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Disinterest and an Overabundance of Subjectivity

Theodor W. Adorno on Kant's Third *Critique*

1

Theodor Adorno's (1903–1969) writings and published lectures on aesthetics offer a prime opportunity to consider how Kant's aesthetics fare in the twentieth century, and perhaps still more importantly, reveal how early in the nineteenth century Hegel had already taken up and re-worked the Kantian legacy. Adorno, an avowed Hegelian in this regard, continued to work through Hegel's philosophy of art, especially having granted it the status of a proper dialectical response to Kant.¹ What I hope to trace in the present essay is the persistence of Kantian aesthetics in the two most forceful and elaborate attempts – Hegel and Adorno's – to somehow get past just that.

Let us begin with disinterest, the first and most prominent of Kant's four elements of aesthetic judgment (CPI, §§1–5, pp. 89–96 [Ak. V, pp. 203–212]). Disinterest is a mode of disavowal, of the *subject* of aesthetic experience disavowing, by identifying and then separating off from itself, that which seems to embody the most personal share of experience. We might regard this disavowal as a movement *toward* super-subjectivity, not in the sense of a super-sized, super-empowered subjectivity, but rather the act of the subject attempting to disown a feature of itself, and then install in its place a refined subject. This *über*-subjectivity would reside above whatever in it remains complicit with an interest in its own objectivity. As Kant might have it: disinterest moves to overcome the insufficiently subjective faculties of sensuousness and the understanding. The other side of the aesthetic coin of disinterest, so to speak, is the apparent retreat of the personal share in the supposed timelessness of the masterpiece, of the classical, in sum, of beauty, whose existence likewise marks the denial of the time-bound nature of the subject and its experience. Still, the question, and

¹ There is no better place to appreciate Adorno's deep affinity with Hegel than in the former's *Hegel: Three Studies* (Adorno 1993), and, for the focus of this essay on the question of the dynamic character of the experience of the work of art, the second of the three studies, titled "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy", is most helpful.

the quest, to do justice and to pay homage to that which is at once both subjective and more than subjective, is nonetheless addressed equally by Kantian disinterest, by the Hegelian sensuous appearance of the idea, as well as by Adorno's objectivity of beauty.

Adorno locates Hegel's primary assault on Kantian aesthetics as directed against what Kant formulates as the objectivity of subjective affect. Or put differently: Hegel and Adorno's dispute with Kant has to do with precisely where to locate – within subjectivity – what remains of objectivity. However, to put it this way, to imagine objectivity within the subject – and indeed as a matter of residue – is to mis-identify the dynamic, generative character of objectivity, which is much closer to Adorno's conception of it. Adorno further sees Hegel as insisting just here – in response to subjective affect – on the objectivity of beauty, the notion that beauty truly resides within the object, or better: the object transformed, and as Hegel has it, baptized by subjectivity (Hegel 1975, 1, p. 29). And yet, arguments regarding the objectivity of beauty are not Adorno's main concern; it is rather that the objectivity of beauty is a gateway to the objectivity of subjective experience. The key difference is that Hegel and Adorno do not argue for the objectivity of subjective response, as if feeling might somehow be made objective. Rather than the all-too-Kantian universalization of subjective affect, they would prefer the objectivity that *addresses* subjective responsiveness and capacity. The objectivity, we might also say, that *resists* subjectivity, not by positioning itself as an external adversary, but rather by installing itself between the pores of subjectivity, perhaps akin to a homeopathic inoculation.

There is something scandalous about aesthetic pleasure, measurable even in the minutest portion of the classical music concert-goer's tapping of the foot. Pleasure, even or especially in the aesthetic, is something Adorno claims we have historically become "increasingly allergic" to (Adorno 2018, p. 133). Grant that we are increasingly aware of the extent to which our pleasures have become a means by which we have been put under the agendas of others. There is no constancy over historical periods in regard to the ratio of subjectivity in objectivity and vice-versa, and indeed no necessary timelessness to any feature of subjectivity, except perhaps its capacity to develop as well as to shed each and every capacity. Perhaps it is the fate of nearly every human capacity to imagine itself as the final one, and thereby complete the historical journey of the species. And yet, there might well be a certain constancy in regard to human intelligence, even if only in the sense that consciousness continues to exist and to bear the

premier mark of what brought it into existence: its *resistance* to sensuousness.² Consciousness resists in its attempt to gain a purchase on sensuousness: consciousness arises as no mere disavowal of sensuousness but of course also its fulfillment, a sensuousness that might know itself as such, and in this very knowledge thereby become something else again. This knowing had to proceed necessarily at some distance from the phenomenon of sensuousness itself. In that regard consciousness resisted the comprehensiveness of the sensuous. Kant's prejudice was to take what was a historically specific feature, indeed a capacity of subjectivity – the sentiment described as aesthetic pleasure – and make it universal and timeless, at least for those deemed civilized. Even though subjectivity had the ability to develop this capacity, it need not thereby become a permanent feature of human experience.

As Adorno outlines the situation in the opening remarks of his 1958–1959 lecture course on aesthetics, Kant's "transcendental subjectivism" is precisely what stood in the way of formulating the experience of beauty as anything other than something which takes place *between* subjects and the object deemed beautiful (Adorno 2018, p. 2). This orientation thus precludes the possibility of beauty ever attaining the status – and indeed the location – of something in the "matter" itself. Still more problematic is the concomitant conclusion that beauty then has no *autonomy* from the subjects who might have occasion to experience it. By Kant deeming it always and only relational, beauty thereby also loses any chance at historical specificity. Further, what Adorno takes as Kant's evidence for the unavoidability of the *relation* to subjectivity is not simply the central role of disinterest but still worse, it includes as well disinterested *pleasure*. The supposed necessity of pleasure in aesthetic experience, albeit disinterested, is what dooms Kantian aesthetics for Adorno, who asks the ad hominem question whether pleasure still accompanies all one's aesthetic experiences. For Kant, aesthetic pleasure – and this is even more obvious in the case of the sublime – is the pleasure subjectivity takes in superseding its own limits. And yet each capacity the human species develops, by overcoming whatever appears in us as limited, is not accompanied by pleasure. Aesthetic *pleasure*, in other words, is for Adorno a historically specific feature of aesthetic experience.³

² This might well be a place to think about the historically changing fortunes of those artistic movements that considered themselves as having a privileged access to reality.

³ Shades here of Hegel's famous dismissal of natural beauty, which is to say of beauty as a phenomenon that transcends human capacity.

2

Aesthetic experience for Hegel and Adorno is a historically dynamic phenomenon, one that changes with the transformations not only of subjects and objects, but perhaps still more importantly, changes with the historical flux in the very *relations* between the two. Though the subjective and objective might well unavoidably co-determine one another, this does not mean that the objective is somehow thereby less itself, less objective. This, for Adorno, was one of the key insights of Hegel, not only that things change historically but that the *relations* between things alters even while these same relations help determine how each comes to be what it is and what it will further become.

The artwork, or rather the experience of the work of art, is a kind of seismograph measuring, or at least recording, and eliciting an image of, the alteration in the very midst of the alteration. And the seismographic means and measures of art itself changes, so that now one feature of objectivity within the subject, and now another, come to the fore; it's as if the stature and indeed status of objectivity – not to mention subjectivity – is itself fleeting. Hence the artwork's objectivity, even if only for subjectivity. Kant's having yoked pleasure to the aesthetic as an unavoidable element of this experience snatched, for Adorno, what was a historical component of aesthetic experience and attempted to make it ahistorical and absolute, and thereby hold static what even Kant acknowledges is essentially fleeting.

For Adorno it seems there are no absolute features of human experience, and yet, there are moments of genuine objectivity. The inexorability of pleasure, so to speak, in aesthetic experience, might thus be read dialectically as the attempt by Kant to achieve a kind of objectivity of aesthetic experience by lending it something deeply, emphatically subjective. So too then the *disinterested* character of aesthetic pleasure was still more evidence in favor of the pleasure not belonging entirely to the subject itself. Disinterest is also then, dialectically, Kant's strategy for employing a potential detachability of pleasure from subjectivity. Kant's most obvious attempt at the 'objectivity' of disinterested aesthetic pleasure lay of course in his formulation of aesthetic judgment as the single case of subjective universality.

And yet Adorno here is not entirely fair in his criticism of Kant, when for example in his lectures he describes disinterested pleasure as Kant thinking of the mere effects on subjects (Adorno 2018, p. 4). More fair would be to acknowledge that Kantian aesthetic disinterested pleasure is a pleasure of subjectivity and not just of this or that subject. Kant might well respond to Adorno's criticism that the very distinction that allowed the composition of the *Critique of the Power of Judg-*

ment, that between determinant and reflective judgment, was just an acknowledgment of the peculiar character of necessity that resides in aesthetic pleasure. Kant thus points his account of subjective experience in a direction away from a wholly determined subjectivity.

Hegel continues in this same direction by moving still farther from that feature of subjectivity that is pre-eminently the mark and defining capacity of subjectivity: consciousness. For Hegel, art's objectivity comes in large measure from its successful skirting, even if only briefly, that thing which is most subjective: consciousness. This returns us to resistance, a key term for Adorno's account of Hegel's formulation of dialectical becoming. In this light consciousness is at once both the fulfillment of sensuousness as well as the most emphatic resistance to it. Forget for a moment whatever content consciousness might come to have, and consider instead what it arises in opposition to. Hegel's dialectical account has it that the saturatedness of sensuousness in the end is even too much for sensuousness itself. It is as if sensuousness, when it is the entirety of what and how we are in the world, is no longer a mere faculty or capacity. Rather, it is a state of being, and, as such, cannot be pointed – cannot point itself – in one direction or another as a capacity of something *else*, a subject let us say. It is not merely the feeling or experience of something like the oceanic, it is instead itself the ocean: a capacity inseparable from the creature in which it is anchored. How might it then come to be not the whole of a being but rather only a particular expression of a being? Hegel's answer is that a faculty comes into existence by dint of its opposition to some other ability, its otherness to what is already the case. Some capacity becomes a faculty rather than the whole of being only when it dirempts itself from the capacity – we might say: when it *disavows* itself as only capacity. Hence consciousness has its true import not in any content it might later come to have but in the *direction* of its genesis away from and against what is already the case. Thus consciousness, famously, is the determinate negation of sensuousness. *À la* Kant we might say consciousness disavows sensuousness and thereby achieves a certain disinterest in regard to it.

And yet, so too consciousness, in its own further development, also inherits and continues the very motion which brought it into existence in opposition to sensuousness. Just as sensuousness, we might say, carried its negation within itself, so too does consciousness, regardless whatever else it might become, also continue the motion that brought it into being. Consciousness is not a full stop, but only always a respite during the long unfolding momentum that brought it into existence and that will likewise carry it on and beyond. The dialectic of motion and rest is mimetically re-enacted within consciousness itself between its endless flow and the stutters we call ideas.

Throughout the long history of consciousness, it too has prolonged itself by maintaining, reinvesting even, in its constitutional opposition to sensuousness. Consciousness mimetically re-enacts the force of its coming into existence by practicing its opposedness within in its own borders; one name for this conscious opposition to self is resistance. And just here we might better understand Adorno's complaint regarding the centrality of subjective affect in Kant's aesthetics, for this Kantian insistence misses the *objectivity* of resistance within subjective consciousness. Adorno's fervent embrace of Hegelianism, or at least in just this regard, is due to the acknowledgment that Hegel saw the resistance to consciousness residing within the aesthetic lodged precisely in the aesthetic matter itself, and not merely registered by subjective affect, as Kant might have it in the fleeting moments of disinterest. Curiously then, Adorno's interpretation of Hegel lands him in what can only appear as a kind of pre-Enlightenment, empiricist commitment to the objectivity of beauty. Adorno was doubtless well aware of the anomaly of this position and explained it as a feature of the dialectical nature of beauty, that beauty might have become once again something objective.⁴ More broadly even, we might surmise that art's continuing allegiance to some feature or another of sensuousness – Hegel of course provides the pre-eminent acknowledgment that all art is inescapably sensuous – is already testament to the ongoing resistance of, and to, consciousness. Art, we might say, or rather especially modernist art, is the witness mutely testifying against the ideology and hegemony of consciousness.

3

Adorno explained that Kant's definition of beauty lost much of its "plausibility" because of the very "precondition" of Kant's philosophical commitment to a transcendental subjectivity. And with this entanglement of the problem of beauty in the very constitution of a transcendental subjectivity, Kant thereby sweeps together the problems of aesthetics with those of philosophy *überhaupt* (Adorno 2018, p. 3). For Adorno, who better than Hegel to take up what Kant inaugurated as the philosophical problem of the embeddedness of the aesthetic in the whole complex of subjective coming-into-existence. The crucial Hegelian formulation for Adorno, of this entanglement of the sensuous with what is more than sensu-

⁴ It is of course tempting to wonder if the anti-intellectualism that periodically resurfaces in art might not be evidence of the ongoing resistance – even within conscious efforts – to consciousness.

ousness, is then the specification of beauty as “the sensuous appearance of the Idea”. By extension then, beauty, Adorno contends, is not a formal thing, “or merely a subjective thing, but rather something in the matter itself” (Adorno 2018, pp. 3–4). Adorno orients his lecture course on aesthetics as follows: “that objectivity of the aesthetic which I assume will occupy us here can result as objectivity only from an analysis of the facts, problems and structures of aesthetic objects – that is to say, the works of art” (Adorno 2018, p. 4). This is hardly controversial as commentators readily accept Hegel’s specification in his own lectures on aesthetics that they ought to be more rightly considered a philosophy of art.

Still, Adorno’s further comments in his introductory lecture indicate that his own objection to Kant’s orientation had as much to do with what Adorno calls its formality as it did with its subjective focus. This formality might well prove to be for Adorno the still larger stumbling block as it indicates the stiff rigidity of Kantian aesthetics, and what thereby disallowed Kant from identifying what was for Hegel and Adorno the consummately historical nature of art and thus the aesthetic, including precisely aesthetic experience. It’s as if, from Adorno’s position, Kant was too readily seduced by beauty’s own formal self-presentation, by the very phenomenon of beauty presenting itself as something situated above, and more permanent than, the mere flux of experience. There is however, to be noted in Kantian disinterest, a moment of resistance to this seduction by the formality of beauty in its claim to be more than it appears to be. Adorno might well comment that disinterest did not quite register resistance enough, for he locates resistance as central to the direction and force of the aesthetic: “Art, then, cannot simply be subsumed under the concepts of reason or rationality but is, rather, this rationality itself, only in the form of its otherness, in the form – if you will – of a particular *resistance* against it” (Adorno 2018, p. 9; emphasis added). Art, in other words, is not absolute otherness – whatever that might mean – but rather the resistance within rationality to its own claim to completeness and sovereignty. Resistance, put differently, is the form that the otherness inherent to rationality takes in the realm of the aesthetic. Returning to sensuousness, and even with the “sensuous appearance of the Idea” in mind, we might once again note that the character of sensuousness in the aesthetic is not the return of sensuousness per se but rather it takes place as a form of otherness to what is conscious in art. The return to “something in the

matter itself” is thus a return to the correlate of sensuousness in and by consciousness.⁵

Adorno returns, near the end of his course of lectures on aesthetics, to the debt he felt was owed Hegel in the latter’s critique of Kant, and so too especially to the supposed foundation of the aesthetic in subjective affect. But Adorno now expands his description by naming the scope of Hegel’s re-orientation from subjective to objective aesthetics as the critique of taste. Here then we find an interesting correlation, and indeed correspondence between what Adorno terms the ephemerality of taste and what he describes as the surface of the work of art. So then, just as art presents itself initially as surface and appearance, taste – subjective affect – thereby becomes the subjective correlate of the superficial appearance of the art object. Appearance and taste: one the surface of the work of art, as it were, corresponds to the other, the surface of the subject.

Hence for Adorno’s reading of Hegel, the transitoriness of taste aligns with the superficial aspect of the work of art. Both features share the character of being unfixed, unanchored in their respective hosts. The work of art is something more than its appearance, just as the subject is something more than its fleeting responses.

Recall that for Kant beauty, be it natural or artistic, is but the “occasion” for aesthetic judgment. Recall too that Kant was even at pains to somehow account for the superficiality of the aesthetic object (be it nature or art) in contrast to the bound, indeed necessary, character of aesthetic response (CPJ, §VII, p. 76 [Ak. V, p. 190]). This led him to position aesthetic judgment as somehow occurring prior to the appearance that served as its occasion. Put differently: there is no single feature of an object of natural or artistic beauty that might correspond to the necessity and universality within subjective affect. Kant’s ingenious solution, if you will, was to counterpose the fecklessness of objects of perception by likewise withdrawing from subjectivity the premise that it has any particular faculty or location of aesthetic judgment. Kant instead formulates aesthetic judgment as the product not of this or that component of subjectivity but of what we might call the systematicity of the subject; it resides nowhere in subjectivity, mimetically akin to the absence of beauty in the object. This is explicitly explained by Kant as the famous harmony of the faculties (CPJ, §VII, p. 77 [Ak. V, p. 191]).

Aesthetic judgment occurs in no single subjective faculty but is rather the expression of the whole unity of subjectivity. Returning in this light to taste, we might now better appreciate Adorno’s characterization of taste as an attempt,

⁵ Hence the work of art is a puzzle and conundrum for Adorno, and requires that consciousness take up the question and the problem of its truth content (Adorno 1997, pp. 118–136).

within subjective affect, to lend it some systematic tone. Any doctrine of taste, in other words, presumes there is some formal structure and consistency underlying the ephemerality and will-o'-the-wisp phenomena of taste. This is what leads Adorno in turn to liken taste to style. Style, we might say, is the systemization of certain features of appearance. It is for Adorno the correlate in the world of art objects (or fashion for that matter) to the standardizing of subjective affect that is denominated by taste.

4

Kant's subjectivist position in aesthetics is far from anomalous; it is more like that point of view's most systematic and robust expression. Adorno points out that the first, classical formulation of subjectivist aesthetics, and one that remains a salient touchstone, is Aristotle's proclamation in his *Poetics* that the purpose of tragedy is to evoke fear and pity. In short, the premise of the *Poetics* is that the *telos* of art is to arouse subjective affect. Adorno's rejoinder to this whole tendency is buttressed by a key passage in Hegel's *Aesthetics* detailing the limitations of any subject-oriented aesthetics:

But it remains ever the case that every man apprehends works of art or characters, actions, and events according to the measure of his insight and his feelings; and since the development of taste only touched on what was external and meager, and besides took its prescriptions likewise from only a narrow range of works of art and a limited training of the intellect and the feelings, its scope was unsatisfactory and incapable of grasping the inner meaning and truth of art and sharpening the eye for detecting these things (Adorno 2018, p. 168).

Taste, in other words, is not only inadequate to measure the meaning and truth of the artwork, so too is taste's very foundation – in the arbitrary and limited responsiveness of subjects – the ultimate disqualification for any attempt by taste alone to penetrate whatever is objective in the work of art. Note especially in the passage above that Hegel is not complaining about the artwork's “external and meager” aspects, but rather his critique is aimed at the orientation of subjective *taste* toward the work of art.

Taste is precisely the wrong capacity to encounter the “meaning and truth” of art. Taste's singular and constitutive inability is to orient itself beyond what is superficial in the work of art. Taste, put differently, is the subject aiming its own capacities toward the object, whereas Hegel and Adorno recognize the work of art as already aimed *against* the subject. In this light we might understand taste as the defensive posture of the subject against just those objects that con-

stitute a threat to the fragility of subjective capacity. The obvious rejoinder here is to point out that it is just the *refinement* of taste that seeks to deepen subjective responsiveness beyond all that is superficial and ‘meager’ in the work of art. Adorno addresses as follows how taste might come to refine itself into a less superficial experience of the artwork:

human beings, for whom, in the world of today, the concept of taste is central in aesthetic matters, are what, in a derogatory sense, I would call ‘refined’, in the same way one might find embodied in a particular type of book-collector. These are generally people who essentially experience education – what one calls education – in terms of property, for whom education amounts to an accumulation of possessions, for whom the bourgeois concept of property continues into matters of the spirit [...] (Adorno 2018, pp. 169–170).

On first blush this seems a somewhat shocking formulation, that refinement might amount to – however spiritual – an attainment, to be sure, but perhaps what is attained is possessed as a kind of property or belonging. Consider in this light C.B. Macpherson’s well-known theory of possessive individualism, in which, following Hobbes, the individual comes to be conceived – and perhaps more importantly takes hold of herself – as a proprietor and property owner of her skills and attributes (Macpherson 1962). Taste, about whose refinement we are currently concerned, is grounded in the unassailable assumption that one’s taste is wholly one’s *own*, regardless how much or little it conforms to that of others. Indeed, the distinction between natural and acquired taste relies squarely on the notion that acquired taste (note the property connotations of the term acquired) not only belongs exclusively to she who has it, but still more powerfully: originates in her. Further, recall that a taste is not at all one’s own until it becomes something more than an affectation to a liking for one thing or another, and instead actually provides the *pleasure* that is the signal mark of full possession. In other words, the education and refinement, and especially the pleasure they afford, albeit as a kind of attainment, is another instance of subjectivity disavowing its own particular history in order to feel itself having some basis in something other than, well let us call it, if not the dead hand of the past, then the dead hand of property.

The aliveness of the object – the work of art – rather than the taste, refinement, or possession by the subject, is what signals the success of such objects. And Adorno asserts that the experience of the work of art only genuinely encounters that object when it finds it a living thing, akin thereby to itself. Taste is, on the other hand, a movement in the opposite direction, toward the work of art, or bit of nature, as a fixed, complete, and quasi-absolute thing. Subjectivity, in the refinement of its taste, is in effect in search of an absolute object, which it might in turn fix itself in relation to. Refinement seeks a correlation

and correspondence between a wholly reliable and unmoving characteristic of an object around which the subject mimetically might accordingly fashion itself.

The most obvious lack of fit, and equivalence, between the work of art and taste is that while the latter, and especially according to Kant, must be singular, the artwork is instead a multiplicity, or to use Adorno's own terms for it: a *constellation* or force-field.⁶ That is, the artwork is a live, *dynamic*, phenomenon while taste installs itself as a permanent capacity that aims at what it likewise construes as a correspondingly unchangeable feature of the artwork. The still further narrowing of taste's own reductivist orientation, beyond refinement even, is captured by the concept of the aesthete. The aesthete might be imagined as coming into existence as the product of taste having become – indeed insisting upon itself as – the central and defining principle of subjective affect. One might well imagine Adorno being especially critical of the aesthete as an extreme example of taste withdrawing ever further from anything but the superficial, exterior aspects of the work of art, and withdrawing ever more into a kind of defensive posture. It is thus surprising to read that Adorno instead expresses no small compassion for the aesthete, as he imagines the genesis of the aesthete alighting from the fear of being hurt by the experience of a work of art. The aesthete's fear of being touched by an object thereby registers an acknowledgment that works of art – in their aliveness – bear the possibility of a dislodging and transforming experience. This is however no illusory or baseless projection on to the work of art by the aesthete, rather, as Adorno explains in his lecture,

I would say that the idea of the externality and superficiality of taste, as described by Hegel [...] is really based on the fact that, by containing the simultaneously critical and utopian intention I pointed out to you, the work of art is simply always something hurtful and that, where it no longer hurts anyone but, rather, blends completely into the closed surface of experience, it essentially ceases to be a living work of art at all (Adorno 2018, p. 170).

The aesthete is thus correct in choosing the refinement of taste as a strategy of self-protection from the threat the artwork represents. To focus exclusively on what is external and superficial in the art object – or any object for that matter – is to foreclose the possibility of being hurt by any other feature of that object.

The aesthete and the hyper-refinement of taste suggest but one side of what Adorno considers the dialectic of taste, and there is to be found in the very deficiencies and limitations of taste an opportunity and advantage for something

⁶ We might just here appreciate an interesting parallel between the Kantian subjectivist aesthetics and the Hegelian/Adornian objectivist aesthetics. Whereas Kant's focus is on the complex, subtle, and nearly indiscernible *relations* that constitute the unity of the subject, objectivist aesthetics aims at a rather similar constellation, but within the work of art.

else to come about. It is important in this light to recall the earlier kinship that was pointed out between taste and style insofar as both rely on what might be termed a consensus or consolidation of affect. Adorno also explains this kinship in terms of the ‘accumulation’ that occurs in both taste and style, and which thus leads directly to the notion of culture, here understood as that which resides in the accumulations expressed by style as well as in the accumulations that designate what counts as taste in one culture or another.

5

In his objectivist aesthetics Adorno deploys the term *technique* to locate that which thus lies in dialectical contrast to the randomness of a subjectivist aesthetics rooted in *taste*. Technique refers not simply to the achieved artwork but rather to the *process* by means of which the work comes to be. It is in that process where the living character of the work resides. Technique is then the dialectical contrary to taste. And here too we find where the vice of taste becomes a virtue for the work of art. It is the very arbitrariness of taste’s relation to its objects that nonetheless qualifies taste as the most adept subjective faculty to respond to the genuine novelty of artistic technique. As Adorno has it:

It is precisely the ephemerality that inheres in taste, this aforementioned non-binding quality that is not tied to anything objective, this negativity of taste, its deficiency, that makes it especially qualified [...] to have these innervations for the most advanced standard reached by artistic technique and language during a particular time (Adorno 2018, p. 173).

This formulation provides an interesting opportunity for noting the difference between Adorno and Walter Benjamin on just this point regarding how art might possibly advance over what has previously existed. Benjamin famously uses the term *aura* to describe the historical legacy that unavoidably inheres in human artifacts. Benjamin saw the most acute limitation of any revolutionary potential as residing in just the historical continuity that festers in all objects made by human beings, despite the contrary posture and intent of any number of modernist works of art. Cinema was Benjamin’s ingenious solution, which he believed could break the spell of *aura* as well as historical continuity. That is, a work of art, or even just an artifact, when fabricated by an apparatus – rather than by a human act that unavoidably leaves its indelible fingerprints – the apparatus’ supposed lack of a human legacy might then produce objects free of the stain of the human. By means of the apparatus we might thereby, thought Benjamin, find ourselves liberated from the continuity – and its implicit limitations –

that inevitably collects in all human things. The cinematic image, untethered from the taint and continuity of human desire, might present us with a genuinely new image of a human future, albeit without the penitenti of all previous, and failed, human aspirations and projects (Benjamin 2004).

Taste's very deficiency, its not being bound to anything permanent or necessary, indeed its very *subjective* arbitrariness, is just what qualifies it, dialectically, to receive the products of the most historically advanced artistic techniques and language. Though taste is of course localized and historically specific to one culture and era or another, there remains an ability within taste that might nonetheless ground itself in opposition to all local and historical influence. This is what we earlier described as the genesis of *acquired* taste. That taste might be something *to be acquired* puts it into a kind of preparatory position, primed by its potentially unbound condition, to register and respond to that which has no apparent history. Here we might appreciate a kinship between the aspirations Benjamin expressed for cinema and what Adorno formulates as what could be called the avant-garde condition, or orientation, of taste. The kinship lies in the formulation of whatever – in exceeding its own limitations – produces, or at least registers, that which is historically advanced.

Fashion comes to mind here, especially in regard to what Adorno terms, in one of the infamous essays on jazz, the dignity of fashion (Adorno 1981, pp. 119 – 132). Such dignity resides, perhaps akin to what we might in turn call the dignity of acquired taste, in a marked non-allegiance to what has preceded it, not so much to the dead hand of the past, but rather to the dead nose of the past. The problem with jazz – and I write this full well expecting fans of popular music (even though I am myself one of them) again to complain of Adorno's supposed elitism and lack of comprehension – is that it invites a regression not only to natural taste, but still more problematically, to a self-imposed limitation and embrace of natural taste.⁷ When Adorno describes jazz aficionados as dancing unwittingly in celebration of their own self-mutilation, I imagine he is referring especially to the condition of their taste (Adorno 1981, p. 126). That is, the repression that cuts into us most deeply is not that of external authorities but precisely the self-limitation, or more strongly, self-mutilation that destroys us. And this occurs in advance of the possibility of becoming something other than a mimetically regressive copy of our own limitations.

It is not here a question of taste being in favor of inappropriate things, of taste being wrong so to speak, but rather of taste's own bad faith, of its refusal

7 See Oberle 2018 for a keen treatment of how Adorno's essays on Jazz are central to understanding the dynamic of negative identity formation.

to exercise itself as a genuine step beyond what is already the case, the stasis of taste as a confirmation of what taste is already inclined toward. And yet one knows this experience of developing a taste for something previously unknown, or underappreciated, of the pleasure and confirmation in taste being a mobile capacity, which is to say: of the pleasure of the *mobility* of human capacity. And the thought of this pleasure helps capture the dialectic of taste, as something whose two-sidedness allows the experience of both necessity and freedom. The necessity of taste, the feeling that one's taste is not truly a choice, but rather an unalterable response to something or other, is balanced, or contradicted even, by the experience of the freedom of taste, of not only the *volition* to enjoy something, but more strongly: that a choice to find a pleasure in something might itself become a permanent feature of oneself.

6

Pleasure's very fleetingness is somehow counteracted in the experience of *aesthetic* pleasure, which proclaims itself – under the rubric of taste – as a necessary feature of the self. And in its seeming necessity aesthetic pleasure thereby diminishes the import of the *fleeting* character of pleasure itself. It's as if aesthetic pleasure's primary effect is to comfort us for the all-too-temporary nature of pleasure. For Kantian aesthetics, the price to pay for this comfort is the disavowal that the pleasure is indeed ever ours in the first place. We might align Kant and Adorno on just this aspect of aesthetic pleasure, and their shared hesitation, indeed distrust of it.

An all too common misreading of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* has it that Kant's goal is to provide a prescription for how to obtain aesthetic pleasure. Rather, the critique orientation of Kant's presentation is to analyze what is entailed in the claim that aesthetic judgment, and pleasure, have taken place. Kant shows there is no positive method for arriving at aesthetic experience; he can instead only detail all of the factors and orientations that disallow such experience. Note that the strictness that disqualifies an experience from being aesthetic is matched by the discipline to disavow sensuous pleasure, which Kant refers to as charm (CPJ, §13, pp. 107–108 [Ak. V, p. 223]). Disinterest is thus the key criterion for putting the self in a position from which something might then present itself as an occasion for aesthetic experience.

And this question regarding the nature of aesthetic experience is arrived at by Adorno by means of his earlier questioning whether pleasure is an adequate or meaningful component of the experience of the work of art. As he puts it in the concluding sentence of the eleventh lecture of the course on aesthetics:

from this necessarily follows the question of the nature of aesthetic experience itself and the question of whether, after what I have told you here, the correlate of the subjective concept of aesthetic beauty is tenable at all or, to formulate it very radically, whether it is actually possible for the enjoyment of art to be an adequate aesthetic experience (Adorno 2018, p. 115).

Note that this questioning of the sufficiency of pleasure for aesthetic experience is inextricably tied to beauty. They are, in effect, two sides of the same coin, and their kinship consists in two features, the first being that both beauty and pleasure are of course oriented entirely toward only a portion of subjectivity, the second feature is perhaps even more problematic, as it has to do with the unitary character of both beauty and pleasure. That is, just as beauty exists only to the extent that the attractiveness of any and every particular feature of an artwork is subordinated to the cohesiveness and consistency of the whole work of art, so too – just as we see so clearly formulated by Kant – must *aesthetic* pleasure be the enjoyment of the unity of the subject, thereby mimetically mirroring the unity – harmony even – of subjective capacities. Adorno instead has it that the experience of the work of art cuts at once against both the artwork as a totality as well as against the subject as a cohesive whole, indeed as a unity at all. The work of art is experienced – and here we see especially the trace of Adorno’s commitment to a modernist aesthetic – piecemeal. It is not, Adorno explicitly proclaims, an experience *for* subjectivity.

This notion that the artwork is not created with subjective experience as its telos brings immediately to mind the brilliant essay by Jean Genet on the sculptures made by his friend Alberto Giacometti in which Genet in effect illustrates Adorno’s contention by stating that Giacometti’s sculptures are not only not intended for subjective experience, but that the sculptures would best be served if they were buried underground (Genet 1979). Underground burial suggests that the sculptures are in effect dead for human experience and so too that their burial would also insure that they were protected from any inadvertent experience, which might presumably constitute a kind of injustice toward them. Adorno himself refers to Benjamin’s own statement to the effect that artworks “are not directly intended for an audience” (Adorno 2018, p. 119). If artworks, all of which by definition are made – and even if sometimes only merely just found – by human beings, might nonetheless suffer by their being experienced by human beings, what might this tell us about the work of art as even being a thing for human beings? In attempting to answer this we might speculate about the seam between experience and what happens to us, let alone the seam between the subject and object. For Adorno, the genuine work of art is one not so much that we experience, but rather one that because its main feature is that it is a living thing, is

something that we at most and at best might live with or alongside. And this is not an experience, which has the disadvantage here of being structurally aligned with the well-being, continuity, and unity of subjectivity.

In this light it is most important to ask who, or what, precisely is the subject of aesthetic experience, especially if it is the case that aesthetic experience is not, after all, for the subject at all. We might best consider this in terms of the dialectic of subjectivity, the dialectic of being a subject. Adorno reminds us of Schopenhauer's characterization in Book III of *The World as Will and Representation* of the effects of the work of art, in which,

It is then as if, in that moment – one could call them moments of weeping – the subject were collapsing, inwardly shaken. [They are] really moments in which the subject annihilates itself and experiences happiness at this annihilation – and not happiness at being granted something as a subject. These moments are not enjoyment; the happiness lies in the fact that one has them (Adorno 2018, p. 123).

This happiness is not then the pleasure of surviving, in whatever form, the annihilation of the subject. It is not the pleasure of the persistence or continuity of the subject. It is rather, one imagines, the relief from the burdens of maintaining oneself as a persisting subject. This experience by the “subject”, compliments of the work of art, is, in effect, the mimetic correlate to the very same process that brings the work of art into existence as a thing at odds with itself, or at least at odds with the world in which it finds itself. So too might we say the work of art, and likewise the subject, share an opposition to the merely sensuous. If art is rationality in its otherness, perhaps then aesthetic experience is sensuousness in its otherness. This would explain why such experience is not strictly for subjectivity. Adorno also characterizes the work of art and aesthetic experience as a response to the “intolerability” of the world as it is, just as the moral impulse comes from the wish to change the world. The matter seems to come down to how the unity of the work of art, and likewise the unity of the subject, come to be. There is the false unity of the concept, the idea of the thing as that which brings its elements into a cohesive whole. It is not the whole per se that is false, this despite Adorno's infamous counterpoint in *Minima Moralia* to Hegel's the whole is the true, but rather the whole when it is achieved at the price of the loss of difference and particularity, just those things sacrificed first by the logic of the concept, the whole that appears in only the sweeping away of any and everything that stands in its way (Adorno 1974, p. 50).

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