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# THE BLOOMSBURY HANDBOOK OF LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY

a comprehensive survey  
of the state of theory in the 21st century.

## Adorno, Theodor W.

As much an essayist and philosopher as he was a composer and sociologist, Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) was one of the twentieth century's most intriguing and significant thinkers. A leading member of the so-called Frankfurt School, he was responsible, along with Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and others, for the creation and exemplification of critical theory, a sustained insight that shunned the unreflective and uncritical orientation of traditional theory by pursuing the unacknowledged presuppositions of concepts and theories that present themselves as exclusive means of providing wisdom and special access. The confidence and convictions traditional philosophy might once have bequeathed on a concept or syllogism Adorno instead settled at the foot of his own experience. Personally and professionally victimized by Nazi anti-Semitism, Adorno's leitmotif was the compromised and paradoxical situation of human subjectivity, which he took to be a remarkable historical achievement capable at once of ineluctably poignant aesthetic experience as well as seemingly unlimited self-destruction. Some of his most important

work shows how the manner and forms of subjectivity are inextricably tethered to the domination of nature as well as of other human beings. His vigilance against kitsch, and what he and Horkheimer termed the "culture industry," has often led to the mischaracterization of Adorno as elitist. But his work successfully witnessed how the culture industry substitutes preformed ersatz stimulation for experience, in the aim to distract and forestall every experience that threatens to undermine the extorted consensus complicit with the status quo. The culture industry is itself but a symptom of the overarching tendency to transform reason into instrumental rationality—thus the topic of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, coauthored with Horkheimer in 1944. The misunderstanding of Adorno's resistance to the seductions of Hollywood movies, as well as to his writings against certain forms of popular music, arises from the mistaken belief that Adorno was underwriting a hierarchy of cultural goods. He was instead merely acknowledging that certain works of art come into existence as strategic vehicles of manipulation rather than coming to be from a wish or inclination to evoke or disrupt experience.

Touchstones throughout his works include the utopianism of Ernst Bloch, the dialectics of Karl Marx and Georg Hegel, as well as the omnipresence of the Freudian unconscious. Adorno's extensive writings on aesthetics, including his late unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), arrange themselves nearly always from the point of view of what happens in human experience. His attention was drawn toward what remained incomplete, thwarted, or even deformed in human experience, best exemplified by his statement that the splinter in the eye is the best magnifying glass. Artworks, Adorno surmised, might sometimes flash with a runic residue of no longer visible features of what eludes subjectivity, but so too do artworks provide occasions whereby subjectivity might sidestep and momentarily overcome its own fractured identity. In this regard Adorno locates himself in the aesthetic tradition of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller, whose primary emphasis is how aesthetic experience serves at once both fully to evoke (beauty) and to efface (the sublime) subjectivity. Adorno's focus on the character of subjectivity dovetails neatly with the longstanding historical concern of aesthetic theory with the problem of how subjectivity comes into existence. His dialectical insistence on the primacy of the object—no doubt inspired by Walter Benjamin's treatments of childhood experience and the mimetic impulse (not to mention the apparent opacity of everyday objects) as well as by Adorno's own experience of music—was to turn toward the subjective share in every artifact no less than to turn toward the very objective character of subjective experience itself.

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## Further Reading

- Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer.  
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New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

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