

Adorno on: What is art?

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Ladies and gentlemen,

As you may or may not know, Holland has 442 registered museums with a collective inventory of 65 million objects, of which, at any one time, 5% or so is accessible to the public.² Before we start to work out just how many lifetimes we'd need to view even a fraction of that, the journalist who reports this helpfully adds that the majority of those exhibits consist of plants and insects, since in that number of 65 million there is included the natural history museums, with their inventories, not to mention the photographic, fashion, handbag, tattoo, naval, telegraphic, science, bible, resistance and Anne Frank museums, with at least the tacit acknowledgement, by the journalist, that subsuming all of those under 'art' may not be entirely convincing. Nevertheless, there *was* this quaintly-called 'pop-up' museum - that is what the article I've just referred to was about - with exhibits supposedly representative of museum collections from all over the country. The result of an initiative of a popular television program and the current minister of education culture and science, what the visitor got to see at the Allard Pierson was the usual eclecticism: reliquaries from the Middle Ages, painted dog boxes, a peanut-butter covered floor, an anonymous vanitas-still-life from 1640, women's fashion from the nineteen-sixties, a photograph of illegal immigrants staggering off-shore at dawn in Italy after

1 Amsterdamse Academische Club, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Lustrumlezing 10 sep. 2015.

2 Figures presented on the occasion of an NRC art-'special' accompanying the so-called 'pop-up' exhibition at the Allard Pierson Museum earlier this year.

a perilous night-time rubber-boat journey from Libya. The curator from Groningen, who thinks ‘pop-up’ means the same as ‘pop’ and seems to associate above all graffiti with this, chooses a piece by an artist who originally came to public attention as the Dutch dub-over of Sesame Street. In short: the best that a government-sponsored showcase of museums from all over the country can come up with is the demonstration that no-one from the minister downwards seems to have much idea of what art ‘is’.

Na een doosje gevuld met door een kunstenaar gekauwde kauwgomstukjes vraagt Mulder: ‘Hebben jullie ook iets met lijsten? Kunst voor gewone mensen zoals ik?’ De directeur van het Groninger Museum, Andreas Blühm, toont hem ingelijste witte vellen papier waar koeien, hun poten vol koeiepoep, over gelopen hebben.³

This initial experience - the difficulty of establishing what art ‘is’ in the abstract, seems first of all a problem with *definitions*. Intuitively we know that every ‘I like’ sentence can immediately be countered by the ‘I dislike’ sentence of the next person, as if the whole world has become a kind of vast, nightmare, social media website, in which the very memory of a ‘common code of values’, a consensus about anything whatsoever, has disappeared. Robert Hullot-Kentor, the translator of Adorno’s *Ästhetische Theorie*, puts it like this:

In the morality of our everyday aesthetics, what is important to us is that we have our likes and dislikes, and at any moment be ready to call a truce over the objective claim of a distinction in value rather than insist that we have put our hands on what all the world must acknowledge as the *one* right thing.⁴

What Hullot-Kentor is struggling with here, is what *all* Adorno scholars struggle with: the relationship namely, in the *Ästhetische Theorie*, between art and philosophy. It’s been a controversy in the literature from the outset. Apparently, faced with trying to make sense of our experience in an art gallery, our first instinct is to go in one of two directions: we start out either with *definitions* - which after all imply logical universality - or with what it is that we personally *feel*, which is entirely personal. Is there a way out of this dilemma, or should one just stick with the idea that art is the realm of the unique and the ineffable, that it cannot be categorised, labelled, pigeon-holed, or defined? That this *is* a dilemma, and that there is a widely

3 <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/van/2015/februari/16/de-whipper-snapper-1459971>

4 Robert Hullot-Kentor (2004): „Right Listening and a New Type of Human Being“, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, p. 182.

felt need for an ‘art theory’ capable of throwing some light on this, can be inferred from a gimmick the Rijksmuseum dreamt up a few years ago. According to the yellow stickers prominently displayed everywhere, art is: a) therapeutic, and b) it’s good for you. If the occasional elderly visitor, with memories perhaps of a more leisurely age, could be seen quietly pulling out their hair, the argument coming from the management seems to be: whatever keeps those turnstiles at Schiphol revolving must be good, the tourist numbers keep growing, so what’s the problem? The new director of the *Rijksmuseum*, reacting to a complaint that it’s so busy there in front of the Rembrandts that it’s difficult to see them through the selfie-sticks, is quoted as saying: „Dat lees ik met aandacht. En denk: koop dan zelf een Rembrandt. Een museum is geen stiltezone.“⁵

I would like to explore with you what I think Adorno does to illuminate this dilemma just sketched, which so many people clearly feel when they visit a museum or an art gallery. Though I hasten to add that that is easier said than done, and I’ve already touched on the reason for this: art *and* philosophy, philosophy *and* art. Adorno was a composer, music critic, musicologist, philosopher, sociologist, literature critic, psychologist, university professor, author, all rolled into one, and then I haven’t even mentioned the student movement, the war, the antisemitism studies, his warnings against re-nascent fascism in post-1945 Europe, the Jews. He’s not called „One last Genius“ for nothing.⁶ But the core of the abovementioned dilemma seems to be: one can’t talk seriously about Adorno (here: Adorno on *art*) without contradicting that very intuition I started out with: that art *can’t* be defined, that art and ‘abstract theory’ don’t go together. Whereas every Adorno scholar will tell you the opposite: that Adorno can’t be understood without dwelling on *philosophy*, without dealing at least with some of those philosophical abstractions head-on. In the context of *art*? This is the point at which everyone except for the professional philosophers start checking their e-mails and eyeing the exit, so I’ll confine myself to just two of those supposedly incomprehensible concepts, before getting back to what the consequences of all this could possibly be for our next visit to a museum. The two concepts we need to dwell on are: i) *culture industry*, and ii) *non-identity*.

5 *Het Parool* 21.04.2015.

6 Detlev Claussen (2008): *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*. „... überbeschäftigter Hochschullehrer, Autor und – in der zweiten Hälfte der sechziger Jahre kann man es nicht mehr anders sagen – Medienstar“ (Claussen, p. 370.)



The “culture industry”-chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the one that has become perhaps the most famous. Written during the war, when the Horkheimer group was in exile in California, published in 1947 by Querido here in Amsterdam, this neologism “culture industry” already contains within it that oxymoron which has in the meantime become a global reality, namely that the distinction between commodity production for the *market* and the peculiar process called ‘culture’ - whereby a society passes on from one generation to the next a body of knowledge that becomes part of the individual and collective *identity* -, has more or less disappeared. We find ourselves, according to the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in an age in which ‘instrumental reason’- science, technology, the market - have (has) become so all-encompassing, that everything to do with individual and collective identity has been (and is progressively being further) eroded.

Their argument is actually very simple. Where scientific rationality was initially used to attack religious, superstitious, and mythical dogma in the name of free inquiry, tolerance, and open society, soon enough - or so Horkheimer and Adorno argued - scientific rationality was unleashed against those ethical values that had inspired its use in the first place. What is seen as resulting from the Enlightenment is therefore a person without a conscience, a bean counter, or a bureaucrat, who fits perfectly into a capitalist system whose production process is based purely on profit and loss. As subjectivity is ever less prized, even while unconscious rage at its loss becomes open to greater manipulation by the ‘culture industry,’ society becomes increasingly reduced to what can be mathematically understood and rage is taken out on the other.⁷

„Purely on profit and loss“, as Bronner says here. At one level it means: the *objective* world, in this case the *commercial* side of things has become so all-pervasive that it is impossible *not* to take *this* part of it into account. Or at least: to *start off* with the ‘market’ side of things. That I’m saying this in the city which as it were almost *invented* modern trade and commerce, that the history of the VOC - the first multinational -, the first stock exchange, is preserved just up the road from here, that for an ‘echte Amsterdammer’ ‘market-thinking’ has itself become almost second nature, goes without

7 Stephen Bronner (2005): „Enlightenment Now: Stephen Eric Bronner“ in: *The Brooklyn Rail*, Jan. 2005.

saying. But at the same time: within easy walking distance from here there is *also* the Rembrandthuis, the Spinoza monument, plus some very poignant reminders that this part of Europe was *also* the place in which there's been, over the course of centuries, a mutual standoff between Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism on the one hand, secularisation on the other.⁸ Johan Huizinga - this just a note in passing - in his *Nederland's beschaving* book, from before the war, presents the 'late Rembrandt' almost in 'Adorno-esque' terms: as someone who already *back then* was suffering under his countrymen's 'capitalism':

Rembrandt heeft zijn leven lang de idee nagestreefd om een andere wereld, een andere vorm van leven weer te geven dan die waarin zijn dagelijks bestaan verliep: de burgerlijke samenleving van de Nederlandse Republiek.⁹

(This from a passage in which, for a wider audience, Huizinga seeks to explain why Rembrandt, in Protestant Netherlands - very different from Rubens in Catholic Belgium -, never became, at least during his own lifetime, the truly *representative* figure of the nation.) In other words, the difference between *tauschwert* and *gebrauchswert*, 'use value' and 'exchange value', may be a *terminology* that pervades the work of Adorno (coming, on the face of it, from Marx), but what these notions *denote*, if I understand Huizinga here, was as obvious already for Rembrandt five hundred years ago as it is for today's museum director - say - balancing his advertising budget against the Amsterdam tourist statistics.

This is not the place to go into the debates amongst the specialists on the subtle distinctions to be made between 'materialism' in the sense of Left Hegelians like Lukács or Hauser on the one hand, Adorno, on the other, but no-one who's been working on these things in recent years would deny, I think, that, for Adorno, when he says 'capitalism' or 'culture industry', (a) what he means, in this context, is that the domination of money and power in the art world is all-pervasive (and not just in the *art-world*, needless to say), and (b) that 'authentic' art (for which 'modernism' is too abstract a term) is characterised above all by its bitter struggle *against* 'domination', against such *heteronomy*, against such dependence upon the market, sponsors, publicity, popular taste. The immediate rejoinder to this is of course - I can already hear you formulating it - that this sounds too antithetical, too self-contradictory. If 'everything' is tainted by its 'commodity character',

8 Jonathan Israel didn't start his magisterial *Radical Enlightenment* just around the corner here, as it were, for nothing - I mean: with *Spinoza*.

9 Huizinga: *Nederland's beschaving in de 17e eeuw*, p. 125.

if ‘everything’ is *culture industry*, (is commercialised, debased, dumbed-down, vulgarised, instrumentalised by the advertising industry and now the social media) then *authentic* art - which preoccupied Adorno for most of his adult life - is surely impossible (or at least: difficult to account for); if there still *is* a realm out there which has escaped the deprecations of the market, it surely can’t be located in that romanticism and idealism which Adorno *also* attacked so vehemently. Adorno’s answer to this objection is to argue: such ‘contradictions’ (of the type ‘culture industry here, authentic art there’), are not just principles (or ideas or theories) in the ordinary ‘discursive’ sense at all - the kinds of controversies we all get into, and which we then try to settle by finding some clinching argument in favour of our ‘thesis’. They are not ‘ideas’ *at all*, but rather, *real*. *Real* ‘contradictions’. *Ideas* that are *real*? A reality that manifests itself only indirectly, in *ideas*?

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As I said, we must dwell for a moment on philosophical issues if we want to understand Adorno, so let me say something about that second concept: *non-identity*. I’ll hide behind Albrecht Wellmer for a bit here, who’s such an admirable guide in these things. I quote a few lines from his acceptance speech on the occasion of being awarded the Adorno prize, nine years ago:

The critique of identifying thought, ... of identitary reason, this critique, if one were to put it in a nutshell, has at its core a determined opposition to the kind of thinking that avoids dealing with the concrete particularity of things — of people, of works of art, of complex issues —, in other words: a kind of thinking that avoids dealing with their „non-identity“. It does this by sticking to the kind of terminology usable only for classifying, for sorting everything into conceptual pigeon-holes, for pruning down everything till it can be subordinated to conceptual, technical, or even real-world societal manipulation. This type of thinking, or non-thinking, has, according to Adorno, come to assume an ominously fateful significance in today’s civilization, and it has come to do so because of the way in which a reductive „instrumental“ reason has become dominant in the forms of natural-scientific technical, administrative and economic forms of reasoning – types of reasoning which, according to Adorno, have increasingly come to determine the everyday world as well as people’s self-conceptions and their interpersonal relationships.¹⁰

10 11 Sept. 2006, Paulskirche, Frankfurt.

That is, if one starts off from the objective world, of which the *art* world is after all just a ‘part’, we’re not going to understand this selfsame art world in the least without, in a first step, placing it in the ‘totality’ of „today’s civilization“ as Wellmer says, including some very fundamental considerations on the origins of artistic-mimetic impulses in our species altogether. For me - if I may insert a personal reminiscence here -, coming originally from paleo-anthropology, and then from a psychoanalysis project inspired by Jürgen Habermas, the chapter „Theories on the origin of art“¹¹, in Adorno’s *Ästhetische Theorie*, has been a source of fascination for as long as I can remember. I’ve never understood why anyone who has ever read this could keep repeating the old chestnut that Adorno comes from ‘German Idealism’, or that he obscures the dividing lines between art and science. Just a short quote from this part of the *Ästhetische Theorie*, to indicate that freeing ourselves from ‘instrumental reason’, and appreciating just what the impulses are that motivates us when we ‘experience’ art, go hand in hand:

Art from prior to the Paleolithic has not been preserved. But it is doubtless that art did not begin with ‘works’, whether they were primarily magical or already aesthetic. The cave drawings are stages of a process and in no way an early one. The first images must have been preceded by a mimetic comportment [ästhetische Verhaltensweise] — the assimilation of the self to its other — that does not fully coincide with the superstition of direct magical influence; if in fact no differentiation between magic and mimesis had been prepared over a long period of time, the striking traces of autonomous elaboration in the cave paintings would be inexplicable. But once aesthetic comportment, prior to all objectivation, set itself off from magical practices, however rudimentarily, this distinction has since been carried along as a residue; it is as if the now functionless mimesis, which reaches back into the biological dimension, was vestigially maintained, foreshadowing the maxim that the superstructure is transformed more slowly than the base. In the traces of what has been overtaken by the general course of things, all art bears the suspicious burden of what did not make the grade, the regressive. But aesthetic comportment is not altogether rudimentary. An irrevocable necessity of art and preserved by it, aesthetic comportment contains what has been belligerently excised from civilization and repressed, as well as the human suffering under the loss, a suffering already expressed in the earliest forms of mimesis. This element

11 Bearing in mind that the *Ästhetische Theorie* was never completed, the „Excursus“ part of title can be read as an intention, cut short by the author’s death, to ‘hive off’ everything here that belonged to the realm of anthropology and psychology into a separate publication, as Adorno had done before - e.g. the music theory part of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, or the Heidegger-critical parts of the *Negative Dialektik*.

should not be dismissed as irrational. Art is in its most ancient relics too deeply permeated with rationality.¹²

What springs to mind here, for Adorno scholars, is the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, and what one could call the ‘natural history of Mind’¹³ contained therein, but there’s something else as well. Anyone familiar with the anthropology- or the psychoanalysis literature of the last century will know immediately what it is that Adorno has focussed his attention upon here. Namely: on the clichéd way that everyone seems to ‘know’ that the ancient cave paintings were ‘art’, or ‘naturalistic’, ‘sacred’ or ‘profane’, essentially ‘modern’ or ‘animistic’, ‘religious’ or ‘magical’, or - especially popular nowadays - something supposedly explicable only *neuro-physiologically*.¹⁴ Or perhaps I should say - before you suspect me of summarily dismissing theories that may after all have something going for them - that when I say ‘clichéd’ I’m thinking of those bad habits that Wellmer, following Adorno, calls ‘identitarian thinking’, which is to look up the above terms in the dictionary, and then fondly to think we’ve achieved something by simply ‘subsuming’ such ancient relics under our own predefined - i.e. specifically *modern* - concepts. When we’re talking about ‘art’, we’re not dealing with anything older - historically speaking -, than the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment¹⁵, and which, if the glum reflections of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* are any guide, is now in the process of being replaced by the directly manipulative imagery of the internet and the social media. (And into a branch of the tourist- and film industry¹⁶.)

12 *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 434. (transl. Hullot-Kentor, modified fvg.) Art, in confronting the two extremes paleolithic and modern, assimilating in both what is unassimilable to its own concept, turns the latter into something new, what it had not been until it had gone through this scarifying confrontation with its own ‘non-identity’: an awareness of its own *historicity*.

13 c.f. Brian O’Connor (2013): „Freedom within nature: Adorno on the idea“ in: *The Impact of Idealism II - the legacy of post-Kantian German thought*. Vol. II - *Historical, Social and Political Thought* (ed. Boyle, Nicholas, Liz Disley, and John Walter).

14 National Geographic speaks of ‘symbolic behaviour’, oblivious to the self-contradiction in the term itself. To this day, and most especially in everything to do with paleoanthropology, the *species* names given and the *real* processes going on some time back there in the Paleocene and Pleistocene bear little relation to one another.

15 Arnold Heumakers (2015): *De esthetische revolutie*.

16 Herman Vuijsje: ‘verpretparkisering’. („Straks zijn alle mooie plekken opgesoupeerd“.
NRC Handelsblad, 15 Aug 2015.)

But '(non)identity thinking' isn't just a topic that gets us reflecting about just what it is that is meant when someone claims that Altamira or Lascaux or Blombos or whatever is 'art'. The intuition I started off with - this dilemma that neither starting off with *definitions* nor with what we personally *feel* about art seems to get us very far - can *itself* be characterised with this Adorno notion: namely that the *word* 'art' and whatever the experiences are that we try to subsume under it are 'non-identical' with each other. We're dealing here - to use a rather memorable title from Robert Hullot-Kentor - with 'things beyond resemblance', with a type of experience that can't be nailed down with the 'logic' coming from science and technology.

If this dilemma is indeed as universal as Adorno suggests, where *else* could we look to see how it manifests itself? One way is to consider what it is that Adorno is reacting *against*. That's not so difficult to name: it's the kind of 'coffee-table' art so popular during the sixties and seventies. Art books of the kind that have 'Art Treasures of the World' or 'encyclopedia' or 'mankind' in the title, expensively illustrated, perfect for birthday-presents, in which the choice of material printed between two covers seems inspired by the kind of vulgarised Platonism that Adorno calls 'Subsumptionslogik'. 'Art' is the general concept, and then everything that I can find that even vaguely seems to fit is pumped into that, all the way from paleolithic art to Picasso. The next author would come up with an entirely different content and an entirely different chapter classification, but never mind, here we have it: coffee-table art. It approaches art the way the naturalists of the seventeenth century approached 'nature', with a 'Naturalienkabinet', a collection of artefacts from the most diverse of geological ages, without there being the least awareness - something that came to plague biologists of a later generation - that the *classification* system, a purely formal one, and the *real* history bear next to no relation to one another. One has some label or other - romanticism, classicism, modernism, symbolism, impressionism, expressionism, constructivism, cubismus, surrealism, dadaism, futurism - and then 'fills' this label with material without there being much of an attempt at relating the classificatory concepts back to the objective historical process of which they are a part. If 'late Adorno' dwells so intensely on Kafka, Beckett, on modern music, then the characteristic that seems to him most important, about these works is what he called their 'allergy to the sensuous', their aversion to what one could call travel-cata-

logue -, or coffee-table art. In his lecture course *Ästhetik* (one of those 'Blaue Bände', blue volumes, that the T.W. Adorno archive in Frankfurt - now housed at my old institution, the *Institut für Sozialforschung* - has been diligently publishing for years), he speaks of the increasing resistance, within art *itself*, against what I've just called coffee-table art:

... namely, the increasing resistance, in the defense of its own substantiality and truth, that the art work has had to mount in the face of its violation by commerce, against its transformation into a means of communication and so on. You could counter of course with the question: why should renowned artists, a Picasso, or a Joyce, or a Schönberg, or a Kafka, deign to notice vulgarities perpetrated by the culture industry in the first place? Isn't it demeaning to sink down to their level and become dependent on Mr. Disney, on Technicolor, when what it is that one is engaged in, that one should replicate there the sweet colours and forms with which the money-making crowd tends to operate? But it seems to me that this moment of allergy against sensuous pleasure does very much have a foundation in something substantial. What I intended with this remark on the growing allergy towards the transformation of art into consumer products was not so much to draw attention to the motivation behind this allergy, as with something else, which would otherwise go unnoticed, namely that in this allergy we're dealing with something historical. This allergy, it seems to me, is nothing other than aversion to a certain kind of dishonesty.¹⁷

So the dictionary definition of art doesn't just mislead us in the sense that it blinds us to the *origins* of art, it blinds us just as much to what it is that is characteristic of *modern* art. ('Nonidentity' now not just in the sense of that initial intuition about a 'gap' between the word and our subjective experiences, but 'nonidentity' in a *historical* sense.)

What he elsewhere calls „Rebellion gegen den Schein“, a rebellion against semblance (it comes up several times in the *Ästhetische Theorie*), and which had struck Walter Benjamin already in the work of Baudelaire a generation earlier, expresses itself not so much in a *degouté* in the psychological sense as the impossibility of returning to traditional genres altogether. It's not just that the 'aura' of a Rembrandt or a Van Gogh has a hard time of it against the thousands of mechanical reproductions made of it every day, or that - as Adorno once put it in a letter to Thomas Mann - works of art are turning into 'toys'.¹⁸ Art - here meant in the widest sense of the

17 Theodor W. Adorno: *Ästhetik* (1958/59), p. 227. (transl. fvg.)

18 „... die Kulturgüter, die buchstäblich unerreichbar sind, übernehmen schon beinahe die Funktion des Spielzeugs. (...) Was zurückblieb, scheint im metaphysischen Sinn kaum weniger ein Trümmerfeld als im physischen, beschädigt im Ich, in der Autonomie, in der Spontaneität und oftmals geradezu die Erfüllung dessen, was der abscheuliche

word - is increasingly losing the social function it once had. That was of course one of the central theses of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Jonathan Israel (whose work after all is *also* a kind of dialectic of enlightenment), after the Theo van Gogh murder in 2004, speaks of a ‘Thatcherite attack’, by the political powers that be, on every form of education that isn’t technical, commercial, or ‘useful’:

Daarom meen ik dat het gerechtvaardigd is om de werkelijke schurken, de echte daders van onze huidige multiculturele crisis niet de fundamentalisten te noemen - van wie moeilijk verwacht kan worden dat zij ooit anders gaan denken - maar degenen die in het recente verleden de leiding hebben genomen in die thatcheriaanse aanval, uit naam van nuttige kennis, beleidsmatige bekwaamheid en aanbidding van het marktmechanisme, op de humaniora, de maatschappijleer en de klassieken van de westerse beschaving.¹⁹

If Adorno’s ‘non-identity’ has any applicability at this *historical* level (Jonathan Israel is after all the noted historian of Holland’s role in the European Enlightenment altogether) then in a quite different sense to the one I dealt with above. At this *historical* level, ‘non-identity’ thematises something in the sense of ‘society as a whole’, though this is not meant idealistically.²⁰ Adorno, like so many of the ‘Left’ intellectuals during the Weimar period (something that got snowed under in the ‘Marxism and totality’ debate of the sixties and seventies), had a conception of humanity in which ‘Bildung’, morality, an educational system capable of inculcating respect for peaceful democratic values, went together. Nowadays the tendency is to speak of ‘German Idealism’, and to treat it as a ‘philosophy’ in the Anglo-US meaning of the term, as something separate from society. But ‘universal’ and ‘particular’, if one studies this in Adorno, translated into the terminology that Jonathan Israel uses, becomes a kind of warning: if the humaniora are no longer capable of inculcating a common set of values, when they cease to embody - and transmit - a shared set of memories about the past, then the polis fragments into those ‘parallel societies’, those mutually antagonistic ‘ethno-’, religious-, even gender-identities, that are now

Spengler als das Heraufkommen des neuen ‘Höhlenbewohners’ prophezeite.“ Theodor W. Adorno and Thomas Mann, 2002: *Briefwechsel 1943-1955*, p. 61.

19 Jonathan Israel: „Culturele zelfmoord“ in: Pieter van Os (2005), *Nederland op scherp - Buitelandse beschouwingen over een stuurloos land*, p. 114.

20 "Dialectic of Enlightenment, the first philosophical attempt to chart the world-historical dimensions of totalitarianism, has barely begun to sink in." (Irving Wohlfahrth: „Hibernation: On the tenth Anniversary of Adorno’s Death“, in: *MLN* 94, no. 5, 1979. Reprinted in Delanty, ed, 2004, *Theodor W. Adorno*.)

‘Balkanising’ our world. That is what I understand Jonathan Israel to be warning against in that above paper, and in this it covers pretty much *another* of the layers of meaning in that Adorno notion of ‘non-identity’. (That Jonathan Israel is not alone in his warning against commercialisation and neo-liberalism in the art sector can be gleaned from a recent comment by the French critic Dominique Moisi, who sees the new European populism, the new nationalism and chauvinism, symbolised in nothing less than the recently renovated *Rijksmuseum*.²¹)

For all that, works of art are not political manifesto’s, and if one studies the *Ästhetische Theorie*, it’s pretty clear that the book is not so much about *art* as about *aesthetic experience*. That’s a tricky term, and with that I come to the *last* of the layers of meaning conveyed in that term ‘non-identity’. Anyone who has read/seen/heard a Kafka, a Beckett, a J.M. Coetzee, a Schönberg, Berg, Kentridge (a Matthäus passion) - I mention here only some of my own preferences - comes away with the feeling that our ‘everyday’ intuition of ‘objective’ versus ‘subjective’ has been suspended. George Steiner once wrote a book with the title *Real Presences*, and it expresses that disturbing sense of finding ourselves in a situation in which the terms ‘real’, ‘virtual’, ‘imaginary’ - in their ordinary meaning - have been suspended, and where the usual vocabulary at our disposal for the description of such states of mind seem jaded and outdated. The secondary literature on Adorno is full of titles that seek to pin down a form of experience that can only be characterised *negatively*: it is not religious (i.e. it’s ‘post-metaphysical’, in Habermas’s sense), it is not ‘transcendental’ in the sense of German Idealism, and it is not ‘objective’ in the sense of the natural sciences.²² I can’t really say, after perusing the secondary literature

21 c.f. „Europe’s Nationalist Night Watch“: „On my trip, I visited the Rijksmuseum, which was reopened in 2013, after a decade-long renovation. The previous building, aging and slightly outdated, was a tribute to the universal appeal of the country’s great painters like Rembrandt and Vermeer; it was a perfect celebration of light and family.“ After the renovation, an entirely different symbolism: „... in recent years – during the decade since their spectacular rejection of a treaty establishing an EU constitution – the Dutch have increasingly felt the need to celebrate their past glory in the most traditional manner. They, like other Europeans, are calling upon the past to compensate for the disillusion and frustration of the present and the uncertainty of the future.“
<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/europe-nationalist-culture-by-dominique-moisi-2015-08> accessed 3.09.2015.)

22 c.f. Roger Foster (2007): *Adorno: the recovery of experience*.

again, that I've found anyone who has really succeeded in separating the multiple layers of meaning in that term 'Erfahrung' to be found in Adorno. (Leaving aside here Jürgen Habermas, whose focus at the time was more on methodological than on aesthetic matters.)

'Erfahrung' comes up in *every one* of the more than forty volumes of Adorno's writings - including the posthumously published 'blue' volumes - i.e. many thousands of times. Martin Jay, the leading scholar on the Frankfurt School in the English-speaking world, who has spent a professional lifetime mulling over what that means: the 'dialectical imagination', has this word 'experience' in the title of a book some years back.²³ (For that matter, this holds just as much, if one looks carefully, for a recent book by the editor of the collected works of both Adorno and Walter Benjamin, namely Rolf Tiedemann. „Anschauende Vernunft“ *too*, if one were to translate it into English, would have both 'reason' and 'experience' in the title.²⁴)

One can get at least some idea of where all this is leading by looking briefly at the resonances set up by the terms aesthetic *experience*, aesthetic *sublimation*, and aesthetic *form*. I don't know if anyone has ever put the „Culture Industry“ chapter of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* next to the *Ästhetische Theorie* and the *Negative Dialektik*, and then examined them explicitly with regard to the connotations of these three terms (i.e. doing a bit of 'metaphorology', as this procedure is now called²⁵). The secret of art is that it *sublimates*, rather than that it represses:

The secret of aesthetic sublimation is its representation of fulfilment as a broken promise. The culture industry does not sublimate; it represses.²⁶

And another rather famous line:

Works of art are ascetic and unashamed; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish.²⁷

23 Martin Jay (2004): *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*.

24 Rolf Tiedemann (2014): *Abenteuer anschauende Vernunft - Essay über die Philosophie Goethes*.

25 c.f. Hans Blumenberg (2011): *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. This goes beyond the usual way of framing it as a contrast between 'Erlebnis' and 'Erfahrung'.

26 <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm> accessed 1. Sept 2015.

27 op. cit.

(Marcuse would later popularise the term ‘repressive desublimation’.) In the *Ästhetische Theorie*, written a generation later, this more unabashedly Freudian understanding however (this ‘drive-theoretical’ notion of sublimation from the twenties and thirties²⁸), is contrasted with a much more Kantian set of associations. Here too aesthetic sublimation is conceived of as the ‘negation’ of the raw (and wordless) presence of - in a Fritz Raddatz title from the eighties - eros and death, but now it has distanced itself considerably (something Marcuse never did) from the ‘Feuerbachian’ equivalence of ‘nature’, ‘reality’ and ‘freedom’. If it’s the essence of aesthetic experience that it has left behind it both the ‘kitchen’ and the ‘bedroom’, this is also a distantiation from the more orthodox *Freudianism* of the thirties:

The route to aesthetic autonomy proceeds by way of disinterestedness; the emancipation of art from cuisine or pornography is irrevocable.²⁹

Surprising in this, and I can only touch on it here, is that an analysis of ‘aesthetic sublimation’ in the *Ästhetische Theorie* leads to something which, during the vast expansion of the social sciences since 1945, seems only rarely to have been thematised: namely that the ‘desire for knowledge’, seen *psychologically*, is, *itself* a ‘sublimation’. (Epistemologically, in terms of the philosophy of science of the day, this stood in direct contradiction to the ‘copy theory of truth’.) But sublimation of what? Hans Blumenberg, reconstructing the ‘process of theoretical curiosity’ across the millennia, in a way similar to *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, puts it like this:

... curiosity is an escape from the failures of adulthood: one has ‘researched’ instead of *doing* something, of being *active*... The relationship between curiosity and ‘doing’, ‘acting’, has become perverted ...³⁰

Here too the literal, orthodox Freudian notion of sublimation is first considered and then left behind. Aesthetic experience, I take Adorno to be saying in that quote about paleolithic art, above, is almost hard-wired into the species; we cannot live without ‘identification’, without ‘mirroring’ ourselves in the ‘other’, which not coincidentally since Levinas and De Vries³¹ has once again taken on religious overtones. That is: without constantly

28 c.f. Helmut Dahmer (1973): *Libido und Gesellschaft: Studien über Freud und die Freudsche Linke*.

29 *Ästhetische Theorie*, GS 7, p. 26.

30 Hans Blumenberg (1973): *Der Prozeß der theoretischen Neugierde*, p. 271.

31 Hent de Vries (2005): *Minimal Theologies - Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno & Levinas*.

making and *breaking* such identifications, all the way from that ‘mirror-phase’ of Lacan to the emotional problems which just about all modern families seem to be struggling with today. This *also* is there in Adorno, this *positive* notion of sublimation, going back to what in Hegel falls under ‘Anerkennung’. If Adorno, the empirical person, was to the end of his life a passionate musician, then perhaps we could see in this a reminder that the world ‘as it is’ needs not have the last word, that it ‘makes sense’ only in terms of what it could one day, in a less bellicose and war-torn future, *become*.³² Many years ago, on my first return to Holland since my childhood, I found a dog-eared copy, at a second-hand book stand on the Spui, of the first-ever translation of the *Minima Moralia*, a book that in my own life has also played something of a role. In that copy the previous owner had put a couple of heavy exclamation marks in the margin of the last of the aphorisms contained therein. One the face of it, this is about philosophy. But what I’ve tried to make plausible in this talk is that, if we follow Adorno, art and philosophy don’t make much sense without each other:

Tot slot. Filosofie, zoals ze alleen ten overstaan van de wanhoop nog te verantwoorden is, zou de poging zijn alle dingen zo te beschouwen als ze zich van het standpunt der verlossing presenteren. Kennis heeft geen ander licht dan wat vanuit de verlossing de wereld beschijnt: al het andere gaat op in de reconstructie en blijft een stuk techniek. Er moeten perspectieven geschapen worden waarin de wereld zich verplaatst, vervreemdt, haar scheuren en spleten openbaart, zoals ze eenmaal behoeftig en misvormd in het messiaanse licht zal openliggen. Zonder willekeur en geweld, geheel vanuit het contact met de voorwerpen zulke perspectieven te ontsluiten, daarop alleen komt het het denken aan. Het is het allereenvoudigste, omdat de toestand onafwijsbaar om zulk een kennis roept, ja omdat de voltooide negativiteit, eenmaal geheel onder ogen gezien, zich tot spiegelschrift van haar tegendeel aaneensluit. Maar het is ook het volslagen onmogelijke, omdat het een standplaats vooronderstelt die, zij het ook slechts minimaal, buiten de bankring van het bestaan ligt, terwijl immers alle mogelijke kennis niet alleen eerst aan dat wat is ontworsteld moet worden om bindend te worden, maar juist daardoor zelf ook met dezelfde misvorming en behoeftigheid geslagen is die ze wil ontlopen. Hoe hartstochtelijker het denken zich ter wille van het absolute afsluit van zijn bepaaldheid, des te onbewuster, en daardoor noodlottiger, valt het de wereld ten prooi, Zelfs zijn eigen onmogelijkheid moet het nog ter wille van de mogelijkheid begrijpen. Tegenover de eis die hiermee aan het denken gesteld wordt, is echter de vraag naar de werkelijkheid of onwerkelijkheid der verlossing zelf bijna onverschillig.³³

32 c.f. „Heaven, Eternity, and Beauty: An interview with Max Horkheimer at the time of Theodor W. Adorno’s death“ in: *Contretemps* 1, Sept. 2000.

33 *Minima Moralia*, 1971, transl. Maurits Mok.