

ZUIDERVAART, LAMBERT. *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion*. MIT Press, 1991, xxiv + 388 pp., \$37.50 cloth.

This is a rich and generous book. The wealth of information on twentieth century European debates in aesthetics and cultural criticism is more than matched by the complexity and subtlety of the interpretation of Adorno's aesthetics. The book is quite evidently the fruition of many years of sustained scholarship. Equally impressive, however, is the generosity of Zuidervaart to put this scholarship in the service of addressing a much wider audience than Adorno has until now enjoyed. The argumentation, and at times even the terminology, is formulated with a view to making Adorno's aesthetics more palatable, and one hopes even intriguing, to North American, analytic aestheticians. Zuidervaart's project is to "identify crucial areas in which *Aesthetic Theory* makes significant contributions to philosophical aesthetics" and to evaluate those contributions (p. xv).

The book is divided into three parts: "Context," "Commentary," and "Criticism." In the three chapters that compose the Context section, Zuidervaart astutely locates Adorno's aesthetics against the background of three different traditions: (1) Western Marxism and critical theory, (2) the debates with and between Lukács, Brecht, and Benjamin concerning the nature of political art, artistic autonomy, and modernism, (3) Kantian and Hegelian aesthetics. (Each of the three chapters of the final "Criticism" section treats a major interpreter of Adorno's aesthetics: Peter Burger, Fredric Jameson, and Albrecht Wellmer.) Providing this broad, and deep context for evaluating Adorno's contribution to aesthetics is no mean feat, especially since Zuidervaart began his exposition with the requirement that its method, like Adorno's in regard to the artwork, be an "immanent" one: "The critique is immanent in the sense that the issues discussed are those of the text, the expectations voiced are Adorno's expectations, and criteria for inadequacies and contributions come from his own position ... Immanent critique becomes metacritique—a combination, often precarious, of dependence upon, and transcendence of, the object of criticism" (p. xx).

The object of criticism which Zuidervaart chooses to depend upon most (and hence also tries to transcend) throughout the five chapters of the central "Commentary" section of the book, is Adorno's notion of truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*). That this choice is from among the two or three best candidates is small comfort since it is also one of the most difficult, though nonetheless pervasive notions in the *Aesthetic Theory*. Zuidervaart is keenly aware of the dialectical nature of the problem encountered; while discussing the influence of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* for aesthetic theory, he cites a passage from it which could well, serve as a description of the complexity of an artwork's truth content: "A contradiction in reality, [the dialectic] is a contradiction against reality" (p. 51). The artwork is, like the dialectic it mimics, "a contradiction in reality," while its truth content functions as something like "a contradiction against reality." The key difficulty of Adorno's aesthetics is somehow to articulate this doubly contradictory insistent thrust of the artwork but without thereby cancelling or assuaging it.

Adorno's immanent method attempts to trace the internal movement of the artwork (i.e., aesthetic form) in order to formulate an aesthetic theory whose form and expression would be but a continuation of that movement. (The title *Aesthetic Theory*

even alludes to the possibility of theory becoming aesthetic, that is, like the artwork.) Zuidervaart's immanent method explicates Adorno's aesthetics by mimetically tracing its path. (The artwork, the object which seems to be the ultimate source of all these mimetic-appropriations, is itself in turn the product of a mimetic tracing of [contradictory] social relations.) But Zuidervaart also hopes that the immanence of his own method will allow him to transcend the object of his critique: Adorno's aesthetics. The vehicle of this hope, whose source and possibility Zuidervaart finds within Adorno's aesthetics, is an elaboration of "truth content."

For Adorno the artwork is a kind of symptom. And his interest in this symptom is motivated—much as Freud's was for hysteria and neurosis—in the suspicion that the experiences of subjectivity, and subjectivity itself were most vital and dense at those locations, and in just those objects where the subjective is denied. Neither Adorno nor Freud sought the essence of the human subject, but both instead found the most nuanced and layered aspects of subjective life within the symptoms and objects (artworks) where subjectivity was most thwarted. The subjective seems to flourish precisely where it is least tended and most prohibited. Adorno and Freud locate subjectivity in the resistances to it.

But Zuidervaart quite correctly shows that for Adorno the artwork is not the only symptom of the resistance to subjectivity. He cites Adorno's letter to Benjamin in which it is suggested that both modern and mass art are equally arrayed against—and toward—the possibility of subjectivity: "Both bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change ... Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up" (p. 31). Indeed, much of the ink that Adorno spills in his writings on aesthetics and cultural criticism is directed toward showing how the symptom—modern art—is, ultimately, productive of subjectivity while the symptom—mass or so-called popular art—in its calling-forth and (pseudo-)production of subjectivity, is ultimately destructive of that very same subjectivity. The term Adorno uses to distinguish between these two sorts of social symptom (or one might also say: between two alternate means of production) is autonomy.

Zuidervaart couples his trenchant analysis of truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) with an equally thorough analysis of autonomy. With regard to the former, Zuidervaart is wise to amend the translation of *Gehalt* from its customary "content," which serves to stress the nonstatic and nonsubstantive nature of one of Adorno's crucial quasi-technical terms. "Import" marks the heart of the artwork as a dynamic process rather than a reified sentiment; it displays Adorno's transformation of the question as to what the artwork is into that of what the artwork does—as a function of what it is. The artwork might itself be described, not unlike subjectivity, as at once both the residue and the object of the dialectical process of alternately avoiding and succumbing to reification.

"The Redemption of Illusion," Zuidervaart's subtitle, refers to his conclusion that the artwork transcends its immanent nature as a mere (contradictory) appearance of the truth of social relations and becomes the means whereby a philosophically informed social praxis produces an autonomous subjectivity, or at least the expression of the necessity of such a production. I would like to suggest a possible alternative to the transcendence and redemption formulated by Zuidervaart by proposing a somewhat different interpretation of both truth content and autonomy. I shall briefly sketch how the *Aesthetic Theory* might instead be construed as itself a resistance to the possibility of

redeeming art, or of art being redemptive of something else, or, finally, of transcending the import of Adorno's aesthetics.

The initial difficulty of Zuidervaart's interpretation is that it implicitly adopts the Habermasian strategy of considering the preconditions necessary for the production of artworks rather than following Adorno's lead wherein aesthetics is constructed upon what the artwork produces or, more often, resists producing. Zuidervaart's reading is throughout quite sympathetic to a Habermasian interpretation (via Wellmer) of a number of Adorno's central concepts even though Zuidervaart's is a far more subtle, nuanced and sensitive reading of Adorno's aesthetics than is Habermas's.

Though this is not the place for a critique of Habermas's reading of Adorno's aesthetics, one should nonetheless be warned that whenever one hears the term "communicative rationality" in a discussion of the cultural benefits of art, one should immediately reach for one's copy of Adorno's essay, "Cultural Criticism and Society": "Just as culture sprang up in the marketplace, in the traffic in trade, in communication and negotiation ... [culture] is in the end reduced to that as which it began, to mere communication" (Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* [MIT Press, 1981], p. 25).

When Zuidervaart writes that autonomy "provides a precondition" for art (p. 32), he seems so be suggesting that human or social autonomy is a requirement for the production of autonomous artworks. One might counter this interpretation by arguing that for Adorno the contradictory nature of the artwork and its truth content presupposes not autonomy but the absence thereof. The artwork is not then the expression of human subjectivity but the vehement protest against the conditions which prohibit it. It is the utter lack of human autonomy which necessitates the artwork as record of the resistance to subjectivity and simultaneously the demand for its immediate production. What Adorno at times calls the authentic or successful artwork is one that *achieves* autonomy, albeit for the duration of a precarious moment. But this achieved autonomy is not that of the human subject—it, like truth content, is also an autonomy *from* the subject. The artwork then is a protest for and against subjectivity: it is a protest against the limitations of a deformed and dominating subjectivity, and a warning against increasing the sway and dominion of the only brand of subjectivity thus far achieved. The shudder experienced by Adorno in response to a successful artwork is something which might be construed as the emasculation of subjectivity. Hence if the desire in light of Adorno's aesthetics is to speak of redemption, via autonomy and truth content, this redemption must be formulated as not being a redemption of the subjective.

Given the lucidity and intelligence of Zuidervaart's exemplary book, it is difficult to imagine it not succeeding in enriching the ongoing debates in aesthetics. I expect it will also serve as the standard against which subsequent writings on Adorno's aesthetics will be judged.

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