy of secular art in the establishment of a cultural tradition, on the other.

Adorno can manage to do both only by conceiving of a form of art that includes the sublime as a transcendent factor, yet does not upset the primacy of the individual as the basis of order in modernity. Because it can only reduce culture to art by retaining the individual as the center around which the totality of the world constructs itself, Adorno's concept of art is intimately linked to the individual's domination of nature — the very mechanism that he and Horkheimer criticize so effectively in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno repudiates the antimodern argument of this book that would logically lead toward myth and ritual as the basis of social order and flees into a theory of art that can never move beyond the illusion of the modern subject as the self-sufficient creator of its own identity.

The dependence of Adorno's theory of art on the individual's domination of nature becomes apparent when one compares his ideas with Nietzsche's outline of an aesthetics of myth in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Adorno clearly borrows from Nietzsche in order to develop the principal categories of his aesthetics, the distinction between Apollo and Dionysus furnishing the template with which Adorno constructs his fundamental opposition between semblance and expression as the imperatives determining the work of art.<sup>6</sup> Thus, both Nietzsche and Adorno insist on the importance of the semblance character of art as the element that maintains art's distinctiveness. Nietzsche explains how the task of the chorus in Greek tragedy is to transform the theatrical experience into an event divorced from the mundane world around it.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, for Adorno, if the

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6. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, tr. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 100-118. Cited hereafter as AT. For an analysis of Adorno's distinction between semblance and expression, see Robert Hullot-Kentor, "The Impossibility of Music: Adorno, Popular and Other Music," *Telos* 87 (Spring 1991), pp. 97-117. Cf. also Walter Benjamin's idea of mimesis as a recognition of "ingenuous similarity." Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Peter Demetz, tr. by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), p. 334. For a discussion of the relation between Benjamin's and Adorno's concepts of mimesis, see Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1997), pp. 137-180.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, tr. by Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 38.

work of art does not retain some element of semblance and thus its distinction from the world of things, it becomes an everyday object that has been functionalized and objectified like all other objects (AT 103).

While the work of art for both must maintain its distinction from the world of objects around it, it must also transcend this isolation in order to avoid becoming mere illusion. Just as Nietzsche's concept of the Apollonian reappears in Adorno's work as "semblance," Adorno's concept of expression exhibits the same characteristics as Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian. Both expression for Adorno and the Dionysian for Nietzsche function to bring reality into the illusory sphere of art, thereby transcending the Apollonian semblance. As with Nietzsche, for Adorno the reality of aesthetic images does not lie in their representational value, in their direct presentation of an image from history or from the experiences of the artist. Instead of entering the work of art as representation (for example, in an "historical novel"), reality enters the work of art through its inner form. For both, the structure of conflicting forces within the work of art creates a specific type of "imitation" that is to be distinguished from direct representation. "[Art's] expression is the antithesis of expressing something" (AT 112). Rather than representing pathos, art imitates it through a mimetic process. Adorno differentiates a communicative from a mimetic aspect of language and relates expression to mimetic language: "The new art tries to bring about the transformation of communicative into mimetic language" (AT 112). While communicative language is representational and depends on the relation between sign and referent, mimetic language emphasizes the constellation of signs in which the referent of each sign is less important than how the constellation as a whole creates a familiar experience for the recipient.<sup>8</sup>

The close tie between Adorno's concept of mimesis and Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian derives from their common return to a pre-Socratic concept of mimesis that "originated with the rituals and mysteries of the Dionysian cult" and signified expression rather than reproduction.<sup>9</sup> Resembling the transformation of reality created by Dionysian

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8. On this distinction, see Hohendahl, *op. cit.*, pp. 241-42 and Nichol森 *op. cit.*, pp. 66-73.

9. W. Tatarkiewicz, "Mimesis," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. by Philip W. Wiener, Vol. 3 (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1973), p. 226. In noting this origin of the term, Martin Jay fails to draw any consequences for Adorno's notion of mimesis. Martin Jay, "Mimesis in Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity*, ed. by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

rituals, the task of both mimesis for Adorno and the Dionysian for Nietzsche is to return the world to a state of nonobjectification. In order to designate this state, Nietzsche speaks of the Dionysian artist's communion with the primordial unity, while Adorno refers to the thing-in-itself. In both cases art does not copy nature but rather presents things as they exist before objectification into discrete entities and concepts (AT 63).

Because art refers to this nonobjectified dimension, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche depicts it as a metaphysical activity. The reenactment of processes outside the work of art occurs as individual artists transcend their own subjectivity by merging with a primordial unity: "In the first instance the lyric poet, a Dionysiac artist, has become entirely at one with the primordial unity, with its pain and contradiction, and he produces a copy of this primordial unity as music, which has been described elsewhere, quite rightly, as a repetition of the world and a second copy of it."<sup>10</sup> The artist's subjectivity merges with processes occurring outside the work of art. In transforming the world into this preconceptual state, mimesis and the Dionysian open the work of art to a metaphysical reality. But, because the primordial unity expresses itself as irresolvable pain and contradiction, Nietzsche refers to this mythic mimesis as an inescapable conflict between the individuation and the dissolution of the subject.

For Nietzsche, such a mimesis of nature implies the destruction and pain of a total dissolution of all individuation. As a consequence, "the entire opposition between the subjective and the objective . . . is absolutely inappropriate in aesthetics since the subject, the willing individual in pursuit of his own egotistical goals, can only be considered the opponent of art and not its origin."<sup>11</sup> As opposed to Nietzsche, Adorno attempts to confine nature within the opposition between subject and object (and thus to the limits of the subject) by referring, not to primordial unity, but to a "primacy of the object in subjective experience" (AT 71). Because Adorno's formulation retains the categories of subject and object rather than referring to a Dionysian dissolution of individuation and the opening to a metaphysical dimension, such as the primordial unity, his concept of art remains beholden to the subject/object split he attempts to negate. In maintaining this tie to subjectivity, he turns the work of art into a construction that can come into being only through the subject's domination over the object (AT 77). He retains this tie to subjectivity, because his concept of nature is based on a notion of reconciliation that cleanses

10. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

nature of the horrifying aspects threatening both the individual's survival and the unity of its consciousness.

*Aesthetic Theory* attempts to take over Nietzsche's aesthetics while eliminating nature as a source of violence. Nietzsche postulates a fundamental conflict between human endeavor and the forces of nature, i.e., his lyricist reenacts the pain and contradiction of the primordial unity. Adorno attempts to deny the necessity of such conflict by assuming that aesthetic images do not set up a relation to nature, that "their reality is their historical content" (AT 85). Though for him mimesis has the same aesthetic structure as Nietzsche's Dionysian, Adorno replaces the idea of a primordial unity of nature with that of history as what transcends the work of art.<sup>12</sup> While Nietzsche explains the double Apollonian/Dionysian character of myth by referring to nature as contradiction, Adorno derives the double character of art as semblance and expression from the fact that art relates to history by setting itself off from empirical reality and by reenacting historical processes in the relation of aesthetic images to each other (AT 86). Rather than establishing a relation to nature, the immanent historicity that creates expression in the work of art is a mimesis of history: "The latent processes in artworks, which break through in the instant, are their inner historicity, sedimented external history" (AT 85-86). The inner historicity and formal processes of the work of art are a reenactment on its own terms of experiences that take place outside of the work of art in the realm of history.

Frederic Jameson has argued that Adorno's chief contribution to philosophy and aesthetics consists of this "transcoding" of both philosophical and aesthetic questions into "substantive socioeconomic ones."<sup>13</sup> But in claiming "that aesthetics always leads back to history itself, and that for art the 'non-identical' is society,"<sup>14</sup> Jameson reproduces Adorno's suppression of any fundamental contradiction between man and nature. In replacing nature with history as the place of the nonidentical, they domesticate

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12. Norbert Bolz also notes this difference between Nietzsche's and Adorno's theories of art, but then goes on to criticize Nietzsche for a lack of "historico-philosophical" understanding. The key issue, however, is how Adorno uses the idea of history in order to escape the contradictions posed by nature. See Norbert W. Bolz, "Nietzsches Spur in der Ästhetischen Theorie," in *Materialien zur ästhetischen Theorie: Theodor W. Adornos Konstruktion der Moderne*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner and W. Martin Lüdke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 390.

13. Frederic Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), p. 239.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

the nonidentical, destroying the possibility of recognizing either alterity or transcendence, both of which depend on violence and suffering. By insisting on the historical and thus avoidable character of suffering, Adorno projects a possible utopian state in which suffering has been eradicated and desires have been fulfilled. Yet, he fails to see that this state of harmony between man and nature could only be established by eliminating the nonidentical moment in both art and reality that he wishes to save. Mimesis becomes for him an experience of reconciliation rather than contradiction and violence.<sup>15</sup> He reinterprets contradiction as historical and thereby argues that contradiction is ultimately avoidable and correctable. Similarly, he understands the nonidentical, not as violence, but as freedom, in order to maintain the possibility of reconciliation and utopia. Because his theory is built on the possibility of harmony between man and nature, he undermines the idea of aesthetic truth by subsuming it under the identity logic of reason rather than under the contradictions of non-identity. “The oneness of aesthetic constituents with those of cognition is, however, the unity of spirit and thus the unity of reason” (AT 138). Through this elimination of the nonidentical, Adorno’s aesthetics unwittingly destroys art as mimesis.

The first step in Adorno’s destruction of aesthetic truth is the turn away from the sublime and toward beauty as the fundamental category of art. Rather than emphasizing the sublime, which exceeds subjective capacities and provides an experience of the nonidentical, Adorno’s aesthetics are organized around the idea of beauty, which is based on harmony with the subject. He is able to dispense with the sublime while still retaining a notion of the nonidentical by altering Kant’s idea of natural beauty in order to give it a tinge of the incomprehensibility of the sublime. In Kant’s analysis, beauty in nature derives from the experience of a harmony of objects with the faculties used for perceiving them: “(Independent) natural beauty carries with it a purposiveness in its form, by which the object seems as it were predetermined for our power of judgment, so that this beauty constitutes in itself an object of our liking.”<sup>16</sup> While Kant insists on the “apparent harmony” between subject and object in the experience of beauty, Adorno notes a certain incomprehensibility in the object: “natural beauty points to the primacy of the object in subjective experience. Natural beauty

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15. Nichol森 follows Adorno in making the assumption that violence can originate only from the subject and not from nature. See Nichol森, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

16. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), pp. 98-99. Cited hereafter as CJ.

is perceived both as authoritatively binding and as something incomprehensible that questioningly awaits its solution” (AT 71). Though this passage seems to defend the primacy of the object and of the nonidentical, and Lambert Zuidervaart reads it as such,<sup>17</sup> Adorno’s reference to beauty rather than the sublime to designate that which exceeds the subject confines non-identity within the bounds of the object.

Incomprehensible though beauty might be in Adorno’s depiction, the question it poses still “awaits a solution” that would affirm once again the subject’s mastery. Adorno’s revision of Kant’s notion of beauty allows him to base his aesthetics on the harmony of beauty, while at the same time insisting that he includes a consideration of the nonidentical that threatens this harmony. By enclosing the nonidentical within a revised notion of beauty, rather than allowing it to remain connected with the sublime, Adorno renders harmless those forces in nature that exceed the individual’s capacities. In Kant’s analysis the centrality of the individual’s needs for constructing beauty allows a separate consideration, within the analysis of the sublime, of those aspects of nature completely incommensurable with the individual. In differentiating beauty from the sublime, Kant is free to describe the sublime as an experience of a contradiction between human faculties and nature in which nature completely exceeds the individual and its desires: “However, in what we usually call sublime in nature there is such an utter lack of anything leading to particular objective principles and to forms of nature conforming to them, that it is rather in its chaos that nature most arouses our ideas of the sublime, or in its wildest and most ruleless disarray and devastation, provided it displays magnitude and might” (CJ 99-100).

In basing his aesthetics on beauty, Adorno avoids a serious consideration of the “disarray and devastation” that threaten human desires. This is not to say that he ignores the sublime. He recognizes that it contains the nonidentical element that his theory of art strives to recover for human experience. Despite his focus on beauty, Adorno maintains an important role for the sublime, emphasizing that modern art has attempted to take over the spiritual function that Kant attributes to it. “The sublime, which Kant reserved exclusively for nature, later became the historical constituent of art itself” (AT 196). The experience of the sublime, which for Kant

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17. Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 165-66. See also Heinz Paetzold, “Adorno’s Notion of Natural Beauty: A Reconsideration,” in Huhn and Zuidervaart, eds., *The Semblance of Subjectivity*, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

was reserved for the reception of natural phenomena, becomes for Adorno the basis for the transcendence of art. “Works in which the aesthetic form, under pressure of the truth content, transcends itself occupy the position that was once held by the concept of the sublime” (AT 196).

The sublime is important for Adorno, because the relation to it points to the moment of suffering in the work of art. Just as Nietzsche’s Dionysian art force is rooted in primal pain and contradiction, expression for Adorno presents objective historical suffering as that which transcends the semblance of the work of art. “Expression is the suffering countenance of artworks” (AT 111). The centrality of suffering for expression leads Adorno to the same musical model for art that Nietzsche uses in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In both cases, dissonance is the key term. While Nietzsche speaks of “musical dissonance” with reference to the Dionysian,<sup>18</sup> for Adorno “[d]issonance is effectively expression; the consonant and harmonious want to soften and eliminate it” (AT 110). Though Adorno’s discussion of suffering and the sublime as constitutive for the work of art brings him close to Nietzsche’s views, Adorno breaks with Nietzsche in attempting to separate pain from nature. Even if Adorno agrees that dissonance, rather than harmony, is the source of art’s transcendence, he attempts to mitigate the implications of this insight by contending that this suffering is avoidable, because it is not a part of nature, but of history. Because, for Nietzsche, art refers to “the primordial unity, with its pain and contradiction,” it mediates an experience of the chaos of nature, which is the undefined and unpredictable opposite to the human construction of laws. For Adorno, however, the suffering brought into the work of art through expression must be something man-made and correctable, originating in history, rather than being natural and inevitable, and emanating from the primordial unity.

Adorno’s assumption that nature is a cipher for reconciliation, rather than contradiction, leads him to criticize Kant’s linking of the sublime to nature’s power. “However, by situating the sublime in overpowering grandeur and setting up the antithesis of power and powerlessness, Kant directly affirmed his unquestioning complicity with domination” (AT 199). Adorno can only accuse Kant of complicity with domination by assuming that the violence of nature is avoidable and that human endeavor can eventually force nature into unity with human desires. Adorno considers it impossible that the primordial unity might be the

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18. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-14.

source of the expression and dissonance found in art, because nature is mute. It cannot exist as a true antagonist of human endeavor, because there is no fundamental conflict between man and nature. Adorno denies nature's power and affirms the human ability not just to subjugate nature, but also to determine the overarching totality within which nature can be assigned a peaceful role.

This denial of nature's excessive power in comparison with human capacities is the crucial assumption that separates Adorno's from Kant's and Nietzsche's concept of the sublime. Just as he refashions Kant's notion of beauty so that it includes aspects of the sublime, Adorno redefines the sublime to make it a form of beauty, and, in doing so, undermines Kant's attempt to distinguish those aspects of nature that are commensurate with human faculties from those that are not. As opposed to both Kant's and Nietzsche's emphasis on the threatening aspect of nature as the crucial element in the experience of the sublime, Adorno's separation of nature from power and restriction forces him to argue, in contrast to Kant, that the sublime presents nature as a return to an original state before the oppression of spirit: "Nature, no longer oppressed by spirit, frees itself from the miserable nexus of rank second nature and subjective sovereignty. Such emancipation would be the return of nature, and it — the counterimage of mere existence — is the sublime" (AT 197). Unable to accept the connection between nature and violence in the Kantian sublime, Adorno redefines it as an emancipation from and protest against the domination of the spirit. Nature is only threatening in Adorno's idea of the sublime to the extent that the sublime uses the threat of domination in order to project a realm of freedom from constraint: "towering mountains are eloquent not as what crushes overwhelmingly but as images of a space liberated from fetters and strictures, a liberation in which it is possible to participate" (AT 199). Because, for Adorno, the sublimity of mountains lies not in their oppressive power, but rather in the promise of a freedom from bounds and restrictions, he can understand the sublime, not as an indication of the indomitable violence of nature, but of the human capacity to attain freedom by subduing this violence.

Kant also designates the spiritual as a realm of freedom. But in doing so, he understands freedom as constituted by the experience of domination and sacrifice. The sublime consists of an acceptance of the restrictions set by nature and a consequent sacrifice of material for spiritual being. In conceiving of nature as an overwhelming power, the experience of the sublime depends on man's fear in the face of this power. "Hence

nature can count as a might, and so as dynamically sublime, for aesthetic judgment only insofar as we consider it as an object of fear” (CJ 119). Though Tom Huhn argues, in defense of Adorno, that Kant’s understanding of the sublime effaces nature,<sup>19</sup> the contrast between Kant’s recognition of nature’s power and Adorno’s attempt to create a reconciliation between man and nature demonstrates that it is not Kant, but Adorno who eliminates nature as an independent force from his theory.

By affirming human impotence in the face of nature’s violence, Kant insists on the persistence of nature as a force beyond human control. This stance does not necessarily result in complicity with domination, as Adorno assumes. For in arguing that the experience of the power of nature in fear is the prerequisite for the experience of the sublime, Kant points out that the sublime depends primarily on the human ability to overcome subjection to the power of nature through the sacrifice of material comfort for the sake of spiritual ideals: “Hence if in judging nature aesthetically we call it sublime, we do so not because nature arouses fear, but because it calls forth our strength (which does not belong to nature [within us]), to regard as small the [objects] of our [natural] concerns: property, health, and life, and because of this we regard nature’s might (to which we are indeed subjected in these [natural] concerns) as yet not having such dominance over us, as persons, that we should have to bow to it if our highest principles were at stake and we had to choose between upholding or abandoning them. Hence nature is here called sublime [*erhaben*] merely because it elevates [*erhebt*] our imagination, [making] it exhibit those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature” (CJ 121). For Kant, the sublime is at once a recognition of the power of nature and a reaction to this power: the individual sacrifices material well-being in order to demonstrate resistance to the physical world over which nature has control. Yet, this superiority over the physical and thus over nature is only made evident to the extent that there is a willingness to sacrifice the physical for the sake of the ideal. This sacrifice demonstrates both an acceptance of and freedom from the physical constraints of nature. But, because this vision of sacrifice depends on “its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation” (“*die eigene Erhabenheit seiner Bestimmung*”), the rejection of the power of nature serves to support the sublimity, not of the subject, but of an outside determination of the subject.

19. Tom Huhn, “Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic,” in Huhn and Zuidervaart, eds., *The Semblance of Subjectivity*, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

Freedom from the power of nature is impossible without a sacrifice that functions as a submission to another set of rules. “By the same token, a liking for the sublime in nature is only negative (whereas a liking for the beautiful is positive); it is a feeling that the imagination by its own action is depriving itself of its freedom, in being determined purposively according to a law different from that of its empirical use. The imagination thereby acquires an expansion and a might that surpasses the one it sacrifices; but the basis of this might is concealed from it; instead the imagination feels the sacrifice or deprivation and at the same time the cause to which it is being subjugated” (CJ 129). Kant describes here the construction of a spiritual reality as the direct consequence of a confrontation with the power of nature, prefiguring Nietzsche’s own derivation of an aesthetic truth from this opposition between man and nature. The material impotence of the human subject leads to its dissolution as an autonomous entity. It can only escape total annihilation by submitting to an outside law that becomes greater than materiality.

Kant’s description of the sublime provides the justification for linking ethics with aesthetics. The experience of the sublime creates precisely the movement of consciousness that must occur with any ethical act. The sublime is not only significant because it recreates this movement, but because it provides the model for it. In order to create ethical actions, rather than merely a set of abstract ethical laws, a culture must impress upon its members a visceral and intimate experience of the sublimity of their actions, i.e., the dependence of their actions on an overarching spiritual framework that transcends the material world. Ethical behavior can only become a norm if all individuals feel the metaphysical cause to which their actions and aspirations are to be subordinated.

Unable to accept nature as incommensurate with desires, Adorno does not recognize the necessity of the individual’s sacrifice for the construction of transcendence. Instead, he attempts to transform the Kantian sacrificial structure of the sublime into a utopian structure. As with Kant, art’s negation of the material world is a spiritual event: “Only as spirit is art the antithesis of empirical reality as the determinate negation of the existing order of the world” (AT 89). This negation is not a denial of materiality itself, but only a protest against “the existing order of the world” — an historical situation in which unnecessary suffering takes place. This protest presents the possibility of an alternate world more congenial to subjective desires. Spirit in the work of art points to utopia, rather than to a divine order as the transcendent moment: “Through the irreconcilable

renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation, art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled: This is the true consciousness of an age in which the real possibility of utopia — that given the level of productive forces the earth could here and now be paradise — converges with the possibility of total catastrophe” (AT 33).

Adorno’s use of utopia, rather than the primordial unity, to describe that which transcends the immanent form of the work of art is an attempt to create transcendence without reference to the divine. Adorno shifts the origins of suffering into history in order to avoid a dependence on nature and the divine as the transcendent elements of the work of art. By considering freedom to be an historical alternative to restriction, Adorno turns it into an historical space of utopian harmony, rather than into a negative projection of a fundamental dissonance between human aspiration and natural forces. As a result, the sublime becomes a form of beauty, and beauty becomes the defining category for Adorno’s aesthetics.<sup>20</sup>

Insofar as he must limit the extent to which nature opposes human endeavor to establish utopia as his own form of secular transcendence, Adorno destroys the possibility of non-identity. If nature is not seen as a source of discord, but of unity, it has been eliminated as an antagonist to human desires, and violence and domination must originate, not in nature, but in human mistakes that can eventually be set right. In locating violence in history, rather than in nature, Adorno is able to explain the pain and suffering expressed in the work of art as socially determined, rather than a part of nature. As a result, the reaction to suffering is not sacrifice, but social change, i.e., a conscious manipulation of history. Yet, such manipulation (i.e. creating paradise through production) depends on the presumption that true nature has been eradicated and that reification is total. The idea of utopia is not merely a reaction to reification, but actually depends upon reification in order to constitute itself. The establishment of utopia as the basis of transcendence enforces reification in society, because it replaces a transcendence of both materiality and the individual with a subjugation of nature to the individual’s desires. Despite all his attempts at creating a negative dialectics that would avoid this problem, Adorno’s philosophy remains based on identity and the concept, rather than on non-identity and mimesis.

Adorno is able to hide the dependence of utopia on the fact of reification

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20. Cf. Albrecht Wellmer, “Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime,” in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. by Max Pensky (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 125.

by arguing that nature in the modern world has been replaced by the domination of the concept. For him, the non-identical is something that nature once must have been, but now is no longer. “Natural beauty is the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity. As long as this spell prevails, the non-identical has no positive existence” (AT 73). As much as Adorno seeks to recover the nonidentical, these sentences are an example of his underlying assumption that nature as non-identical has been eradicated. But this argument is merely an historical way of denying the power of nature. It posits the total eradication of nature that the theory needs in order to cohere.

Since mimesis can only make sense as a mimesis of nature (as the non-identical and unpredictable), Adorno’s presumption that nature has been totally subjugated to the concept and that only human manipulation exists as a force in reality destroys the possibility of mimesis. If mimesis is nonetheless a crucial aspect of modern art, this can only be a clue that non-identity still exists and that the idea of a total eradication of nature as non-identity is a modern delusion. If it had really been eradicated as something that goes beyond human concepts, then all of reality could be manipulated to fulfill human desires, and a state of utopia in which there is no conflict between man and nature and man rules over nature like a god would in fact exist. But as long as nature presents a threat to the fulfillment of human desires, it cannot be reduced to human concepts; it still remains unreified, and thus a source of fear and the basis for mimesis.

In assuming that in the modern world nature has been subjugated to the concept, Adorno develops an aesthetics organized around a subject-based totality with no place for aspects of nature that potentially exceed the subject. To the extent that he views nature as reconciliation, rather than contradiction, it remains trapped within identity logic and the domination of the subject. “Artworks have this much in common with idealistic philosophy: They locate reconciliation in identity with the subject” (AT 77).

This centrality of the individual in his understanding of art has become the major point of critique in subsequent analyses of the sublime. Thus, Jean-François Lyotard agrees with Kant in recognizing that the experience of the sublime is linked to the subject’s sacrifice. “By sacrificing itself [in the experience of the sublime], the imagination sacrifices nature, which is aesthetically sacred, in order to exalt holy law.”<sup>21</sup> By interpreting the sublime as “the sacrifice of the imagination,” he can

21. Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, tr. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 189.

claim that the sublime is based on a sacrilegious destruction of the aesthetic of the imagination in favor of the rationality of moral law.<sup>22</sup> But by opposing the moral faculty of the mind to the aesthetic imagination, Lyotard transforms the aesthetic into a natural force. Because he insists that nature is itself “aesthetically sacred,” even before the sacrifice and independent of a moral law, Lyotard’s reading reduces the sublime to the moment of horror and denies the possibility of any subjective reaction that could oppose this horror. If nature is itself sacred, then horror in the face of nature becomes the crucial moment in the experience of the sublime. Such a reading cannot explain the uplifting aspect of the sublime and its connection to the creation and maintenance of ethical values.

In equating the sublime with the sacred, Kant is careful to emphasize that no object is ever sublime or sacred in itself. Sacred objects do not exist, only the experience of the sacred, which occurs through the sacrifice of material objects according to the dictates of a moral law. The imagination does indeed sacrifice nature in order to exalt holy law, but it is only in this act of sacrifice that the experience of the sacred ever occurs. Moreover, this sacrifice of nature is not a sacrifice of the imagination itself, as Lyotard claims, but only of its “empirical use” (CJ 129). Imagination, in sacrificing its use in the empirical realm, “acquires an expansion and might” in the supersensual realm (CJ 129).

As opposed to Lyotard, Kant insists on the essential role of moral law in creating the aesthetic experience of the sacred. In his account spiritual values cannot exist if the sublime is reduced to the moment of fear. Though it is essential for the construction of the sublime, this fear is not experienced directly, but disinterestedly. “We can, however, consider an object fearful without being afraid of it, namely, if we judge it in such a way that we merely think of the case where we might possibly want to put up resistance against it, and that any resistance would in that case be utterly futile” (CJ 119-20). Rather than in the direct feeling of fear, the crucial moment of the sublime occurs when the subject is able to gain distance from this fear in order to be able to defy material circumstances in spite of their power and thereby to affirm a spiritual reality that transcends the physical world. A reduction of the sublime to the moment of horror eliminates a transcendent ideal and with it any set of values according to which an individual could organize its experience and actions. The anti-metaphysical stance that only recognizes the moment of horror in the sublime

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22. *Ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

can explain neither ethical behavior nor the construction of meaning that would allow consciousness to exist. Without the ability to assert some ideal against the immediacy of physical terror, consciousness disintegrates. For the transcendence of the physical world is simultaneously the act that gives meaning to the physical, fitting it within the parameters of a set of values that organize experience. Without values to integrate it into a meaningful framework, experience would be unassimilable.

In his alternative discussion of the sublime, Wellmer contends that Adorno's focus on the subject leads to the metaphysical idea of utopia. This idea must be eliminated in order to allow a world of pure immanence that Wellmer celebrates as an emancipation from metaphysical referents. In order to create this world, Wellmer must eliminate the overwhelming power of nature from his theory by considering the sublime to be an opposition between the abyss of meaninglessness and the ideal of reason. For him, "the opposition, the polarity, the irresolvable tension which gives rise to the feeling of the sublime would be one in the intelligible subject itself: namely the tension between the experience of an abyss of meaninglessness or non-sense, through which the subject of speech becomes aware of its own fragility, on the one hand, and on the other hand the subject's resistance to the superior force of negativity, through which the subject is able to sublimate the experience of its own negligibility within the world of communicatively shared meaning and, in this manner, lifts itself out of its negligibility."<sup>23</sup> In order to lift "itself out of its negligibility" the individual posits a linguistic community of rational subjects as the creator of meaning. The world is not given to the individual but rather created out of human communication. The rational construction of meaning in language becomes the source of both values and of the world itself. As a consequence nature as it exists outside of human understanding is an "abyss," rather than an active force. Nature does not precede human attempts to understand it, and art's task is not to create a mimesis of nature but to push back the boundaries of meaninglessness by making the unintelligible into something pleasurable. "However, that other side of discursive reason, the abyss of meaning, is not only the unintelligible as the horrible, but also nature as a source of delight beyond all meaning."<sup>24</sup>

By identifying nature with the abyss and as a source of delight, Wellmer discounts the active power of nature and assumes that it is simply a void that can eventually be colonized by human understanding. Nature as

23. Wellmer, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

an active force that might oppose human endeavor does not exist. As a result, art does not have any function independent of reason. It is simply the cutting edge of reason as it creates meaning out of the meaninglessness of nature: “by transforming the terror of what is unintelligible into aesthetic delight, [art] widens, at the same time, the space of communicatively shared meaning.”<sup>25</sup> But as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* convincingly demonstrates, reason is not a value, but a method.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, it is possible to speak of instrumental reason as a means of achieving particular ends, but impossible to speak of substantive reason as an end in itself or as a foundation for meaning.

To affirm communicative rationality as the highest value that transcends the subject is only to say that the individual cannot exist alone, but depends on a larger community for its constitution. Though this point is important for understanding the basis of subjectivity, it is inadequate for explaining the construction of the values that define the totality of subjective experience and that give it meaning. Because the construction of values must occur within the consciousness of every individual if ethical behavior is to remain concrete and everyday, rather than abstract and exceptional, values cannot be separated into distinct “value spheres” governed by experts and communicative rationality, as Habermas and Wellmer propose, but must be established within a single unified, aesthetically-based totality that can be grasped immediately by an individual consciousness in the sublime moment.

In positing the rational construction of collective meaning in language as the ideal that opposes materiality in the experience of the sublime, Wellmer fails to recognize the true horror of nature that the individual faces and the consequent necessity of an aesthetic, rather than a rational foundation for values. Nature creates a supreme fear in the individual precisely because all of its human capacities, including reason and linguistic constructs, prove to be useless in the face of nature’s power. Kant emphasizes that nature is not simply a void to be colonized by language but a “chaos” that displays “magnitude and might.” Nature exceeds human capacities, not simply by lying beyond the reach of language, but by actively destroying human constructions. The possibility of values must therefore be built on the individual’s acceptance of the material power of nature and an accompanying projection of an ideal that exceeds both human capacities and the indomitable power of nature. The sublime

25. *Ibid.*

26. Horkheimer and Adorno, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-88.

cannot exist in a world of pure immanence, but presupposes and enacts the movement toward the divine.

Adorno also fails to recognize this necessity of the divine for the construction of the sublime, considering nature reconcilable with human desires and positing a utopian reconciliation as the ideal that transcends material reality. Yet, his aesthetics are still superior to Wellmer's to the extent that he describes art as a mimesis of subjective experience that can only take place to the extent that processes in the work of art are a reenactment of processes that are essential to the experiences of the subject: "as if artworks, by molding themselves to the subject through their organization, recapitulated the way the subject originated, how it wrested itself free. Artworks bear expression not where they communicate the subject, but rather where they reverberate with the protohistory of subjectivity, of ensoulment, for which tremolo of any sort is a miserable surrogate." (AT 112-13) In focusing on the "protohistory of subjectivity," Adorno holds onto an experiential moment that can mediate between physical reality and spiritual values, allowing for the transformation of pure materiality into a meaningful world.

The mimetic structure that links the primal history of subjectivity to its recapitulation in the work of art is similar to Nietzsche's linking of the Dionysian to collective experience in the parable of conflict between man and nature. Both mimesis and the Dionysian use the individual as the measure of experience and of values. But, in contrast to Nietzsche, for whom the Dionysian aspect of the work of art is able to relate mimetically to a reality beyond the work of art by merging with a primordial unity that goes beyond the individual, expression for Adorno does not point beyond the individual, but is a mimesis of the process by which individual subjectivity develops. Rather than seeing nature as that which transcends both the subject and the work of art, Adorno invokes the history of the subject as the transcendent factor. "This is the affinity of the artwork to the subject and it endures because this protohistory survives in the subject and recommences in every moment of history" (AT 113). Expression for Adorno gains its force from the affinity between the processual character of the work of art and the process of individuation that he assumes must occur in the same way in every subject.

But instead of starting afresh at every historical moment, as Adorno asserts, the individual is determined by the collective within which it develops. If the history of the individual does not lie at the beginning of mankind, but rather is the fundamental story of every subject, constantly

repeated in the development of every individual in history, the work of art's recapitulation of the emergence of the individual does not illuminate a primal history of subjectivity and the distortions that result from alienation, but records the culturally specific forces that determine a particular individual's emergence. In creating a mimesis of subjective processes rather than a representation of images, the work of art does not provide a history of how an abstract, universal subject is deformed by repression but outlines how a specific community forms its members through its particular modes of discipline. This discipline is not a form of irrational violence, but the precondition for the development of subjectivity.

By referring the immanent processes of the work of art to an abstract history of the subject, Adorno only manages to relate the development of one subjectivity (that of the artist) to that of another (that of the recipient). But if there is a similarity between the two that is not coincidental, then there must be another transcendent aspect that links both. For Nietzsche, this aspect is the primordial unity, i.e., an unknowable metaphysical force that permeates an otherwise immanent history in the same way that it presides over the development of the subject. The agent of this primordial unity is the collective as it establishes and carries on the traditions and rituals that enable subjectivity. But, because every community will have its own specific relation to the primordial unity and thus its own version of the divine, subjectivity will always be an outgrowth of a specific culture.

Adorno's inability to recognize this dependence of subjective experience on the traditions and conventions of a community leads him to assume a universal validity for his aesthetic judgments that they do not and cannot possess. This deficiency in his thinking has consequences that become evident in Shierry Nicholsen's analysis of the role of subjective aesthetic experience in Adorno's judgments on art. She demonstrates that his musical judgments, though subsequently buttressed by theoretical elaborations, originated in Adorno's first impressions of music.<sup>27</sup> The subjectivity out of which Adorno writes belongs to a specific community of individuals who have shared a similar upbringing, and the validity of his insights depends on this shared context, rather than on an objective and universal judgment. As a consequence, his aesthetic judgments are often based, not on logical arguments, but on association and innuendo understandable only to a group of initiates sharing Adorno's assumptions. But Adorno's commitment to a unified and universal history of subjectivity

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27. Nicholsen *op. cit.*, pp. 24-31.

prevents him from comprehending how conventions and styles in art are essential to preserving art's particularity, which can never be particular as such, but always particular to a specific group. He interprets the return to convention in the late work of Beethoven, not as a realization of the community-bound and thus convention-based character of art, but as regression and cliché, as a sign of damage and "a kind of poison."<sup>28</sup>

Adorno replaces collective with subjective experience as the locus of cultural particularity. In his view, history rather than the primordial unity links one subjectivity to another, and both nature and the divine are considered either benign or irrelevant factors. Rather than conceiving of a particular collective with its rituals and traditions as the precondition for the development of subjective experience, Adorno derives the collective from the individual subject. The collective he constructs is, consequently, an abstract entity based on the assumption of a universal subject, rather than on a particular culture with non-interchangeable subjects. Though he recognizes the collective as the source of the legitimacy of works of art (AT 86), he denies the relation to the collective in his aesthetics by focusing on art as the product of the individual, rather than on myth as a collective event. He asserts the superiority of art to myth by arguing that, in the modern world, nature has been tamed and no longer presents a true opposition to human desires. This view of myth differentiates Adorno's progressivist outlook from Nietzsche's and even Kant's primitivist one. Adorno historicizes the relation between man and nature, while Nietzsche and Kant assume a basic similarity between the ancient and the modern worlds in their relations to nature.

Despite his general assumption of progress from the savage to the civilized, Kant's concept of the relation between man and nature in the experience of the sublime does not distinguish between primitive and civilized society. Both situations are defined by the antagonism between the power of nature and the weakness of man. In neither case is reconciliation with nature possible, but only the human adherence to an ideal. In replying to the objection that his analysis of the sublime is too sophisticated to underlie the judgments of all men, including the simple and the uneducated, he provides the following response: "I admit that this principle seems farfetched and the result of some subtle reasoning, and hence high-flown [*überschwenglich*] for an aesthetic judgment. And yet our observation of man proves the opposite, and proves that even the commonest

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28. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

judging can be based on this principle, even though we are not always conscious of it. For what is it that is an object of the highest admiration even to the savage? It is a person who is not terrified, not afraid, and hence does not yield to danger but promptly sets to work with vigor and full deliberation. Even in a fully civilized society there remains this superior esteem for the warrior, except that we demand more of him: that he also demonstrate all the virtues of peace — gentleness, sympathy, and even appropriate care for his own person — precisely because they reveal to us that his mind cannot be subdued by danger.” (CJ 121) Because nature’s power always exceeds human capabilities, the sacrifice of physical existence for ideals is the characteristic of the warrior that Kant designates as ideal behavior for both the modern and the savage.

By contrast, Adorno assumes that the modern world dominates nature, while the primitive world is dominated by a fear of nature’s power. “Times in which nature confronts man overpoweringly allow no room for natural beauty. . . . Wherever nature was not actually mastered, the image of its untamed condition terrified” (AT 65). Adorno connects nature in the modern world to reconciliation, while Nietzsche and Kant see nature as presenting limitations on human aspiration and emphasize a fundamental conflict between the two in both the modern and the primitive world. These differences from Kant’s and Nietzsche’s conception lead Adorno to assume a gradual progression of art away from myth, and thus from the spell of nature. “As its prose character intensifies, art extricates itself completely from myth and thus from the spell of nature, which nevertheless continues in the subjective domination of nature” (AT 66). The progression from nature’s predominance to the subject’s domination of nature creates the distinction between art and myth in Adorno’s theory.

Despite the fact that his theory of form ultimately derives from Nietzsche’s explanation of myth as a Dionysian formal structure, Adorno denies that art and myth might function according to similar structures. In claiming that formal consistency is only a property of secular art and not of myth, he assumes that inner form can only result from the subject’s domination of the contents of the work of art. “Artworks extend the realm of human domination to the extreme, not literally, though, but rather by the strength of the establishment of a sphere existing for itself, which just through its posited immanence divides itself from real domination and thus negates the heteronomy of domination” (AT 77). Since for Adorno, the subjective domination of nature has only been accomplished in the modern world, only modern art can create inner form. By contrast, myth

only exists in a situation where nature is still uncontrolled. Adorno denies that myth could contain the formal consistency that would constitute its expressive character. “The aesthetic images, however, emancipate themselves from mythical images by subordinating themselves to their own unreality; that is what the law of form means” (AT 86). He reserves mimesis through form for art, and imputes to myth a mode of representation that directly depicts the absolute.

Locating the source of discord in the concept and not in the limits set by nature, Adorno distinguishes between art, which maintains the possibility of reconciliation by negatively depicting it as that which is beyond the concept, and myth, which rejects this possibility by emphasizing the inescapability of natural limits. Though Adorno correctly attributes to magic and myth an archaic violence that originates in the indomitable power of nature, he does not realize that the mimesis of this power is what creates inner form in both art and myth. He attempts to appropriate exclusively for art the Dionysian structures of myth by assuming that formal structure arises as the result of the subject’s domination of nature and the contents of the work of art. However, in order for inner form to create expression, it must arise as the result, not of the subject’s domination, but of its sacrifice in favor of a higher ideal in the confrontation with the power of nature. By failing to note the importance of formal structure for myth, Adorno also overlooks the essentially sacrificial structure of mimesis in art.

Myth does not represent the absolute as an Apollonian symbol, but as a Dionysian formal structure. The orientation to the divine depends on aesthetic mechanisms (which Adorno attributes solely to art), because the divine aspect of the cult object does not inhere within the object itself but, like the non-identical in the work of art, is established by a mimetic relation to the absolute as that which is absent in the image and must be extrapolated as a projection out of the form. Kant describes this negativity of myth when he relates the sublime to religious enthusiasm. His explanation of religious enthusiasm is exactly the same as Nietzsche’s and Adorno’s models for the appearance of the Dionysian and of expression in the work of art. The infinite can only be expressed negatively, and the negative structure of the sublime is the reason for the Old Testament ban on images. “We need not worry that the feeling of the sublime will lose [something] if it is exhibited in such an abstract way as this, which is wholly negative as regards the sensible. For though the imagination finds nothing beyond the sensible that could support it, this very removal of its barriers also makes it feel unbounded, so that its separation [from the sensible] is an exhibition of

the infinite; and though an exhibition of the infinite can as such never be more than merely negative, it still expands the soul” (CJ 135). This relates closely to Adorno’s description of the work of art as a negative mimesis, not a positive representation. Yet, Kant is not referring to the work of art, but rather to religious rules. The absolute does not exist in the myth itself, but as a negative projection emanating from its form.

Though Kant’s own Enlightenment prejudices prevented him from developing this account of the establishment of spiritual values, his analysis of the sublime provides the foundations for an aesthetics of myth. Here Kant links the sublime, not to nature, but to religious laws. “Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc. This commandment alone can explain the enthusiasm that the Jewish people in its civilized era felt for its religion when it compared itself with other peoples, or can explain the pride that Islam inspires. The same holds also for our presentation of the moral law, and for the predisposition within us for morality. It is indeed a mistake to worry that depriving this presentation of whatever could commend it to the senses will result in its carrying with it no more than a cold and lifeless approval without any moving force or emotion. It is exactly the other way round. For once the senses no longer see anything before them, while yet the unmistakable and indelible idea of morality remains, one would sooner need to temper the momentum of an unbounded imagination so as to keep it from rising to the level of enthusiasm, than to seek to support these ideas with images and childish devices for fear that they would otherwise be powerless” (CJ 135).

The enthusiasm that arises out of the experience of the sublime must be a feeling exceeding the bounds of reason, because the power of nature it confronts overwhelms the subject’s capacities. Yet, it is only in this overwhelming of reason that the capacity for morality is produced. The basis of morality is not in reason, but in religious law, whose functioning is inseparable from the aesthetic experience of the sublime.<sup>29</sup> The indispensability of an aesthetic experience for the construction of morality leads to

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29. Unfortunately, Kant was too committed to retaining reason as a basis for morality to recognize the necessity of the aesthetic moment of myth for establishing a moral sense in a community. Kant designates religious enthusiasm as a kind of “madness” (CJ 136), and, as Lyotard notes, this “enthusiasm is an Affekt, a strong affection, and as such it is blind and cannot, therefore, according to Kant, ‘deserve the approval of reason.’” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, tr. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 166.

the conclusion that the formal structure of myth is similar to Adorno's concept of the work of art. Myth does not create a copy of the absolute, but acts mimetically in order to transform mundane into sacred experience.

Because the binding quality of a myth lives and dies according to its aesthetic effect, its construction of morality cannot be universal or abstract, but remains in an intimate relation to the experience of a specific community. The power of myth, as of art, depends on its ability to adjust to changes in the character of collective experience, and the truth of a mythic story is not a given, but depends upon the extent to which the structures of experience imbedded in its form still retain validity for a particular collective. Since moral truth is constructed aesthetically in the experience of the sublime, the cultural realm of traditions and rituals is the key site for the reception of values. Such a culture is not constructed universally on the basis of reason, however, but through the sublime, whose validity is justified aesthetically.

Because Adorno rejects the collective construction of values in myth in favor of the individualist construction in art, the collective postulated by his aesthetics is abstract; it is not founded on traditions and rituals, but on critique and reflection. The agent of aesthetic reception is not a religiously based collective, but a scientific research community that creates the supposedly indispensable philosophical critique of art.<sup>30</sup> Adorno's denial of the inescapability of sacrifice pushes his form of art in the direction of philosophy. In his aesthetics, critique must create the overarching context within which the work of art can speak to others. "The spirit of artworks is not a concept, yet through spirit artworks become commensurable to the concept. By reading the spirit of artworks out of their configurations and confronting the elements with each other and with the spirit that appears in them, critique passes over into the truth of the spirit, which is located beyond the aesthetic configuration. This is why critique is necessary to the works" (AT 88).

As Hohendahl describes, *Negative Dialectics*, *Aesthetic Theory*, and "Essay as Form" embody various attempts to "postulate a rapprochement between art's immanent logic and discursive thought."<sup>31</sup> Instead of allowing art to remain an independent realm of experience closed to conceptual structures, Adorno attempts to integrate the aesthetic dimension into the mechanisms of philosophy. He achieves this by creating a form of conceptual criticism in the essay form that goes beyond traditional

30. Zuidervaart, *op. cit.*, p. 146 and Hohendahl, *op. cit.*, pp. 191, 211.

31. Hohendahl, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

philosophical discourse and its discursive logic.<sup>32</sup> In describing this aestheticized mode of criticism, Hohendahl notes that, for Adorno, the essay form is built on “associations and equivocations” and that negative dialectics “remains discursive, although not bound by rigorous rules of rational argumentation.”<sup>33</sup> NicholSEN describes this style of discourse in detail by showing how a passage from Adorno’s essay, “Titles,” is designed to give the impression of discursive argumentation while avoiding a clear and decisive argument in order that the reader might be provoked into further reflection.<sup>34</sup> But, while NicholSEN claims that this reflection creates a space of “freedom and lack of restriction,” the autonomy of the reader is strictly delimited. The reader is not free to draw his or her own conclusions based on the configurations presented. Rather, as NicholSEN must also admit, “[t]his mass of reflection-provoking configurations of concrete elements is ultimately drawn back within the discursive form as a conceptual conclusion is drawn on the basis of it.”<sup>35</sup> Instead of allowing the aesthetic realm to develop on its own and to create its own independent structures, Adorno’s merging of art and philosophy in aesthetic theory ultimately draws aesthetic experience back to a predetermined conceptual conclusion. In his attempt to free theory from the constraints of the concept, he only manages to delegitimize aesthetic experience and to transform “art into an agent of critical theory’s interests.”<sup>36</sup> Theory will always be built on concepts, and, to the extent that Adorno theorizes with equivocations, rather than with clear theses, and associations rather than with arguments, he is either engaging in prevarication and “casuistry,”<sup>37</sup> or constructing an artwork that is calculated to lead the reader to a specific conceptual conclusion (a.k.a. tendentious art), as NicholSEN’s analysis suggests.

Adorno attempts this dubious merging of philosophy and art, because, on the one hand, he seeks to translate the insights of art into the social realm, and on the other, does not allow himself to conceive of a type of art that establishes social structures based on aesthetic intuition alone — this type of art manifesting itself as the rituals and traditions of a community. Rather than seeing religious transcendence as the basis of the communal aspect of art, he connects art to community by means of

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32. *Ibid.*, pp. 233-35.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 235 and 251.

34. NicholSEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-24.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

36. Rüdiger Bubner, “Concerning the Central Idea of Adorno’s Philosophy,” in Huhn and Zuidervaart, eds., *The Semblance of Subjectivity*, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

37. Bubner, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

philosophy. He argues that art, like beauty in nature, relates to its contents negatively. But instead of recognizing that this negative relation can only be properly constructed with an absolute that is undefinable, he seeks to create a conceptual determination of it, looking to philosophy to say that which art is not permitted to express. “Just as in music what is beautiful flashes up in nature only to disappear in the instant one tries to grasp it. Art does not imitate nature, not even individual instances of natural beauty, but natural beauty as such. This denominates not only the aporia of natural beauty but the aporia of aesthetics as a whole. Its object is determined negatively, as indeterminable. It is for this reason that art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it” (AT 72).

The connection of art to philosophy expresses the dependence of art on reception. Yet the restriction of this reception to philosophy also separates society from the experiential dimension that is the point of the moment of reception in art. Adorno hides his prejudice in favor of concepts and philosophers by saying that philosophy can never really say what is to be communicated in art. This last pseudo-dialectical flourish, which both affirms and denies the importance of philosophy, is determined by Adorno’s refusal to rely on the direct judgment of recipients. The rejection of this popular dimension is also the denial of cultural specificity. Though art needs reception, this reception is not philosophical and universal, but intuitive and cultural. The collective reception of myth does not attempt to establish the absolute conceptually, but allows it to remain a negative projection from the formal structure of myth. Because they avoid a conceptual determination, traditions and rituals maintain the only adequate mediation of truth with experience.

Adorno’s merging of art with transcendence, while maintaining a subject-based totality, turns out to be impossible, because transcendence in art necessarily involves a transcendence of the individual in favor of a divine order. In positing utopia, rather than the divine as the place of a transcendent dimension that constitutes the subject, Adorno creates an elaborate tautological structure in which that which transcends the subject in art is the subject itself as delineated by its desires. Yet, his project of gaining an understanding of a specifically aesthetic mode of truth as opposed to a rational one remains valid. While rational arguments can serve as a method of achieving previously defined goals, they cannot function as a basis of moral judgments. Instead, judgment can only be based in structures of transcendence mediated by aesthetic truth. As

opposed to reason's abstraction and universality, transcendence and art are situational and culturally specific. As such, they form the basis for the functioning of ethics, which must always be adapted to a particular situation. At the same time, the cultural specificity of judgments does not destroy their truth value and turn them into pure considerations of power. Though aesthetic truth is not based on rational argument, it nevertheless retains legitimacy based on the sacrifice of materiality in favor of transcendent ideals. Reason, because it is not based on sacrifice, but on the attainment of material goals, cannot serve as a substitute for aesthetic truth as a basis of morality. When the attempt is made to carry out this substitution, the result is an instrumentalization of sacrifice. Instead of being carried out in favor of a transcendent ideal, sacrifice within a rational order is made to benefit a temporal authority, which determines the final goals of this sacrifice. But, because there is no rational way to decide final goals and the traditions and rituals for this determination have been rejected, the goals become material and subject to the whims of those in power.