

## **Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic**

*Tom Huhn*

The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space. —Immanuel Kant

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that, cuts the airy way, Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five? —William Blake

I want to consider the relation between the aesthetic theories of Kant and Adorno. I want to suggest that Adorno closely follows Kant not only in the elaboration of the subject of aesthetics but also in the subjectivity elaborated in the aesthetic. What I would like to demonstrate is that the only substantive difference between Kant and Adorno lies in the history of the last two hundred years; that history consists of a transplantation of whatever it is that was once embodied by aesthetic judgment into what now occurs as the history and process of art. My hunch is that Adorno reads the *Critique of Judgment* as, simultaneously, the richest, most nuanced treatise on aesthetics, and as a site of immense repression. Rather than fault Kant's text for the latter, Adorno instead reads that repression as integral to the aesthetic and thereby attempts to set back in motion the frozen Kantian dialectic between beauty and the sublime. Adorno's insight into the aesthetic is both akin to and modeled on Kant's: Kant finds *aesthetic judgment* the reverse and hence visible image of subjective constitution, whereas Adorno theorizes the work of art as both that same reverse image as well as the attempt to see not only by means of it but also through it. It is as if Kant and Adorno are peering at the same phenomenon from opposite points of view. Kant glimpses a view of the constitution of subjectivity and intersubjectivity by suppressing the view of the object that, ironically, is the occasion for the judgment of beauty. Kant's aesthetic theory is thus a mimetic recapitulation of the very dynamic by which judgment functions. Adorno's aesthetic theory, on the other hand, ratter than attempting to look past the object in order to discern the subject, focuses on the object as a way of illuminating both object and subject. The object of aesthetic judgment thereby reveals itself as subjectivity in its otherness. It is now the artwork, and no longer Kant's aesthetic judgment, that has become for Adorno the most privileged site of alienation.

My hope for the present essay is twofold: I want to prompt a reconsideration of Kant's aesthetics by showing the extent to which Adorno is indebted to it; and I want to suggest that a profound intimacy continues to exist between Kant's and Adorno's texts, precisely in the inextinguishability of the aesthetic hope for reconciliation within human life. Though this hope for reconciliation registers itself in Kant as a refusal to forsake nature as the realm in which human freedom comes to fruition, Adorno proceeds instead to recount the historical migration of this hope from the site of natural beauty to that of the sublime and finally (or at least up until the present) to art beauty. Adorno's critique of the third *Critique* is that it attempts to hold the dialectic: within the aesthetic at a standstill, to keep natural beauty separate from art beauty, and to keep both these instances of taste separate from the judgment of the sublime that occurs within—but seemingly above—the all too civilized heads of people.

I begin by considering some of Adorno's remarks on Kant's account of the sublime. The Kantian sublime, as is well known, resides not in art but only in the presence of nature: "This sublimity, Kant argues, is something we ought to feel in the face of nature, but measured by the subjective theory of constitution, this means that nature itself must be sublime. Self-reflection in the face of nature's sublimity anticipates something of a reconciliation with it" (AT 298/281).<sup>1</sup> The sublime is a promise, indeed a much more substantive and emphatic promise than the one made by beauty—Adorno's fondness for Stendhal's dictum that beauty is the *promesse de bonheur* is revealed by how often he repeats it—for the sublime also promises reconciliation and thereby redemption.

But for Kant, such promise and such redemption might occur only with nature. Indeed, we might well say that for Kant this promise and redemption have meaning and content only insofar as they are made with and in nature. For a sublime art—nearly an oxymoron for Kant—the promise of life and redemption would instead amount to the resignation of subjectivity to its already-fallen state.

Perhaps the most important element in Kant's account of the sublime is an incessant dynamism, or better said, a negative dialectic. (For Adorno, the Hegelian dialectic inevitably collapses the distinction and distance between subject and object in favor of the subject and at the expense of the object; Adorno's negative dialectic instead favors the object at the expense of the subject. The dynamism of the Kantian sublime, like negative dialectics, registers the too-ready and too-complete erasure of the object.) The sublime is not itself redemption but the persistent performance of the expectation that redemption ought to be at hand. It is the refusal to relinquish not just hope but the immediacy and presence of real life. The sublime, however, is not Christian—it does not require a fallen subjectivity. Neither, then, is it nostalgic—it does not seek to recover what it imagines once existed. Neither is the sublime allegorical, premising its present on an overly dead something else. The sublime: is instead a mimetic, proleptic: production of nature—human (social) nature, which is to say, second nature.

If this second nature is reduced to a merely phenomenal scale, the art that heralds it is likewise often reduced to one version or another of morality. Although beauty might indeed at times function as a *symbol* of morality, the sublime resists such functioning in order to continue to suggest that which exceeds the grasp of the phenomenal: "No longer under the sway of spirit, nature would free itself from the cursed embrace of naturalness and imperious subjectivity. This liberation would amount to a return of nature, more specifically a return of the sublime, the counterimage of mere life" (AT 293/281).

A persistent theme of Adorno's aesthetics is that nature might indeed "free itself from ... imperious subjectivity" by an art aligned in opposition to us. Adorno suggests this opposition might also be taken as the revenge of nature on us. Not revenge for what we have technologically inflicted on nature but for our having left off holding regard for nature in any of its guises. Art's contrariness, then, is a product of the sublime's having migrated, after Kant, from nature into art. The historical era of the sublime in nature, let us say the second half of the eighteenth century, Adorno describes as coincident with a development in which "[t]he unleashing of elemental forces was one with the emancipation of the subject and hence with the self-consciousness of spirit" (AT 292/280). The subject comes into its own and (mis)recognizes itself as sublime nature. But this misrecognition, this hope and reflection, cannot persist, because of the subjective failure to realize itself as indeed something more than mere life.

We might well describe Kant's account of taste—the experience of beauty in contrast to that of the sublime—as the diagnosis of its subjective attempt to universalize itself. For Kant, subjectivity succeeds as a universal product in the moment of aesthetic (tasteful) pleasure, but so, too, must we judge that same moment—by Kant's own account—as a failure insofar as it is precisely the universality of that moment which remains unrecognized by subjectivity. Indeed, it is precisely this opacity, the failure of aesthetic subjectivity to recognize itself as an agent, that calls forth the need for a critique of aesthetic judgment.

Subjectivity *realizes* itself in taste but fails to *recognize* itself therein, and thereby likewise fails to reproduce itself as social. Though the singular success of taste lies, according to Kant, in the achievement of positing intersubjectivity, its failure nonetheless is twofold: taste fails either to transform its achieved universal intersubjectivity into something objective or, what seems the very least, to apprehend its achievement—hence, its continuing opacity. This particular failure of taste—again, in the very moment of its success—sets in motion the project of the sublime. The first task of the sublime is to remove from taste the presentation that allows it to misrecognize itself as objective. For Adorno, the migration of the sublime from nature to art is not the product of nature's revenge alone: it is also a symptom of the reciprocally increasing reification of the social and the subjective. If the sublime begins as the withdrawal of the purportedly objective, it continues more purely as the force of the negative. As reification increases, so, too, does the urgency for a dynamism that cuts across it. The migration of the sublime into art might then well be construed not merely as the disregard of nature but also as the signal of an increased reification within the confines of art itself. If art was ever a realm of free play, the arrival of the sublime indicates that art exists no longer as such. Because art, for Adorno, now requires the sublime, it is no longer the realm of mere appearance but, beyond that, the realm of false appearance, which is to say, of appearances that demand to be disavowed. If aesthetic appearance once served as a goad to reflection and life, *pace* Nietzsche, it must have since hardened into an impediment, indeed especially to itself.

We also find in Adorno the suggestion that it is just the success of art that allows the sublime to migrate toward it. Adorno borrows Nietzsche's aesthetic schematism regarding the principle of individuation in art in order to describe the particular problematic that art both creates and seemingly resolves: "It is the fact that art must at all costs individuate itself that makes universality problematic" (AT 300/289). Perhaps in homage to Nietzsche's critique of Euripidean drama, Adorno notes that a *deus ex machina* is the visible intervention of a technological machinery to assist, or rather force, the transition from particular to universal. Ideally, the particular artwork would dialectically make the transition on its own. Adorno's explanation of individuation and universalization centers again on Kant: "The more specific a work is, the more faithfully it actualizes its type: the dialectical precept that the particular is the universal has its model in art. Kant was the first to have sighted this, but he immediately defused it. From the standpoint of Kant's teleology, reason in aesthetics has the task of positing totality and identity" (AT 300/288). Presumably, what Adorno has in mind here is Kant's notion of the exemplar, which Kant formulates—in distinction to the example, which would be merely an instantiation of a general rule or model—as an instance that is simultaneously a particular and a rule or principle. The exemplar is by definition particular insofar as it is singular, but also it is more than a model, since it exists as ideal for any possible further instances.

Adorno faults Kant for positing too smooth and seamless a relation between particularity and universality in the object of beauty—because, despite his aesthetic theory, Kant helps keep invisible the technological machinery of transition. The object of beauty, whether artistic or natural, is for Kant less a site of promise or reconciliation, because it consists wholly of a harmonious identity between particular and universal. In short, there is no tension, dialectic, or slippage in Kantian beauty. It is as if beauty too

readily achieves what Adorno considers art's inescapable goal: "Since time immemorial, art has sought to rescue the particular; advancing particularity was immanent to it (AT 299/287). Yet for Adorno, the Kantian redemption and promotion of the particular object (but so, too, surreptitiously of the subject) come at too high a cost: the complete obliteration of the persistent, tension between particular and universal as well as the eventual total effacement of the object, of beauty itself. In Kant, beauty severs forever—in order to gain the universality of subjectivity—whatever ties remained that bound it: to the particularity of the object. With this effacement of the object for the sake of beauty, or with what Adorno calls the evisceration of art, art's immemorial project of redeeming and promoting the particular now becomes the problem of the sublime. More simply put, Kant's formulation of beauty resolves, but all too quickly and completely, the immemorial tension between particular and universal. It is this tension that migrates to the sublime.

Kant's favoring of natural over artistic beauty is the implicit recognition of the importance of some resistance to an all-pervasive and seamless identity of particular and universal. For Adorno, natural beauty is precisely a cipher of that which resists identity: "The beauty of nature is the residue of nonidentity in things spellbound by universal identity. As long as this spell rules, nothing nonidentical is positively there" (AT 114/108). Natural beauty is not itself the non-identical but the cipher or promise that nonidentity might be possible. "Natural beauty partakes of the weakness of all promissings: they are inextinguishable" (AT 114/108). And this inextinguishable promise is also fragile: "The reason one shies away from natural beauty is that one might wound the not yet existing by grasping it in what exists" (AT 115/109). The sublime, as we will see, bears no regard for this fragility in its attempt to extinguish the promise once borne by natural beauty, while attempting to make the not yet existing come into being. If we turn to a passage in which Adorno comments on Hegel's aesthetics, we will come to understand that it is not only the sublime that migrates into art but the beauty of nature into art beauty:

Contrary to Hegel's philosophy of identity, the beautiful in nature is close to the truth, except that at the moment of greatest proximity it conceals itself anew. This, too, art has learned from the beautiful in nature. What draws the line against fetishism and pantheistic make-believe as pleasant-looking disguises of an endless evil fate is the fact that nature, as it tenderly, mortally stirs in its beauty, does not yet in the slightest exist. (AT 115/109)

In other words, the beauty of art now carries the burden of what nature once promised in the guise of natural beauty. Natural beauty might then be understood as a dynamic, indeed a dialectical one: it begins as the hope of identity and comes near to achieving identity, but in the proximity of this near identity it "conceals itself anew," which is to say it retreats from positing identity. It would not be amiss here to suggest that what Adorno means by the autonomy of art may well be a reference to the historical piling up of functions onto art and art beauty such that art, merely by the accumulation and variety of tasks and expectations that fall to it, comes to be autonomous. Art tints functions as the default sphere into which migrate the historic frustrations of failed dreams and projects of human emancipation. Yet insofar as this sphere serves not only as a reservoir of these

frustrations but also maintains them, the aesthetic sphere of art thereby—for Adorno—becomes an active, independent agency. This of course is not to suggest that all art is autonomous or that all or any art making occurs in autonomy but that what some art or aesthetic judgment *achieves* is autonomy. Put differently, the autonomy of art signals the transfer of human autonomy (which is to say, freedom) from the human subject to the aesthetic artifact. When we speak of the spirit of art, we do not just infer our own alienation but so, too, posit *the* privileged site of alienation.

The sublime, like natural beauty, is hope. It is also a good deal more, and less. It is more than hope insofar as it attempts to make actual the hoped-for identity between particular and universal. The sublime, in this regard, is the refusal of the solace of hope evoked by natural beauty. We might well recall here Adorno's statement explaining how, in the late eighteenth century, the sublime and taste came into conflict as a result of the "unleashing of elemental forces" that was "one with the emancipation of the subject" (AT 292/280). The subject, however, was not emancipated—and, to paraphrase a well-known passage from *Negative Dialectics*, we might say that the moment when the subject was to realize itself has passed. The residue of this passed moment, of a subject born still, is not the hope for some future birth but the refusal of nature as the locus of generation and regeneration. The sublime, after Kant, thus migrates to art, to the realm of artifice par excellence. And the fact of this migration means that hope has not been extinguished but transferred. The question is how this migration affects the hope and whether there is more to hope for from art and art beauty than once was allowed by nature and natural beauty.

In order to consider the transformation of hope, and art, by the migration of the sublime, we need first to know how Adorno interprets Kant's account of the sublime. The reason Kant has an account of the sublime is, I have suggested, the result of taste's having achieved a too successful harmony of particular and universal, of subject and object. I have also suggested that this harmony occurs at the cost of obliterating the object as well as subjectivity's failure to recognize its achieved universality. I want now to suggest that implicit in Adorno's account of Kant's sublime is the thought that this sublime already registers the faults within the success of taste. It is thus in the account of the sublime that we find the symptomatic expression of what ails the success of taste.

The sublime arrives in the eighteenth century as the most advanced dialectical technique for producing human freedom, Adorno describes the traditional concept of the sublime as an "infinite presence ... animated by the belief that negation could bring about positivity" (AT 294/282). However, since this positivity fails to occur (or occurs all too negatively in taste), the negativity of the sublime comes to the fore:

Sublimity was supposed to be the greatness of man as a spiritual being and as nature's tamer. However, once the experience of the sublime turns out to be man's self-conscious realization that he is not natural, it becomes necessary to reconceptualize the sublime. Even in the context of the Kantian formulation, sublimit)' was tinged by the nullity and transience of man as an empirical being that was to have thrown in relief the eternity of his universal characteristic, i.e., spirit. (AT 295/283)

The sublime fails to achieve the *Aufhebung* of spirit, in part because it misconceives what is not spirit. In sacrificing empirical existence so readily, the sublime thereby also discards nature, just that realm until then requisite for prolonging the hope provided by natural beauty. With the sublation of human existence in the hoped-for transcendence of the sublime, the place and means by which reconciliation might occur is disregarded. And if this sweeping, purposive disavowal is, as I have tried to suggest, already a feature of natural beauty, then the negation of empirical existence effected by the sublime is but a more-thorough version of the effacement of nature achieved according to Kant's account of taste. The salient difference, then, between Kant's accounts of taste and the sublime is that natural beauty still required nature (whatever that might have been or comes to be) as an occasion for an aesthetic experience, for the harmony of particular and universal, even though Kant's account explains the functional importance of that occasion as merely an opportunity for subjectivity to misrecognize itself.

Power figures in most accounts of the sublime, from Longinus to Burke. Kant's account of the sublime, however, begins by exponentially increasing the power of the sublime into something capable, literally, of overpowering power; Kant's term for this superpower is dominance (*Gewalt*). It is as if the weakened power of subjectivity to reproduce itself in an experience of natural beauty demands a supercharged power. And because power has no overt opportunity to recognize itself in beauty the sublime becomes the locus for the return of what was beautifully repressed. In this fashion, the power that expresses itself only implicitly in the experience of beauty becomes explicit: and overpowering in the sublime. The sublime is the promise not just of identity but of overt recognition of subjective dominance, of self-conscious dominance, and so, too, of pleasure therein. The sublime might then be construed as the dialectical continuation of beauty, registering its sins and propelled by what remains unfinished in it. This continuation makes explicit, then, the complicity of domination in the aesthetic, in this case the sublime: "By situating the sublime in an overwhelming magnitude, in an antithesis of power with impotence, Kant betrayed an unmitigated complicity with domination" (AT 296/284). This complicity, I want to suggest, is already foreshadowed in the judgment of beauty, especially the judgment of natural beauty, where the object is swept away by the tide of subjective universality even though the illusion of its presence remains. The sublime, then, is the dialectical removal of the veil of illusion that sustains judgments of beauty. The *reflective* judgment of beauty depends on the not quite seeing through that this veil provides. The critical mission of the sublime is to remove this veil. That mission fails, however, with the failure of subjectivity to complete it. The sublime continues historically as a downward spiral into sheer negativity: "Radical negativity, as bare and nonillusory as the illusion once promised by the sublime, has become its legacy" (AT 296/284).

The sublime, however, was never just sheer power and complicity with domination. It was, according to Adorno's interpretation of Kant, the primary means of subjective resistance to nature—in short, the means by which freedom is won. Because that freedom has not been won, or rather continues to be won only piecemeal and momentarily, the dynamic of the sublime not only turns inward to feed on itself but also returns, dialectically, to art. Art seeks to "reverse what the sublime wanted to sustain" (AT 296/284). The attempt by art to bring to fruition what remains unfulfilled in the sublime

is likewise an attempt, by art to complete the impetus underlying natural beauty. Beauty, as we have come to realize through an analysis of the sublime, is about domination:

As a transition in domination, the transition from natural to artistic beauty is dialectical. Art beauty is that which is objectively dominated in an image and at the same time transcends domination by virtue of its objectivity. Works of art free themselves from domination by taking the aesthetic behavior we display toward nature and transforming it into a productive labor, which is modeled on material labor. Like the dominated as well as reconciled language of humans, art seeks to revivify what has become opaque to humans in the language of nature. (AT 120/113-14)

If we read this passage as a commentary on the third *Critique*, we might well conclude that Kant was attempting to forestall the historical dynamism propelling natural beauty into art beauty. His account of the sublime might then be read as a displacement of a historical dynamism into what he hoped would be an entirely separate aesthetic experience. The continuing value of the third *Critique* lies, then, in its attempt to keep separate the three most crucial elements of the aesthetic: individuation, power, and freedom. Despite the letter of Kant's text, the programmatic analysis of these elements is testament to the lack of reconciliation among them. Kant's text itself resembles the aesthetic insofar as it embodies the desire and hope for reconciliation while nonetheless displaying aesthetic judgment, whether of beauty or the sublime, as an already compromised and coerced reconciliation.

In the quoted passage, we not only witness the dialectical transition in domination from natural to art beauty but also come to understand the dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity as it plays itself out in the recent history of beauty. Adorno implies that art beauty achieves an objectivity not allowed natural beauty. Contra Hegel's notorious elimination of natural beauty for the sake of a fully subjectivized art beauty, Adorno insists on an achievement of objectivity by precisely what has been relegated to the wholly subjective. The Kantian critique that invokes a universal subjectivity at the cost of any objectivity whatsoever is fulfilled then, for Adorno, in the constitution of a universal, albeit momentary, objectivity. It is in this light that we can best understand Adorno's frequent calls in the Aesthetic Theory to return to the object, the artwork. What was once construed, under Kant, as the dynamic of a universalizing judgment is turned via Hegel into a momentarily universalized object, and finally returned by Adorno into its autonomous particularity.

What kind of achievement, or fall, is this? The first caution that needs to be exercised is in response to the too-hasty surmise that the objectivity of the artwork is to be understood as reification. The artwork becomes—after the historical migration of the sublime to it—like the evanescent moment of Kant's aesthetic judgment. Its objectivity lies not in something that can be grasped or sustained, just as absolutely central to Kant's account of taste—and to Hume's—is our utter inability to supply the principle of aesthetic judgment. The inexorable nonappearance of the standard of taste has its complement in the, curiously enough, nonappearance of the object of art. And this nonappearance is the historical achievement premised on the historic failure of the sublime. Nonappearance is

formulated in Adorno's aesthetics as afterimage. The artwork is not itself image; image implies, despite itself, presence and realization. (And image, for Adorno, is itself the revelation of what fails to appear.) Afterimage instead implies residue and trace, that the moment has passed. In this regard, the artwork as afterimage is a trace not just of the nonidentity between thing and image, or even thing and thing, but of the nonidentity within temporality itself. The afterimage is a site of mourning, but of hope as well. The closest approximation we find in Adorno to what the objective appearance of the artwork might look like is in his characterization of fireworks:

Fireworks are apparitions *par excellence*. They are an empirical appearance free of the burden of empirical being in general, which is that it has duration; they are a sign of heaven and yet artifactual; they are both a writing on the wall [*Menetekel*], rising and fading away in short order, and yet not a writing that has any meaning we can make sense of. (AT 125/120)<sup>2</sup>

Let us return to the question of whether the transition of the aesthetic from subject to object might best be read as achievement or fall. It is of course both. As an achievement, it means subjectivity's return to a state of affairs in which the object demands recognition—just that recognition that subjectivity failed to provide itself in the experience of the sublime. The transition to art beauty is thus premised on the failure of subjectivity. And it is just this failure that paves the way for a return of the thwarted force for universality. If subjectivity cannot, recognize itself as universal, dialectically the only place to turn is toward the object, just that object already sacrificed surreptitiously in the judgment of natural beauty and overtly in the sublime. The impetus toward unity and universality thus appears in art beauty as the return of the repressed. The artwork, historically then, becomes objective just as, historically, the subject conies to fruition, albeit momentarily, in aesthetic judgment.

The objectivity of the modern artwork, because of its dialectical history, is best understood as the reverse image of universal subjectivity. Modern artworks, in short, have become the most profound in stances of subjective alienation; most profound because they are at once both at the farthest remove from subjectivity and its most fulfilled *expression*. Adorno's repeated call to focus on the art object and likewise his insistence on the objectivity of the artwork might then be interpreted as the resistance to taking the achievement of the artwork as the achievement of subjectivity. That is, Adorno wants to forestall the collapsing together and coerced reconciliation of objectivity and subjectivity. If humanism defines itself by measuring the status and progress of humankind according to the achievements of its products, what might be called Adorno's antihumanism ought to be in turn taken to mean that any such achievements always occur only in default of subjective progress. The critical mistake of humanism, the mistaking of objectivity for subjectivity—just the reverse of Kant's description of the judgment of natural beauty—is, for Adorno, prohibited rather than encouraged by the artwork. The artwork witnesses not the achievement, of subjective freedom but the continuation of its failure to ever fully arrive. Hence, the objectivity of the artwork is the literal embodiment of the distance

between where we are and freedom. The artwork stands not just as testament but also as reminder of our unfreedom.

From this conclusion, it is but a short, step to the view, posited variously by Schiller, Nietzsche, and Marcuse, that the artwork not only testifies to the absence of freedom but also impedes our progress toward it. In their hands, the objectivity of the artwork becomes an obstacle on the path of human emancipation. Culture turns into not just the symptom of human lack but something more like the persistent commitment to it. For Adorno, however, the artwork has become the surrogate for an emancipating subjectivity. (This explains his statement to the effect that all artworks fail—they fail not only to liberate subjectivity but also to produce a subject. This is what remains literally inhuman in art.) As a surrogate the artwork remains incomplete, hence the need for an aesthetic theory as a reminder that, no matter how complete any art object might be taken to be, insofar as it is an art object its completion is possible only as a return to subjectivity. The historical orbit, of the artwork around subjectivity has reached its heretofore most distant point from the subject, repulsed to this furthest; distance by the nearly successful program of the sublime—counterprogram of capital—to unite the subject with her own alienated projects. After the failure of the sublime, the artwork becomes the objective counterimage of subjectivity; the achievements of modern art are to be read in direct proportion to the failure of the sublime. The modern artwork might thus be taken as whatever bears the closest resemblance and serves as the nearest analogy to the subject. And what do we see in this object?

Perhaps the first thing to take notice of is its hermetically sealed nature. The modern artwork, as many have noted, seems destined to reside in templelike museums. Philip Fisher has eloquently and persuasively described how modern artworks are produced exclusively with that end in view.<sup>3</sup> More relevant to my focus on aesthetic judgment is to note the contrast; between the artifacts of modern art and those occasions for finding nature beautiful. For Kant, objects of natural beauty are an invitation to reconcile the subjective with the natural and thereby propose an opportunity to realize human freedom by creating a space between nature and artifice. Modern artworks, on the other hand, seem to offer no occasion for reconciliation with nature. They do still invite reconciliation, but the site has changed. The site now seems to be wholly within culture itself—as if artworks can only imagine and prescribe a reconciliation between subjectivity and itself. Still, though other than the reconciliation prompted by natural beauty and the sublime, this would nonetheless amount to no small achievement; the question posed objectively by modern art is whether subjectivity can recover possibilities it jettisoned before they were ever realized. Let us consider what Adorno proposes under the term "technique" as the means of producing some of these possibilities. And let us recall that the goal in the dialectic between nature and artifice is neither the imitation nor the avoidance of nature:

Being-in-itself, which artworks follow after, is not an imitation of something that already exists but an anticipation of a being-in-itself that does not yet exist, something unknown but that determines itself by way of the subject, Works of art state that there is something that exists in itself, but they do not spell out what it is (AT 121/114).

In regard to the question of technique, Kant and Adorno again share a crucial insight, concerning the status of the artwork, for both define what constitutes the entire sphere of art as the means-end rationality of technology. It is just this rationality that decides Kant in favor of natural beauty and, in the case of art beauty, even allows him not only to distinguish pure from dependent beauty but to favor the former over the latter by dint of its liberation from intention. For Adorno, beginning in the late eighteenth century, "technologization [of art] set up control as a general principle" (AT 94/87). It seems, too, that Adorno distinguishes *technique* from *technology*, on what amount to Kantian grounds: if technology is both the application and increasing centrality of instrumental rationality to human praxis, then the concept of technique appears in Adorno's text as the dialectical overcoming of technology. It is means-end rationality pushed up against itself. Dialectically then, successful appearances of technique feel like the magic of not being subject to means-end rationality: "The technologization of art is triggered both by the subject's disillusioned consciousness and distrust of the obscuring quality of magic, and by the objective situation of art, which is that artworks are becoming more and more difficult to bring off" (AT 94/87).

We find a striking confirmation in Kant of this dialectic between nature and artifice. For Kant, the successful work of art—a beautiful work—conveys its beauty precisely by seeming to be a work of nature. That is, art beauty is possible only as the successful concealment, or we might say transformation, of the means-end rationality inherent in intentionality. Thus, for Kant, beauty is the dynamical transformation of technology, just what Adorno describes as technique. The proof that Kant's aesthetics is fully dialectical is likewise afforded by his contention that natural beauty's success depends in turn on its appealing as if it were artifactual. Indeed, it might even be recalled that Kant has a technical term for the dialectical nature of beauty: exemplary beauty. In addition to exemplarity, there is in fact a good deal in Kant's aesthetics that attests to a dialectic of technology and technique: think, for example, of the crucial character of "purposeless purposiveness" in aesthetic judgment, or of the definition of genius as the overcoming of all subjective particularity. Indeed, why not describe the whole of the third *Critique* as the attempt to formulate the aesthetic as the *means* by which subjectivity, unintentionally and without malice toward nature, overcomes its own particularity and *means*-spiritedness to thereby realize itself as unity? Further, this unity is to have its model and precursor—again unintentionally—in nature, Technique, on this model and like beauty, is second nature.

"The autonomous work of art, which is functional only in reference to itself, aims at attaining through its immanent teleology what was once called beauty" (AT 95/89). Technique is the means by which the autonomous work of art achieves its telos. But rather than this means-end relation's confirming the artwork's thralldom to technology, Adorno instead posits technique as the dialectical overcoming of instrumentality. Technique, then, is the transformation of technology into pure expression: "What is called reification approaches, when it is radicalized, the language of things. Reification brings itself near the very idea of nature, which extirpates the primacy of human meaning" (AT 96/89). Artistic technique here allows us to understand the dialectical trajectory of reification. Technological reification, what might be considered the

instrumentality par excellence of subjectivity, can also, by a "radical use of reification," become an expression of nature, insofar as the latter has been defined—technologically, we might add—as what stands in opposition to us. The radicalization of reification is thus a radicalization of the alienated relation between subjectivity and nature. Technology, in this light, is thus a mimetic approximation and acceleration of the nonidentity between things and us. So, too, is it potentially, especially if pushed far enough, a self-alienation that opens a space for something else to speak. In short, what makes technology akin to what, nature might be is that both are the refusal of content, substance, and meaning. Technology is a means only, a method whose premise is the disavowal of significance. Nature appears dialectically to us as a dynamic that not only invites but, more important, resists any significance we might want to extract; from it.

Technique is the acceleration of the meaninglessness of technology and reification that may well prompt an evisceration of whatever meaning we might once have imagined having. Technique achieves what Kant describes as natural beauty: an occasion whose lack of intentionality allows the appearance of what an intentionality might; nonetheless have produced. Technique, then, occurs with the same opacity as natural beauty. But; what is opaque in both cases is not simply intentionality—for this is precisely what has been overcome. Rather, what is opaque in both beauty and technique is the universality of subjectivity. In judgments of beauty, what we fail to discern—though it is just this failure that allows beauty to occur—is intersubjectivity, the version of universal subjectivity unearthed by Kant's critique. Likewise, in our encounter with technique, what we fail to discern is precisely the thoroughly social nature of this most advanced form of production.

We are blind to technique insofar as we particularize it by ascribing it to an individual. Rather than fetishize the object produced, which is what we do in naming masterpieces, we fetishize the activity of making by describing it as technique. The recognition of technique as technique is thus inextricably bound up with both blindness and insight. To discern technique is already to reify an agency that has just itself overcome the reification of technology; thus, it is an insight premised on blindness. But to fail to discern technique is likewise to fail to find production a subjective (which is to say, thoroughly human) act; thus, it, is a blindness premised on an insight. This dialectical web of technique maintains the opacity of the social.

In this regard, technique is but the historically most advanced participant in *das Immergleiche*. Thus, there is no reason to posit a historical development within the history of aesthetic judgment or aesthetic theory; Adorno's explication of technique is merely the twentieth-century equivalent of Kant's theory of natural beauty. But if instead we assume there is a history—indeed, a dialectical one—within the aesthetic whereas there is history nowhere else (consider in this light Hegel's history of the aesthetic), then the telos of the aesthetic is one and the same with human emancipation. (Art, pace Hegel, is not only the expression of temporality but the embrace of it—hence, perhaps, its commitment to deathliness.) And this thought concurs with the trajectory of Hegel's aesthetics into an exclusively subjective realm. But the thought likewise confirms Hegel's aesthetics as a dialectical continuation of Kant's insofar as it continues the effacement of any and all too-particularistic expressions of subjectivity, indeed expressions of subjectivity at all. What makes Hegel's aesthetics such an integral part of the history of die

aesthetic is not the removal of nature as a realm in which human freedom is to be won but rather the explicit recognition that the bulk of the work to emancipate subjectivity will have to be done within and against subjectivity. The task, in other words, is first and foremost an internal one. This is already implicit, in Kant's analysis of beauty but especially in his account of the sublime. Adorno locates this potential more generally in the political implication of Kant's version of subjective interiority: "Inferiority, for Kant as well, is also a protest against the order, heteronomously imposed on subjectivity" (AT 177/169).

To consider for a moment, this constellation of terms in light of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would be to understand the order Odysseus places on (and within) himself as the technical, mimetic approximation of the heterogeneity he nonetheless feels imposed from outside. In this regard, technology originates as the disavowal of mimesis. The technology of self-production arises within the dynamic of mimesis that denies its own origin. So, too, the self that arises fails, in turn, to recognize its own origin. Dialectically then, it should come as no surprise that Adorno names Kant as one who takes interiority as a protest against order even though it is Kant who formulates the categorical imperative as the means by which that same interior most properly orders itself. But there is something amiss for Adorno in the dialectic between mimesis and technology—something extra and undigested. He uses the term "expression" (*Ausdruck*) for what occurs between the cracks of the dialectic: "Expression is an interference phenomenon, a function of technical procedure no less than one of mimesis. Mimesis, for its part, is called forth by the density of technical process, whose immanent rationality nonetheless appears to labor in opposition to expression" (AT 174/167). In a perfect world, technology and mimesis would seamlessly and unendingly transform themselves into one another. Subjectivity would project itself as other and then accommodate itself thereto. But expression is instead a kind of Ludditelike moment, within this generation and regeneration. It is the protest spoken against itself; in this way, it is akin to critique, since it, too, depends on no external factors. Expression, therefore, speaks on behalf of no one but rather of those not yet allowed; subjective expression is an oxymoron: "This leads to a subjective paradox of art: to produce what is blind—expression—from reflection, through form; not to make the blind rational but instead to aesthetically first make it up" (AT 174/167). The blind needs to be produced in order for us to have something nonmimetic and technologically defective to follow. Blindness, in short, is a mimetic approximation of expression. And it is precisely at this juncture that we come to understand best the Kantian legacy in Adorno as well as the advance the latter attempts to make on him. The genius of Kant's aesthetics of beauty lies in its recognition of the absolute necessity of the opacity of the object—and the experience—we call beautiful. The incipient transition in Kant's aesthetics from beauty to the sublime is the recognition that the opacity of the object is unfortunately complemented by the opacity of subjective agency.

For Adorno, a modern artist might make this subjective opacity productive as technique; the term *Formgefühl* (intuitive feeling of form) describes the artistic subject's own cognizance of an opacity that is nonetheless productive. Not only does this term have an affinity with Kant's account of artistic genius but Adorno also finds that it solves the dilemma of Kantian aesthetics:

It resolves the Kantian problem through a category of mediation. Though for Kant art is utterly nonconceptual and subjective, it nonetheless contains a moment of universality and necessity, just that aspect which, according to the critique of reason, is the preserve of discursive knowledge. *Formgefühl* is at once the blind and binding reflection of things, on which it must in turn rely, *Formgefühl* h hermetic objectivity that falls on subjective mimetic ability. This ability strengthens itself in turn on its opposite, rational construction. The blindness of *Formgefühl* corresponds to the necessity in things. (AT 175/ 167-68)

Oddly then, what we become in following *Formgefühl* (whether by making or experiencing) is an instance of both technology and technique. We follow a method, however opaque, in the hope of further reflecting—though now as a dynamic—what has already hardened into a thing. Aesthetic judgment, then, becomes a mimetic approximation of the artwork, which is already a technical, mimetic approximation of us. The reflexivity inherent to the aesthetic doubles itself, and this doubling reflection occurs only if there is already some moment of blindness. It is on that opacity that reflection ignites itself. Hence, Adorno's description of *Formgefühl* as blind and binding. Because it is opacity that sets reflection in motion, there must, dialectically, be a return of opacity, just as in Kant's aesthetics we witnessed the absence of the standard of taste as corresponding to achieving the blindness of subjectivity.

The category of mediation fulfilled by the *Formgefühl* might likewise be construed as a model for subjectivity. The importance of this model is that it recapitulates the important lesson of the sublime in which all models and modeling are dispensed with for the sake of a vision of subjectivity as itself process and change. "Technologically discernible is that artworks are not being but becoming" (AT 262-63/ 252). Adorno continues in the same passage by asserting that artworks consist of an "immanent dynamic," again, I would want to say, like the immanent dynamism of Kant's account of the sublime. Artworks, then, are *models* of movement and becoming, though they nonetheless come into existence only if they are congealed as reified things—this is the price they must pay. Adorno insists that the movement that artworks are can be discerned only technologically—movement can be grasped only as a process that itself imitates the being of a static thing. Yet artworks embody the jolting reminder that all artifacts are but the forestalled, hence blind, mimesis of human fulfillment. The advantage of technology—perhaps akin to self-blinding subjectivity—lies in its incomplete reification. And incomplete reification, like opacity, holds the promise of a vision of something more.

## Notes

I want to thank Leo Damrosch, Gregg Horowitz, Bob Hullot-Kentor; Jan Heller-Levi, and Lambert Zuidervaart for careful, generous and insightful readings of earlier versions of the essay.

1. Nearly all of the passages from the *Aesthetic Theory* that appear in the essay are either modifications of, or substitutions for, Lenhardt's translations.

2. Leo Damrosch reminds me that fireworks are, in French, *feu d'artifice*. Fireworks appear as a figure for aesthetic experience in accounts other than Adorno's. Burke, for example, in discussing magnificence as a source of the sublime, writes, "There are, however, a sort of fireworks, and some other things, that in this way succeed well, and are truly grand." Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton, University of Notre Dame Press, 1958 [1757], p. 78. Genet describes his own work with the same figure: This book is only literature, but let it enable me to glorify my grief so that it emerges by itself and ceases to be—as fireworks cease to be when they have exploded." Jean Genet, *Pompes funèbres (Funeral Rites)*, *Oeuvres Complètes*, III, Editions Gallimard, 1953. Cited in Edmund White, *Genet; A Biography*, New York: Knopf 1993. p. 281. And from *Ulysses*: "And Jack Caffrey shouted to look, there was another and she leaned back and the garters were blue to match on account of the transparent and they all saw it and shouted to look, look there it was and she leaned back ever so far to see the fireworks and something queer was flying about through the air, a soft thing to and fro, dark. And she saw a long Roman candle going up over the trees up, up, and. in the tense hush, they were all breathless with excitement as it went higher and higher and she had to lean back more and more to look up after it, high, high, almost out of sight, and her face was suffused with a divine, an entrancing blush from straining back and he could see her other things too." James Joyce, *Ulysses*, New York: Penguin Books, 1977 [1922], pp. 363-64.

3. Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art; Modern American. Art in a Culture of Museums* (New York: Oxford University Press", 1991).