

Tom Huhn

The Enigma of Experience; Art and Truth Content

Abstract: The Enigma of Experience; Art and Truth Content

Enigma and truth content are two of the most prominent terms in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. This essay explores the relation between enigma and truth content by considering the peculiar character of the experience that occurs in response to works of modern art. The enigma of modern art is also constitutive of it. The character of the self-contradicting existence is what makes the work of art into the occasion for a baffling and befuddling encounter. The complement to enigma in the work of art is its truth content. Key to engaging the work of art's enigma and truth content will be the mimetic quality of the relation between experience and the work of art. So too is the misalignment between the work of art and experience an opportunity for encountering what exists as objective contradiction. The ongoing mimetic misalignments of object and subject, expressed in and through the blockages that come to be named artwork and experience, is where we find how much more snarled and entangled the artwork and experience become in order, according to Adorno, to thwart the continuing demands for clarity and meaning. The essay also includes abbreviated attempts to locate in Kant and Schiller's aesthetics the first stirrings of what will later figure in Adorno's elucidations of modernist art.

Keywords: Enigma, Truth Content, Modern Art, Modernism, Aesthetic Experience.

For Lindsay Ashmun

The enigma of the work of modern art is also the name for its constitutive character. The character of this self-contradicting existence is what makes the work of art into the occasion for a baffling and befuddling encounter. The complement to enigma in the work of art is its truth content. Key to engaging the work of art's enigma and truth content is the mimetic relation between experience and the work of art. The misalignment between the work of art and human experience is an opportunity for encountering what exists as objective contradiction. The ongoing dance between the mimetic misalignments of object and subject, expressed in and through the blockages that we name artwork and experience, is where we find how much more snarled and entangled the artwork and experience become in order to thwart the ongoing demand for clarity and meaning.

Enigma is a key term, for it implicates both the truth content of the artwork as well as by extension what might be called the truth content of philosophical experience (to the exposition of which the Introduction to *Negative Dialectics* is explicitly dedicated: see Adorno 1973, pp.3-57¹) and of experience in general. Enigma refers not simply to the difficulty or the impasse that thinking has *in*

¹ "Common to art and philosophy is not the form, not the forming process, but a mode of conduct that forbids pseudomorphosis. Both keep faith with their own substance through their opposites: art by making itself resistant to its meanings; philosophy, by refusing to clutch any immediate thing" (Adorno 1973, p. 15).

relation to the work of art but but also to that relation as it comes to constitute the very character of artwork. The artwork is enigmatic not because of some failure on the part of cognition (shades of Kant here²) but rather it is part and parcel of how and what it comes into existence as. The artwork is not a thing and thereby also a thing that happens to be enigmatic. It rather comes into existence as enigma, as a thing precisely at odds with itself, in other words, a self-contradictory thing. It is thereby an object more akin to a subject, and so too an object more objective than any other object. Its objectivity (consider this here in relation to Kant's subjective universality of beauty³) lies in its being reflection and product of the contradiction at the heart of modern life: a thing most vibrantly alive in its own deadliness; its autonomy is compromised in the very dynamic that brings it into existence. The modern enigma of art reflects, exteriorizes, and cathects the enigma of experience (and thus of existence). How is a live thing itself, how does a live thing become itself, when the means of being are themselves comprised, are at odds with the very capacity to be alive? The enigmatic character occurs in relation to two things: the enigma of the artwork is an enigma for both thought and experience *and* the enigma is likewise ontological: how can such a thing - essentially at odds with itself - come into existence at all?⁴ Indeed, what kind existence is even possible for such a thing? Experience is itself an enigma. The modern artwork is a rebuke to the existence of all things nonidentical with themselves, all things that are only *seemingly* reconciled to their own existences.

Adorno's characterization of the enigma of modern art might well find a fitting precursor in Kant's formulation of the centrality of disinterest to aesthetic judgement.⁵ Disinterest for Kant, akin in structure to his "purposeless purposiveness", identifies an element at the heart of subjectivity that is at once both absolutely necessary to its constitution as well as wholly other to it. The otherness that resides in subjectivity, and that manifests its existence as disinterest or purposeless purposiveness is not, for Kant, an otherness that opposes or is an adversary of subjectivity. It is rather an otherness whose existence requires, at a minimum, an acknowledgement by subjectivity. This acknowledgement, however, cannot be made into something that furthers anything subjective, especially not subjective self-knowledge. Hence we might also understand how the very pleasure of the aesthetic is, for Kant, not really a pleasure *of* this subject or another, nor genuinely a pleasure *for* this subject or another, but rather a pleasure of and for that which acknowledges the limits and boundaries of subjectivity. This is of course the place where the sublime come to be the premier formulation of the aesthetic precisely in regards to the intrinsic and constitutive character of its own limitations.⁶

² Kant's exposition of the sublime is exemplary in regard to just this founding of a particular ability in the limits, or indeed failure, of cognition: "We call sublime what is absolutely large", "what what is large beyond all comparison" (Kant 1987, § 25, p. 103).

³ "For the basis of this pleasure is found in the universal, though subjective condition of reflective judgements, namely the purposive harmony of an object (whether a product of nature or of art) with the mutual relation of the cognitive powers (imagination and understanding) that are required for every empirical cognition" (Kant 1987, p. 31).

⁴ Kant responds to just this dilemma by use of the notion of genius in order to explain the successful productions of fine art, or what might be called masterpieces: "Genius is a talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given [...]" (Kant 1987, § 46, p.175).

⁵ For Kant, the First Moment of a judgement of taste is precisely its disinterest: "Taste is the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of liking or disliking devoid of all interest. The object of such a liking is called beautiful" (Kant 1987, § 28, p. 120).

⁶ I'm suggesting that fear - as a limitation - plays a more central and constitutive role in the experience of the sublime than inclination and appetite play - as limitation - in a judgement of beauty. This, despite Kant's seeming

Enigma, like disinterest, marks the existence of something beyond the boundaries of subjectivity - even though this beyondness is somehow central to it - of something that is recognizable by subjectivity but that cannot be known, or better: *experienced* by it. And yet that very characterization, of a thing beyond and not for subjectivity, serves to prompt subjectivity to an encounter, which by the very nature of its object (the artwork), cannot be had. Truth content is the other name acknowledging that thing that lies beyond subjective experience. Let us consider how this particular name functions. It names a thing as absolute (truth) as well as identifies it as having something for subjectivity (content). And yet I want also to suggest that the expression truth content itself harbors a contradiction, for truth implies some kind of knowledge, perhaps an acquisition, while content implies instead something for subjective experience, something to be undergone. Thus the expression "truth content" contains its own form of enigma, expressing a seeming singularity though addressed to different features and capacity of subjectivity.

The artwork's enigma, again, is not simply a posture in regard to cognition, but is rather constitutive of as such. The enigma is a kind of contradiction within existence: human lives become human in the alternation between being and becoming. What appears and exists as a genuine contradiction within human life comes to exist as an enigma in the work of art. Human lives do not rise to the level of form or expression, just that vehicle that makes the work of art express and announce itself as enigma. We cannot directly encounter the contradictoriness that constitutes us, or rather, we cannot see ourselves as appearance or semblance, we require instead the sheer otherness of the artwork to reflect the dynamic that not only enmeshes us but is the very means by which we live. We too - mimetic kin to the work of art - art things wanting to be identical to themselves, and yet, or rather, that is where the enigma of art arises - the demand that something be known is a weak version of the demand that something be identical to itself. Truth content for the work of art is akin to its being mimetic of itself. And mimesis, in this light, is like Freud's description of the combination of Eris and Thanatos - the dual, seemingly opposed forces by means of which things become more of what they already are, as the duality by which dual things express themselves, and indeed as a convoluted unity (see Freud 1961a and 1961b).

How does the artwork become what it is? It is an enigma, and thereby a challenge and goad to intellect. Knowledge and intellect are designed to dispel and conquer all enigmas. The modern artwork remains art only so long as it maintains its status as enigma. Truth content cannot be disgorged from the work of art as a thing, especially as a thing for mind. There is no solution to the enigma of the artwork. It must instead by a truth of and for experience, and even then not a truth to be grasped *by experience* but instead enigma becomes the igniting further into its incomprehensibility, in its being more than a mind can grasp.⁷ The artwork's existence is a thing that only becomes in time what it is is lived in the form of the experience that transpires mimetically alongside it. There is no truth in or for experience, for it is at odds with the kind of wanting to know that seeks to hold things still. The modern artwork is the enigmatic flash of the impasse within experience - and although the flash happens only in the duration of the experience, the enigmatic flash nonetheless resists the processual dynamic of experience by its insistent urge to grasp its own very dynamic, to hold it still and to seek a lesson from it. The enigma of the artwork deflates the expectation that experience will yield a profit. The artwork's enigma is the reverse image of the hope that experience can turn itself into something *moire* and other than the process of

correlation between them: "Just as we cannot pass judgements on the beautiful if we are seized by inclination and appetite, so we cannot pass judgement at all on the sublime if we are afraid" (Kant 1987, § 28, p.120).

⁷ Perhaps the feeling of the supposed timelessness of works of art, or of all beautiful things, is a testament to their location beyond time, beyond, that is, the very form of experience.

becoming what it is. Human experience, simply put, is but alteration in time. That experience also seems nearly always to want to control that alternation, and most pressingly, to wrest meaning from it - the demand for meaning is the most powerful case of experience transforming itself from a dynamic to a static phenomenon.⁸

Despite his distaste for Pragmatism, there is nonetheless a pragmatic aspect in what Adorno characterizes as truth. He assumes, like William James, that truth is anything but a humanly made product and artifact of our activities or desires. For James and Adorno truth is an artifact that is more often constructed or comes to exist behind our backs or seemingly though in front of our noses somehow not apparent to us. We have already discussed how truth content implies the mediated character of truth, and so already points to the existence of truth as a thing not immediately graspable by us because it is a thing not produced straightforwardly by us. So too then does truth content imply that truth remains a thing in need of deciphering, of interpretation, of uncovering or discerning the meaning of something. In this light the artwork appears as the preeminent exemplar of the *mediated and artifactual* character of truth, for the artwork always implies that truth requires the work of what Adorno would call critique. However, where many go wrong is then to assume that by way of thinking that the truth content can be deciphered. Rather, for Adorno it is that the artwork presents itself as both enigma, that is, as the locale where truth might need to be explicated and so too does the artwork present itself somehow - via its presumed truth content - as the solution to enigma. The artwork then is both puzzle and solution. In neither case is there a presumed hierarchy in which thinking appears as some sort of white knight come to rescue the baffling, enigmatic, unknowing provocation that is the work of art. It is rather experience - and not thinking - that is overdetermined in the artwork; the artwork exists by dint of the experience that produced it. So the artwork unavoidably contains the residue of whatever event or experience gave rise to it. And experience is also provoked as the requisite means of responding to both the enigma and the truth content of the artwork. We are thus overdeterminedly returned to experience by the work of art.⁹

It might be that the work of art begins as the first critique of sensuous immediacy. The artwork stands then also as a rebuke to sensuousness as a fully complete capacity or, put differently, as a capacity that suffices for all that is human or all that whatever is human might become. The artwork à la Hegel is then not only the expression of the fulfilment of sensuousness so too is it a critique that acknowledges and thereby sets the limits of sensuousness. To consider now how the notion of the truth content of the work of art functions in experience we might see this as in line with the work of art as critique of sensuousness. Just as the work of art is not itself sensuousness but rather an expression of sensuousness, so too then is truth content an acknowledgement that sensuousness is not the last frontier for either the work of art or human becoming. The work of art's truth content is then is not so much a truth about the

⁸ Here we might fruitfully consider Friedrich Schiller's response to the publication of the *Critique of Judgement*. Schiller composes his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* in order to explicate, as central to what he saw as the spirit of the *Critique of Judgement*, the overarching momentum of aesthetic experience as an alternation between what is active and what is at rest in human becoming. Schiller presents an aesthetic theory, or better: an aesthetic education, as the need for returning to balance and harmony the full panoply of all human capacities, since the development of each and every capacity can't help but participate in the sacrifice of our essential unity. Thus Schiller's doctrine of "education" points away from knowledge and toward life (cf. Schiller 1967).

⁹ This thought might well put us in mind of Hegel's aesthetics, where we learn how the very condition of sensuousness achieves - in the work of art - a kind of self-reflection, self-duplication, and self-overcoming by dint of an overflowing of this very capacity (cf. Hegel 1993).

object as it is rather the truth about the subject of experience. That there is a truth to art is akin to there being a truth to sensuousness but of course it makes no sense - outside the precincts of the artwork - to consider sensuousness as having a truth content. It might well have a reality and an actuality, but never a truth content, which implies a depth and a meaning beyond what is immediately present. But if we acknowledge that sensuousness is not an immediacy but already a particular kind of mediation, then we might consider the work of art less as a break with sensuousness and more like an event and a thing continuous with sensuousness. The artwork is the re-mediation of sensuousness. The truth then is that art and sensuousness are themselves limited finite things or capacities. And most importantly: their content thus exceeds them. The work of art is a sign and expression of the first capacity that is human rather than entirely creaturely. The work of art is the first mark of the human, a mark not only made by whatever has come to be human in us, but also a mark that stands as and for the first human thing. And yet, the mark's essential separateness from us, combined with its unavoidable intimacy as a mark *of* and *from* us, is what makes it enigmatic. It comes as no surprise then that some have also identified the origin of art in the experience of magic (to cite but two prominent authors who rely heavily on the notion that art arises out of magic: Fischer 2010, especially chap. 2, and Hauser 1957, especially part 1). Magical experience, like the uncanny, is that at once too close as well as foreign to us. The magical object is a proxy for us as well as the first means by which we began to become whatever it is we are that is more than sensuous immediacy, more than creaturely.

How is it that the thing that is most uncannily like us is also that which most perplexes us? One answer to this would be to see the work of art as the premier example of alienation, in Marx's sense of the offloading or projecting onto something else a capacity that is originally our own. In this light it seems a bit ironic to realize that so much of what culture aims to achieve is the attempted re-integration of just this capacity to make art. Culture proceeds from the assumption that what is most human in us is the capacity to make or experience art, and likewise assumes that this capacity needs constant cultivation, or re-cultivation. But if, on the other hand, art and culture are the premier example of human alienation, then art and culture instead become the means and model by which we continue to be alienated from ourselves. Herbert Marcuse's brilliant 1937 essay, "On the Affirmative Character of Culture", thus rightly concludes by calling for the abolition, or shall we say overcoming, of culture precisely because it is culture that is the primary means by which we maintain ourselves as alienated beings (Marcuse 1968, pp. 88-133). For Marcuse, the thing that culture affirms is the ongoing catastrophe of our continuing alienation and self-alienation. The enigma of the modern work of art is a continuing testimonial to the ongoing alienation at work in the work of art and thereby, as our faithful proxy, at work in us. Truth content then appears as the conviction not only that there is something emphatically crucial for us within the artwork, but still more importantly for us, truth content implies that though we remain ineluctably bound to the work of art, we remain unknown to ourselves and indeed in some emphatic sense, not in possession of ourselves. Truth content is the reminder of the unfinished nature of our becoming, hence Adorno's thought to the effect that the work of art is both being and becoming. The content of the truth is that we remain perpetually unfinished. Our being remains in contrast to our becoming.

Pleasure affords another place in which to feel and to measure the reverberations of the enigma of the work of art. The enigmatic character of pleasure resonates in two registers: the first is the dissonance in the long tradition of writings on aesthetic theory as to the continuity or discontinuity of so-called aesthetic pleasure with everyday pleasure. There are many, Burke is prominent among them, who accord aesthetic pleasure no special place distinct from sensuous pleasure (Burke 1958: see especially the

“Introduction on Taste,” added in the 1759 second edition). In this regard, and though Burke rightly notes the deeply social character of aesthetic pleasure, he takes it to be a mark of, and a pleasure in, our community with others. But so too does he see this social character of pleasure as wholly the product of our capacity to experience our continuity with things, that is, the pleasures of a cultured taste are grounded in the very sensuous kinship we might find with all kinds of objects and surfaces, sounds, smells and the like. Burke’s thinking here is wholly in line with that of Joseph Addison’s famous essay on the “Pleasures of the Imagination” (1712), in which Addison suggests that the imagination primarily allows for an expansion of the pleasure of sense, and an expansion that one can presumably call up at will, and without the presence of the sensuous pleasure that imagination nonetheless models itself upon. Burke and Addison - but so too Hume and Adam Smith might easily be added - thus deem aesthetic pleasure as at most a refinement of - or rather all too often a deviation from - the basic pleasure of sensuousness. In the other register stands most famously the Kantian tradition with its absolute insistence upon the non-continuity between sensuous gratification and aesthetic pleasure. Indeed we might see this tradition as formulating its primary concern as the policing of the boundary between aesthetic pleasure and any other pleasures, indeed, any experiences. Further, the whole realm of the aesthetic comes to be defined as that which exists only in opposition - and as an otherness - to all other pleasures.

I want to suggest that the enigma of the modern work of art resides in just this relation regarding the proper place and status of the pleasure it affords. Is what the work promises genuinely a pleasure, or indeed even a thing at all for us? Mimetically, the pleasure afforded by the work of modern art carries the same enigmatic character as the artwork. One might even surmise that the modern era arrives not with the first works of modern art but with the initial appearances of an enigmatical pleasure, that is, aesthetic pleasure. When we wonder about the enigmatical character of the pleasure that art might afford us, we thereby move out of the precinct of the object the artwork and toward the realm of the experiences that it gives rise to. And here then we come more fully into the realm of the deeper resonances of enigma, for enigma cannot so much be the description of a *thing* as it is rather the characterization of an experience, indeed, a failed or at least a forestalled experience. Enigma names a peculiar kind of experience, or better: a peculiar moment within experience. It is the moment of experience leaning toward something but unable to find a support or way forward. Enigma thus names a certain fap, a lacuna within experience. Something important seems to be happening, indeed perhaps of the utmost import to us, and yet we cannot know or find it, cannot even - we might say - experience it. This means that we also think of enigma as a gap not only in experience but more pressingly as a gap within the condition of being alive. This helps explain the peculiar proximity of pleasure - and indeed this very foreign of uncanny pleasure - to just this moment of blockage. For pleasure too - akin to the gap at the centre of enigma - has an origin before and behind us. In regard to our pleasures, aesthetic or not, what lends us the conviction that they are indeed ours? We might conjure Freud here, the Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (see Freud 1961a), to inquire to what extent our pleasure precedes, as well as exceeds, us. But so too might we inquire as to what other principles might predate our having come to exist in the forms and shapes we now still occupy.

We do not co-occur with the origin of each of the principles or capacities that come to take up residency in us. In regard to some of even our most prominent features we are more like latecomers, *Nachfolger*, while in regard to others we might well come into existence as specific unities before one or another of them. Does this mean that we have the latter capacities in some way like possessions while the former in some sense possess us?

The enigma of the modern work of art is a symptom and a reflection of our not knowing which features of what we currently are are things that continue merely to drag us forward and which features of contemporary life are attempting to pull us toward what we have thus far only incompletely realized. The enigma of the modern work of art exists in just that interplay within each of us - as well as the species as a whole - between what precedes us and what exceeds us. That the modern artwork must remain unresolved is a testament to the intransigence within us that though we appear to be standing still we are nonetheless pulled forward and backward by capacities, tendencies, and inclinations that either pre-date us, or are just now arriving within us. Pleasure remains an enigma despite our supposed mastery over it. The invention of the work of art was, to a certain extent, a development that put the means of the production of pleasure back into our hands, just as likewise the invention of the tradition of aesthetic pleasure, of the pleasures of the imagination, was also a move toward and in service of the mastery of pleasure.

Adorno remarks that for Kant, “aesthetics becomes paradoxically a castrated hedonism, desire without desire” (Adorno 1997, p. 11), just as aesthetic pleasure comes into existence as a pleasure without a subject who might possess it, save the purported subject of subjective universality. We might say then, with apologies to Feuerbach, that the secret of aesthetic pleasure is sensuous pleasure, and that the aesthetic pleasure that can’t quite be ours here and now might nonetheless come into a sort of quasi-existence as a projection beyond us. Further: it remains unrecognizable as it is a capacity grounded in whatever pleasures we aren’t yet able to have. And yet:

Whoever concretely enjoys artwork is a philistine; he is convicted by expressions like “a feast for the ears”. Yet if the last traces of pleasure were extirpated, the question of what artworks are for would be an embarrassment. Actually, the more they are understood, the less they are enjoyed (Adorno 1997, p. 13).

Adorno goes on in the same section to suggest that it was just this unavailability of meaning - and he mentions Kafka - that opens up the reader to the possibility of truth, and that means here that truth becomes the premier sign of that which is beyond us, unavailable, and yet also a sign that there is a reality to the experience even if - or especially if - we cannot grasp it.

The modern work of art, with enigma and truth content, represents a kind of return of the repressed. Whatever pleasures might have been produced in the long histories of art-making were undone, made complicated and freighted with doubt, with the advent of the modern work of art. Pleasure’s dominance over us re-asserted itself in the modern artwork, and especially in the very mystery of its dominance. The modern artwork’s refusal, or at best ambivalence toward yielding pleasure, is a measure of the extent to which it serves a principle that is at once both more and less than we are. Aesthetic pleasure is a token of experience, neither of which we can quite have; the modern work of art continues tauntingly to remind us of this, by cunningly providing us a quasi-experience and a quasi-pleasure, and therewith rekindling a renewed longing for both.

Let us turn here to a particular work of art to consider the experience and intervention in experience that such a work makes possible. The work I have in mind is Christian Marclay’s 2010 “*The Clock*”, a 24-hour montage of more than 12,000 film and television clips that make real-time reference to the time of day.¹⁰ Many fortunate viewers of *The Clock* will agree with Zadie Smith’s sentiment that it is “maybe the greatest film you have ever seen” (Smith 2011). And Smith herself readily joins the seeming consensus on the experience of watching *The Clock* by offering that it “is the first film in which time is

¹⁰ A 3-minute excerpt from *The Clock* can be found here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xp4EUryS6ac

real". However, it is just this conviction regarding the experience of real time that the artwork so effectively undermines. This confusion may *The Clock's* real gift to us. If narrative film succeeds by suspending the viewer predictably and cin comfortably in the Aristotelian beginning/middle/end of drama, Marclay's pastiche film of punctuated, time-stamped moments instead liberates the viewer from the traditional suspense of filmic narrative (There is no beginning, middle, or end in *The Clock's* 24-hour cycle). *The Clock* relieves the viewer of burden of knowing what time it is and thus the labor of suspending oneself in time. But this is not the experience of real time. *The Clock* induces rather an experience untethered from the conscientious obligation to locate itself within the passage of time. *The Clock* thereby frees one's attention to turn to other things, like the watching something else keep time. Smith's keen attentiveness to the experience of watching the film is premised upon the work having watched the clock for her, and this liberated her to experience something else.

This intervention in the experience of narrative likewise brings to mind the situation of how abstract expressionist champion, Clement Greenberg, also took narrative to be the thing that most adamantly needed to be expunged from painting in order that painting - and by extension culture - might liberate itself from an otherness, from serving as the vehicle for something not intrinsic to itself. Though we won't here consider what a pure or even purifying art might mean, more to our purpose is to note the overlapping intent that the work of art free itself from the form and limitations of narrative, and thus free, in tow, the spectator of such an event. Narrative, hardly an evil in and of itself, rather comes to be recognized as a certain hardly an evil in and of itself, rather comes to be recognized as a certain limitation, not merely for the purpose of an autonomous of free form of art, but more importantly awareness of narrative as a constraint serves in turn as the recognition of experience's non-transparency toward itself. Narrative comes to look not like the form by means of which experience gains coherence but instead as the mark of experience not having hold of itself except by means of a form outside its own dynamic. We might say that the rejection of narrative is what allows the enigmatic character of experience to be revealed by the work of art. Truth content might then in turn be understood as the insistence that experience be something more and something other than what narrative gives us. The implication then is that whatever the artwork's truth content, it won't appear anywhere near something narrative. The meaning of the modern work of art, akin to the meaning of experience, can't be narrated. In fact, to whatever extent a meaning in either approaches the form of narrative, the more suspicious it comes to seem.

Subjective pleasure in the artwork would approximate a state of release from the empirical as from the the totality of [the] heteronomous [...] The happiness gained from artworks is that of having suddenly escaped, not a morsel of that from which art escaped; [...] the concept of aesthetic pleasure as constitutive of art is to be superseded (Adorno 1997, p. 15).

The empirical is not in and of itself problematic; it is but the development of a certain human capacity, namely the capacity to profit from our own experience, to make it a means of observation and hypothesis. The empirical here signifies that which is the opposite of whatever just happens; the empirical is instead the strategizing with what happens, the making of what happens into something that might become profitable. To be released from the empirical then would signal liberation from the heteronomy of our very own self-alienating capacity. The artwork is a model then of how an escape might be plotted from the very heart of the empirical, how, we might say, the empirical can be made complicit in the plot

to supersede itself. This liberation would likewise signal the liberation of experience from the instrumental rationality of the empirical, as well as the liberation of aesthetic pleasure from the task of participating in the work of the work of art.

Adorno applies the concept of truth content to both singular works of art as well as entire art movements:

The truth content of many artistic movements does not necessarily culminate in great artworks; Benjamin demonstrated this in his study of German baroque drama. Presumably the same holds true for German Expressionism and French surrealism; not by accident the latter challenged the concept of art itself, a defiance that has ever since remained admixed with all authentic new art (Adorno 1997, p. 25).

This line of thinking, that truth content does not necessarily overlap with the production of great works of art, is of a piece with the previous claim regarding the historical necessity that aesthetic pleasure is to be superseded as a thing constitutive of art. What lends authenticity then to an artwork or to an artistic movement is to be found in its commitment to a certain impulse that comes, for Adorno, to define what is modern in art: at that is at odds with itself, or more strongly, art that defies its own existence. More specifically, Adorno characterizes this as the “preponderance of art over the artwork” (Adorno 1997, p. 25). It is as if the work that modern art does is to gain and keep a certain momentum against its own objectification. We might well find this same dichotomy elsewhere in Adorno’s writings on the relation of art to culture, where the latter is problematic precisely because it represents some things like the ossification of the dynamism of art, or we might say that culture comes to exist as the institutionalization of art, or still worse: culture is the agency that instrumentalizes art.

In this light the difference between culture and culture industry is more a matter of degree than anything else, and so too implies that culture industry is not primarily some kind of bastardization of culture but rather a more advanced form of a certain instrumentalization already implicit in culture’s appropriation of and profiteering from the dynamic of art. Still further, we might trace back to art itself this tendency or impulse toward its own pacification. The more authentic modern impulse, according to Adorno, then comes to be the impulse against itself.

I want to suggest that this impulse of the authentic work of art, and even of the authentic art movement, is not only a historical development out of the increase in alienation under advanced capitalism, so too is the impulse also wholly of a piece with the very development of the aesthetic tradition beginning in the eighteenth century. What I have in mind here in particular is Schiller’s interpretation of the main lines of Kantian aesthetic theory. Schiller famously reads the third *Critique* as a description of the limits of the proper developments of human capacities. Schiller’s take on Kant’s aesthetic theorizing is to see it as proclaiming, in effect, that we have already breached the barrier of the just limits of human capacity development. The turn to the aesthetic is thus the measured response to the overdevelopment of human capacity, and the specific task of the aesthetic is to bring our capacities into a more balanced harmony between and among human beings. Schiller is much influenced here not only by Kant’s formulation of the harmony among the faculties of some new human capacity (consider also here the crucial distinction between determinate and reflective judgement) but rather by bringing into continuity the capacities that arose by way of opposition and difference. For Schiller, all human capacities come to exist only insofar as each one opposes the unity of the whole creature. Therefore, every developed capacity drags us farther from the very wholeness and unity out of which we arose. There is

then only one single direction to take for Schiller's famous doctrine of aesthetic education: it must inevitably be away from the cultivation of any single human capacity and towards the integration and harmonization of the already existing capacities.

The aesthetic realm is then the place where and the means by which human capacities are superseded in order that the experience of capacityness, but without the exercise of any single capacity, might be cultivated. We might well consider this Schiller's version of Kantian purposeless purposiveness. Adorno's "preponderance of art over the artwork" might be re-purposed here to express the preponderance of capacity over the exercise of any actual capacity. We might well see that the contradiction, or better, the defiance of each capacity against the unity of the whole being, is likewise found in what Adorno calls the crisis in modern art: "What today emerges as the crisis of art, as its new quality, is as old as art's concept" (Adorno 1997, p. 54). Enigma and truth content art the most contemporary terms, and their opposition - combined with their complementarity - is the more contemporary formulation of the ur-problem of self-alienation. Those terms, and the artworks that are the vehicles for them, depict and enact the conundrum regarding how human lives maintain themselves as human amidst all the pitfalls of human objectification and alienation. And yet, the term pitfall itself points us in the wrong direction, for it implies that the difficulties of being human lie somewhere outside the boundaries of what is human. It is rather, thanks to Schiller's amplification of Kant, that we come first to realize that the whole realm of the aesthetic is premised upon the conundrum of how to retain just that which has been cancelled and purportedly superseded. Recall that the term *aufheben*, before it is taken up most famously by Hegel, appears prominently in Schiller's writing on aesthetics.¹¹

We might consider the enigmatic character of art in the specific form of address that the artwork makes to the viewer, and by extension, to subjectivity. Adorno writes: "Artworks are enigmatic in that they are the physiognomy of an objective spirit that is never transparent to itself in the moment in which it appears" (Adorno 1997, p. 128). For Adorno, the long history of art in the West arrives at a modernist art that has, in its most meaningful aspect, become the opposite of what it has previously been. The work of art had been the vehicle for conveying and expressing meaning; it came to be as the embodiment of a unified, cohesive meaning. This situation is reversed in modernism, where the work of art comes to exist and to appear as the blockage of meaning, as an enigma rather than the bearer of meaningful content. A common mistake would be to assume that the artwork is meaningless; it is rather that the work taunts the viewer/listener as having a meaning beyond the comprehension of she who experiences it, beyond, we might say, who and what she currently is. And yet, "the enigma points to its truth content" (Adorno 1997, p. 128). Points, that is, beyond itself as well as beyond the present experience of it: "each artwork through the neediness implicit in its enigmaticalness nevertheless turns toward interpretive reason" (Adorno 1997, p. 128). Art's enigmatical character is directed squarely at us, or at least toward us insofar as we are capable of interpretive reason, or, in other words, critique: "Grasping truth content postulates critique" (Adorno 1997, p. 128). Or, as Adorno elsewhere notes, what is true in art is something that does not yet exist.

We might also consider the scenario of enigma and truth content in the work of art from the point of view not on interpretation but rather from the genesis and facture, the making of the artwork: "Every act of making in art is a singular effort to say what the artifact itself is not and what it does not know:

¹¹ If it were not outside the scope of this essay, this would be the place to treat of mimesis, especially in its rose as that by means of which imitation, repetition, duplication, etc. are just an ideal strategy for the wish simultaneously to retain and to supersede.

precisely this is art's spirit" (Adorno 1997, p. 131). Art's spirit has its objectivity in saying what the artwork does not know and is not; conversely then, we might say that art's spirit has its subjectivity in attempting to say what the experience of the artwork does not know and is not. Note the relation here between showing and telling: the artwork shows what it cannot speak, as it does not know what or how to say what it is not. In its movement toward speech rather than image or appearance, art's spirit again addresses subjectivity, however it is subjectivity that is not, and does not know itself. Something objective in the work of art thereby addresses something subjective that is unknown and not yet in existence.

We might fruitfully try to transpose this schema onto the earlier discussion, following Schiller, of the attempt by the aesthetic realm to address the thorny issue of human capacity, over-capacity, and especially the kind of capacity-building that excludes not only other kinds of knowing but so too other kinds of becoming. What this might then mean here is that art's spirit calls forth an objectivity and a subjectivity that do not know themselves and do not yet exist. In other words, a capacity is called for that might be the proper response to an ability that does not exist, and yet the call is also hesitant, it asks only for something to be said in response to the enigma of the presented thing. We see then that enigma and truth content are not things that ask merely for a response, they ask for a response that takes the shape of a capacity, namely a capacity to solve and to interpret, to speak and to name the meanings of something.

And the problem with capacity in this light is that it is an overdetermined form of response. It answers not only an address but sets up a more or less permanent agency for the solving of problems, and the proper naming for what things are. Such an agency or capacity, however useful in response to a particular address, forestalls any other sort of response, and indeed standardizes the response to future forms of address for both objectivity and subjectivity. The task of maintaining the suspense of what is and what will become human Adorno assigns to art: "Art desires what it has not yet been, though everything that art is has already been" (Adorno 1997, p. 134). Here we might well describe the suspense of art as likewise the suspension of sublation, of the dynamic of canceling and preserving. Art then appears less as the means of resolving some paradox of existence, or of capacity, and more like a kind of x-ray at the midpoint between being and becoming, perhaps not unlike the curious status of aesthetic pleasure, a pleasure modelled on what has been but not yet something genuinely different. In the state of suspense, art recalls what has been, hence the many formulations of such things as remembrance and mournings that are so prevalent in modern art, but so too does art point away and beyond what it currently is - this one of the oldest dynamics of representational art, of all the art that betrays its own reality by proclaiming that it is only an image of a missing thing. It is in this light that Adorno adapts Stendhal's famous definition of beauty as the promise of happiness to the realm of art as a whole: "Art is the ever broken promise of happiness" (Adorno 1997, p. 136). Art's dignity resides in its fecklessness; its inability and its unwillingness to become the capacity that would realize human freedom is what allows it, in turn, to maintain its own condition of suspense. And that we might be most thoroughly human in just that moment of suspense so powerfully modelled in every aesthetic appearance - this of course was Nietzsche's insight.

References

- Addison, J. 1712: "The Pleasures of the Imagination", *The Spectator*, 411-421.
- Adorno, Th. W. 1973: *Negative Dialectics*, Eng. transl. by E.B. Ashton, New York, The Seabury Press.
- Adorno, Th. W. 1997: *Aesthetic Theory*, Eng. transl. by R. Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Burke, E. 1958: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Fischer, E. 2010: *The Necessity of Art*, Eng. transl. By A. Bostock, London, Verso.
- Freud, S. 1916a: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Eng. transl. by J. Strachey, New York, W. W. Norton.
- Freud, S. 1916b: *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Eng. transl. by J. Strachey, New York, W. W. Norton.
- Hauser, A. 1957: *The Social History of Art. Volume 1*, Eng transl. by S. Godman, New York, Vintage Books.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1993: *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, Engl. transl. by B. Bosanquet, London, Penguin Books.
- Kant, I. 1987: *Critique of Judgement*, Eng. transl. by W. S. Pluhar, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company.
- Marcuse, H. 1968: "On the Affirmative Character of Culture", in Id., *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, Eng. transl. by J. J. Shapiro, Boston, Beacon Press, pp. 88-133.
- Schiller, F. 1967: *On the Aesthetic Education of Man; In a Series of Letters*, Eng. transl. by E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Z. 2011: "Killing Orson Welles at Midnight", *New York Review of Books*, April 28, 2011, pp. 14-16.