THE SUBLIMATION OF CULTURE IN ADORNO'S AESTHETICS[1]

Thomas Huhn

"Jesus is a trick on niggers."
Hazel Motes in Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood

"The injustice of all cheerful art, especially that committed by entertainment, is one on the dead, on accumulated and speechless pain." (AT, p. 59 mod)[2]

I propose to explain in this essay the relation between art and suffering alluded to by Theodor Adorno. This explanation begins with the above passage from Adorno in which the injustice perpetrated by art is an injustice against the dead and against unarticulated pain. Although Adorno here limits the charge of injustice to "cheerful" art and to entertainment, I hope to show that this injustice is a structural necessity of sublimation. My goal then is to explicate this formulation of injustice as a dynamic immanent to sublimation and catharsis. The unjust character of art is thus to be explained as the injustice necessarily entailed by the very concepts of sublimation and catharsis.

This negative characterization of sublimation follows from its having reconciliation and thus sacrifice as its motor. Sublimation is best understood as a promise: a promise of fulfillment, to replace what has been removed, to complete the uncompleted, and to compensate loss. The nature of promising, as Nietzsche so eloquently displays in On the Genealogy of Morals, lies in the destruction what has been for the sake of what must now—as was promised—come to be. The future of a promise, its necessarily empty and yet-to-be character, follows directly from the negation and emptying out of what has been. That is, promising necessitates not only the destruction but more importantly the sacrifice of the past. We shall return to sacrifice (as we always must) below.

What is unjust about sublimation is its valorization of suffering, and by extensions, repressions. The injustice done the dead by sublimation is the presentation of suffering as reconcilable with the status quo. Sublimation claims that it can pay the bill for suffering and death. This reconciliation with the status quo is thus the effacement of suffering, in the end the effacement of the dead themselves insofar as their only claim is that their suffering be redeemed. The dilemma of art, or more especially of aesthetic illusion/semblance (Schein), is, according to Adorno, how such a redemption of suffering and death occur without, however, the cancellation of them.

Any redemption of suffering serves to efface and thereby prolong it. Art, insofar as it is an attempt to redeem suffering, depends upon suffering for its very existence and motive force. Indeed, it is in this context that Adorno's infamous statement regarding the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz must be understood. This statement follows not from the presupposition that genocide is so horrible that nothing can redeem it. This statement follows rather from the formulation that art is a response to suffering and the dead. That no poetry is possible after Auschwitz means that the victims of genocide make no claim to which art would then be the response. It is the case that art is somehow not up to the task of responding to genocide. It is rather that in genocide there is, quite literally, no death but only extermination. Perhaps, the ultimate indignity and injustice possible is that of expropriating from a human being the possibility of its own death. (I qualify this assertion with a 'perhaps' because I am not at all secure in the comfort that we have already seen the worst of what human beings are wont to do to one another.) In

genocide human beings are not killed but exterminated. I would suggest that the feeble character of all responses to genocide, whether aesthetic or not, is the product of there being no death, and thus no claim, to respond and attempt to do justice to.

To do justice to suffering and the dead both must remain unredeemed and unredeemable. If they were to be redeemed, if suffering and death itself were redeemable, their redemption could occur only at the price of negating both. They are redeemable only insofar as they can be sacrificed. Genuine redemption—that, is, a redemption which could do something other than conceal and efface past sufferings and deaths—would be the cessation of suffering and death. But it is just this which art is powerless to positively effect. But here lies the rub: it is precisely this powerlessness of an aesthetic redemption which signals the faulty and contradictory character of any and all claims to redemption, indeed, the very character of redemption itself. If artworks were to succeed in positively redeeming suffering and death this redemption would be nothing but the repetition of the injustice which brought about suffering in the first instance—the very suffering by means of which they still lay claim to redemption and thus, in turn, prompt the existence and continuation of the aesthetic. Their redemption would cancel their claim to redemption (because it would both necessitate but also efface suffering and death) without redeeming them. The injustice of cheerful art and entertainment is thus the effect of a repetition compulsion which serves to entrench suffering and death under the guise of assuaging them. Reconciliation and redemption are the legitimation of suffering and death. Jesus remains, especially in art, a trick on niggers.

We may construe this unredeemable (now irredeemable) claim of redemption in terms of what Adorno himself writes of as a certain "ambiguity" inherent in sublimation itself: "The ambiguity of 'sublimation' is the psychological cipher for the ambiguity of social progress…" (P, 85 mod)[3] Social progress is ambiguous in a twofold sense: there is the ambiguity as to whether the social as a totality is a progress over the nonsocial (this is a stronger version of the more obvious ambiguity as tow whether any particular movement within the social represents a progress over what preceded it): and there is the ambiguity (or better said: ambivalence) as to whether the price of progress (that is sacrifice) could ever hope to be recovered and redeemed by the value of any particular progress itself. I want to argue that Adorno's characterization here of sublimation is too weak: the "ambiguity" (Doppeldeutigkeit) of sublimation implies only a dualism, a fluctuation merely between two poles of meaning or value. Such a characterization is a symptom and not a diagnosis of sublimation—it has already fallen prey to the logic sublimation. Sublimation is just such a prescription of an either/or logic; it is the formulation par excellence of the necessity of a calculating sacrifice. This necessity is entailed by the insistence of an exchange premised upon an economy of scarcity. And this, in turn, is what allows the seeming rationality of sacrifice, for sacrifice becomes a reasonable calculation—sacrifice becomes rational—with the presumption that something can be gained only by the relinquishing of something else.

One side of this ambiguity of social progress results from the domination that brings about all "achievements" of civilization: "The achievements of civilization are the product of sublimation, that acquired love/hate against the body and earth, from which domination tears all human beings away." (DA, p. 234 mod)[4] On the other side (and it is the proposed side and site of the aesthetic), if there is indeed to be another side to

sublimation, lies the "secret" of a sublimation which is not the product of domination: "That is the secret of aesthetic sublimation: to present fulfillment as broken." (DA, p. 140 mod)[5]

The ambiguity of sublimation is not captured but given witness to in the very ambiguity of Adorno's phrase. Aesthetic sublimation presents fulfillment is both retained and denied. It is retained insofar as it is presented and yet it is presented as unattainable. The positive character of sublimation is expressed as a negation. The impossibility of a just, successful sublimation provides a critical location and structure from which the domination inherent in reconciliation might be resisted and denied. Aesthetic sublimation presents the normative claim for fulfillment while revealing in the same moment that such a claim cannot and ought not be satisfied.

But, according to Adorno, in this very negation the dialectic progresses; sublimation comes to possess the promise of emancipation: "Because art repeats the spell of reality—sublimates it to an image—it likewise frees itself from it; sublimation and freedom concur." (AT, p. 189 mod)[6] My argument is that this freedom, since it is premised upon sublimation (indeed, as Adorno writes, freedom and sublimation "concur" [sin dim Einverständnis]), is not a freedom from the suppression and hence legitimation of suffering and death by sublimation. This freedom is instead possible only with the continuance of these things and with their attempted concealment.

It is for Adorno just this mimetic doubling—not of reality but the spell which stands over and prescribes the real—in which sublimation might be genuinely successful. Not in the redemption of its promise (that suffering can be assuaged, compensated for, redeemed) nor the promise of redemption (that suffering will be redeemed) does sublimation have its aesthetic success. Its success is unfortunately measured according to the distance it creates between the social construction of reality and its own. The aesthetic construction, insofar as it is an image of the social and hence its negation, negates via sublimation not the real but the principle according to which the real is constituted. Sublimation thus posits the negative ideal of the reality principle: this underlies its affinity with freedom. Artworks posit themselves as the reverse image and ideal of the reality principle.

The place of imitator/reproducer and imitated/reproduced would then be, according to Adorno, reversed: "Far from showing that they imitate reality, artworks show reality how its displacement is effected. In the end, what would be reversed is the principle of imitation; in a sublimated meaning reality ought to imitate artworks." (AT, p. 192)[7] "Sublimated meaning" is to be read as the sublimation of meaning—the denial of meaning for the sake of the principle of meaning. But it is precisely this denial of meaning and the principle of reality which reveals that even aesthetic sublimation has its foundation in sacrifice.

The content of this principle of meaning is the prohibition against production as reproduction: artworks "displace" the principle of reality by subscribing not to a different ideal than that according to which the real perpetrates and perpetuates itself but by imitating and reproducing the same principle. The question is thus to what extent this imitation and reproduction break the closed and coercive spell of sublimation via sacrifice.

The reality principle is itself, because of its foundation in domination, displacement. In recapitulating this displacement artworks negate not just the real but its principle. The "reversal" of the Nachahmungslehre displaces first the location of that which is imitated and then its own principle. If reality was to be imitation and reproduction of artworks, there would be nothing to imitate or reproduce. Artworks should lack just that positive principle necessary as the basis for the reproduction of something. The content of an imitation of an artwork would be a negative ideal, the prohibition against reproduction and in the end against any positive principle whatsoever, that is, against production itself.

It is this specific lack of a positive principle of reproduction, the aesthetic prohibition against thee production of likenesses, that translates here into resistance against reification. But this resistance is first directed against imitation: "…in the power of the inner-aesthetic development the social reproduces itself without it being imitated." (AT, p. 321 mod)[8] There is then a reproduction without imitation, a reproduction that is not imitative and yet is social. The model for such a mode of reproduction is a conception of sublimation that takes as its ideal the kind of relations characterized in fair and just exchange.

But the aesthetic valorization of catharsis and sublimation marks a retreat from the movement of the artwork away from society. Catharsis seems progressive because it represents the entrenchment of the social at the heart of the artwork. Catharsis succeeds because it pays homage to the social character of art. The problem however is that catharsis thereby regresses any movement of the artwork toward fair and just exchange by embracing mythic sacrifice. Catharsis is the aesthetic legitimation of repression. It is cunning made rational. The ideal of catharsis is the promise the sacrifice is not in vain. Catharsis prescribes sacrifice as the pleasurable telos of aesthetic form. Catharsis is the aesthetic equivalent of the mythic prescription to cut out an organ an throw it on the fire. Catharsis is emancipatory and participates in the truth of the artwork to the extent that it articulates the claim that there ought to be reconciliation, that suffering ought to be redeemed. But catharsis then participates in the bad infinity of enlightenment when it claims that suffering is redeemed.

For Adorno, aesthetic sublimation refuses—because of its inherent "ambiguity"—the claim (and herein lies its difference from catharsis) that redemption has been achieved. My argument with Adorno is that what he terms the "ambiguity": of sublimation is instead a profound contradiction. Thus, any freedom which might issue from the conspiracy of sublimation and freedom must remain not merely ambiguous but contradictory. Any resolution must be placed on the side of (false) redemption and reconciliation, that is, repression and sacrifice.

The dynamic of catharsis and sublimation can be traced as a movement within two different concepts: reification and society. The social dimension of catharsis and sublimation is first a movement away from the social; sublimation succeeds here to the extent it forces a distance between the artwork and the social:

> To be sure, though art's rejection of society—which sublimation approaches through the law of form—autonomous art offers itself as the

> vehicle of ideology: art, in the distance, leaves unmolested the society before which it shudders. (AT, p. 321 mod)[9]

But it is in this very movement away from the social, in the success of sublimation, that sublimation has its failure. The more sublimation succeeds, the further it removes the artwork from society and the more powerless the artwork becomes as a critique and negation of the social. Sublimation succeeds at the cost of sublimation itself. The necessity of this failure, however, spells, according to Adorno, a kind of success. For what sublimation, in its distancing from the social, refuses to become is unredeemed reification: "Through its social power of resistance alone does art maintain life; if resistance does not reify itself it becomes a commodity." (AT, p. 321 mod)[10] Sacrifice must, in other works, carry the day.

But what is different, for Adorno, is that aesthetic sacrifice is made and remains thoroughly in vain. The irrationality of sacrifice and redemption is supposedly thereby revealed. What is missing, however, from Adorno's formulation of this negative revelation, in an account of the persistence of (supposedly aesthetic) pleasure. I would argue that this persistence is proof not of the negation but rather the affirmation of the logic and (perverse) rationality of sacrifice. It, more than anything else, gives the lie to the autonomy of the aesthetic by re-affirming not just the rationality of sacrifice but celebrating its utter gratuitousness.

What needs to be understood here is the extent of the entwinement of the social and sublimation. Adorno insists on the social character of the resistance to the social. The same degree of entwinement and self-negation is expressed in Adorno's insistence on the simultaneous character of art as both autonomous and "fait social". (It is interesting to consider here why Adorno uses a French term to name the social character of art. It is as if even in naming that aspect of art which is most canny and familiar Adorno must nonetheless pay homage to and mark its foreignness. Art is thus a fact of society but of a society that remains foreign to us. Familiarity rightly breeds contempt: its concept and claim are false.)

If sublimation successfully avoids its reification and subsequent regression into catharsis, which is to say avoids particularity and stasis, then sublimation succeeds in keeping alive the claim by suffering that it ought to be redeemed. The non-reified form of this claim by memory is precisely that allows suffering to negate the totality of the social. In refusing to become particular suffering, suffering confronts the social claim of totality. That is, the movement of domination via totality can only be held in check, and thereby potentially negated, by a claim that also refuses to be particular. Since artworks are the only objects which allow the articulation of the claim made by suffering, but without sacrificing or redeeming that claim, artworks are thereby the only means by which the falsity of the whole might be revealed.

To what extent have artworks succeeded in such revelation? To formulate an answer to this question requires an understanding of the misappropriate of artworks. Catharsis is one example of, and perhaps the primary method by which artworks have been and continue to be expropriated. Blame should be heaped upon aesthetic theory to the extent of its complicity in aiding catharsis to become and remain a static repression within the history and movement not perhaps be blamed. Catharsis is not an external

intervention in aesthetic form but rather an expression of the internal contradiction within the very concept and movement of sublimation. The truth of catharsis is that it attests to the bad infinity of a sublimation founded on sacrifice and unfair exchange. Judgments regarding catharsis should then only be made on the basis of the degree to which catharsis avoids its own destiny and circumvents its own concept. But even this, as I have tried to show, is for sublimation impossible.

The failure of catharsis to refuse its telos and that of sublimation to break free of myth and enlightenment, may still however be characterized as the products of misappropriation—but in this instance as the misappropriation of art by culture. Artworks return to the social (and in this way affirm it), sublimation effaces the distance it allowed between art and society, when art sacrifices itself to the ideal of culture. The category of culture, and artworks in the service of culture, is testament of the failure of sublimation and the subsequent embracing of this failure. Adorno writes of vulgarity that it is "…the subjective expression of the failure of this sublimation, which art as catharsis so over-zealously praises and prescribes t itself as recompense because it suspects how little it has till today—the same as all culture—succeeded." (AT, p. 340 mod)[11] Culture is thus the objective mark of the failure of sublimation, just as vulgarity is its subjective appearance.[12]

(But a prescription that the vulgar should come to appearance, that the marks of repression and the failure of sublimation ought to appear, offers no resolution to this dilemma because vulgarity presents those marks as reconciled with the status quo. Vulgarity is thus the static expression and non-cultured form of the necessity of repression.)

Culture fails because its ideal is reconciliation: the reconciliation of social contradictions (or more strongly, the contradiction of the social). Vulgarity too has reconciliation as its ideal, but effects such reconciliation in a particularly heavy-handed and oppressive fashion: it brings about reconciliation by flaunting the lack of reconciliation, but it thereby displays the history of—and its own constitution as—repression. The vulgar is itself the recapitulation of the excessiveness of the insistence of sublimation and the falsity of the promise of redemption. Vulgarity embraces ad thereby reveals the ugliness of reconciliation. It is the too acute (and thus stands in opposition to culture) revelation of the horror at the heart of beauty.

The *a poria* of sublimation has here far-reaching consequences for Adorno's ambiguous valorization of culture and the distinction he draws between culture and culture industry based on that valorization. The distinction between culture and culture industry can be shown to be not a distinction in kind but only degree, for culture is already itself the result of the institutionalization and industrialization of aesthetic form. More specifically, culture is just that industry in which art is made rational, reconciled with sacrifice and society. The culture industry is then but the self-conscious re-appropriation and reenactment of the originary failure of sublimation. Genuine artworks themselves, to the degree they participate in culture and are cultured, could hope to be no more than this. Adorno would have to argue here, in order to sustain the distinction in kind between culture and culture industry, that the dynamic of the culture industry is not mimetic, does not recapitulate the movement of culture, but only reproduces what culture has already been. That is, the dynamic of the culture industry does not touch

upon and is not entwined with sublimation. Instead, it merely reproduces the effects of sublimation and not its movement. It fails (or refuses?) to be either art of culture. If the culture industry participated to any degree in sublimation, the argument could be made that its products are potentially liberating precisely because they would then be the result of the mimetic doubling of the principle and dynamic of sublimation.

What I have tried to show, contra Adorno, is that sublimation represents no positive or even potential intervention in the social entrenchment and legitimation of the logic of sacrifice. Adorno's vehement distinction between culture and culture industry is superfluous so long as the contradiction of sublimation remains unresolved. Culture thus appears more on the side of the problem rather than the solution.

NOTES

[1] The following abbreviations are used in the essay:

AT T.W. Adorno, Aesthetische Theorie, Gesammelte Schriften, Band 7. English translation: Aesthetic Theory, translated by C. Lenhardt.

DA Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik de Aufklärung Philosophische Fragmente, Fischer, 1969. English translation: Dialectic of Enlightenment, translated by John Cumming.

P T.W. Adorno, Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft, Suhrkamp, 1955. English Translation: Prisms, translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber.

mod This abbreviation after an English translation designates that a modified translation has been substituted for the published English translation. The page numbers following each citation in the notes refer to the German edition of Adorno's works.

[2] AT, p. 66

[3] P, p. 98.

[4] DA, p. 209.

[5] DA, p. 125. Adorno's very next sentence contains his substantive complaint with the culture industry: "Kulturindustrie sublimiert nicht, sondern unterdrückt."

[6] AT, p. 196.

[7] AT, pp. 199-200.

[8] AT, p. 336.

[9] AT, p. 335.

[10] AT, p. 335.

[11] AT, p. 356.

[12] Vulgarity is, for Adorno, the return of the repressed in which that which has been repressed bears the marks of its repression.