
Aura in the Age of Aesthetic Rationality: Adorno's Criticism of Benjamin and the Claim for an "Authentic" Modern Art

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Abstract: This essay focuses on particular aspects of Adorno's criticism of Benjamin's statements, as they mainly appear in the notorious essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Adorno reconsiders the concept of aura and the relationship between artwork, rationality, technique and technology. In order to explicate the background of his criticism, I explore and reconstruct its relevance to cardinal issues in *Aesthetic Theory* and to his ideal conception of a critical and "authentic" modern art. My aim is to demonstrate that divergences in the approaches of the two thinkers constitute not merely an ideological controversy, but a systematic art-theoretical differentiation.

Keywords: Critical Theory; Aura and Reproducibility; Aesthetic Rationality; Technique and Technology; Modern Art.

1. Introduction

In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin notes that "around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art [...but] also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes".¹ Although he ascertains that the work of art has actually always been reproducible, he prophetically –regarding the digital era– observes the intrinsic role of reproduction in particular art-forms, such as photography and film. For the latter, reproduction constitutes, in addition, not only an "external condition" for mass distribution, but an "inherent" presupposition for its production. Benjamin states that this possibility not only causes, but indeed forces mass distribution due to the expenses of film production.² Contrary to Adorno's criticism, Benjamin acknowledges the danger of mass exploitation and ideological manipulation these new technical possibilities might imply. However, as far as it concerns depictive precision and the highlighting of artistic details, Benjamin evaluates positive these technical innovations, expressing his persuasion of the fruitful interplay of art and science in the future. He considers this interplay as a historical analogue to the scientification of art during the Renaissance. Although he notoriously ascertains the decay of aura of authentic artworks of the past through mechanical reproduction and through industrial distribution of their

replicas with various media, he also somehow senses, in the case of new art-forms he analyzes, unforeseen possibilities and the emergence of a new historical era. In this essay, I will focus on particular aspects of Adorno's criticism of Benjamin's statements, as the latter appear in the above mentioned essay and in "Some motifs in Baudelaire". Adorno's main concerns are the notion of aura and the relationship between artwork, rationality, technique and technology. I will relate his criticism to cardinal conceptions, he repeatedly refers to in order to describe the artwork, as content and mimesis. Finally, in order to explicate the background of his criticism, I will explore and reconstruct its relevance to the modernistic movements of the 50s, especially in music, and to his ideal conception of a critical and "authentic" modern art. My aim is to demonstrate that divergences in the approaches of the two thinkers constitute not merely an ideological controversy, but a systematic art-theoretical differentiation; at least for this context, I venture to summarize this differentiation as pertaining to an aesthetic of means and to an aesthetic of content, respectively.

2. Reproduction, aura and aesthetic rationality

Adorno adopts Benjamin's observation as far as it concerns the vast historical background of reproduction in artistic practice. But he goes even further. In *Aesthetic Theory* he claims that even the "objectivation of the cave drawing vis-à-vis what is unmediatedly seen [the original real object] already contains the potential of the technical procedure that effects the separation of what is seen from the subjective act of seeing. Each work, insofar as it is intended for many, is already its own reproduction."³ In his aim to reject –or at least to dialectically moderate– the dichotomization of auratic and technological artwork, it seems here as if Adorno deliberately misreads, or at least separates, Benjamin's statements from their context by using an inept argument. In fact and in a more aptly manner, in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", Benjamin allows beauty of *original*, auratic artworks, which were created before the age of technical reproducibility, to be "intended for many". As he states, "on the basis of its *historical* existence, beauty is an appeal to join those who admired it at an earlier time".⁴ And by referring to Proust's and Valéry's quasi auratic perception in dreams, he associates his own definition of aura as "unique manifestation of a distance", with the

accumulated –through the course of history– gazes of admiration an artwork contains, which is an analogue to the cult-value: “Some people who are fond of secrets flatter themselves that objects retain something of the gaze that has rested on them (The ability, it would seem, of returning the gaze). They believe that monuments and pictures present themselves only beneath the delicate veil which centuries of love and reverence on the part of so many admirers have woven about them”.⁵ Consequently, contra Adorno’s “dialectical critic” (AT, 33), beauty, as accumulated admiration of an artwork by *many* spectators in *different* eras, is intrinsically connected to its authenticity and originality, though “intended for many”. It could here be objected, that the artwork’s admired beauty is not the artwork itself and that the fact of its admiration does not contradict Adorno’s statement about the immanent reproducibility of the artwork towards the object it represents (if it does). However, beauty as *sedimented* admiration presupposes that an artwork has been intended for- and admired by many. Nevertheless, reflections of the kind, pointing to an idea of separation between thingness of the artwork and its aesthetic value, would be more suitable for Analytic Philosophy of Art and quite unfamiliar for Adorno’s thought; according to him, everything that addresses properties of an artwork belongs to its objectivity and reification, having technical and historical-sociological background.

But why does Adorno neglect Benjamin’s above mentioned statements when referring to the archetypal cave drawing? The initial “separation of what is seen from the subjective act of seeing” of the real object, the visual artwork represents, seems to devalue art as object of experience and bearer of truth. Indeed, it places art in the ontological sphere of semblance. But besides anyway salvaging the semblance character of artworks (cf. AT 107-110), Adorno makes here an initial epistemological mistake; the fact that a work of art as such is “intended for many” (als ein vielen Zubestimmtes) does not imply that it also is reproducible. In addition to the notion of aura of the artwork as beholder of accumulated admiration from spectators in the course of history, Benjamin refers to the case of paintings that were kept in altars. That means, they were intended for restricted and *gradual* access, however for many spectators. The authentic original artwork might be intended for many in the context of its perception and evaluation, but that does not necessarily imply that it also is available as *reproduced* object for many, or that this access for many spectators implies reproduction of an initial and, according to Adorno, more original view of an archetypal real object.

It is generally true, that Adorno is not really convinced with Benjamin’s ascertainment of the loss of aura in the age of mechanical reproducibility and, consequently, of aura’s incompatibility with technological progress and modern art. As will be stated below, on the one hand, he tries to salvage aura in the realm of the aesthetic, whereas Benjamin replaces one aspect of aura –the *memoire involontaire*, it evokes– by pointing to the idea of intensities of every day experiences.⁶ As will be stated below, this salvation is of crucial importance due to the correlations Adorno attempts between aura and content of the artwork. Following Benjamin, Guy Hocquenghem and René Schérer point to the sensuous and spiritual effect of

the aura of a cultic object. They consider *generally* the aesthetic phenomenon as a field for aura to unfold. In this field the mythical-metaphorical and the real-materialistic element of aura –the above effects– interact,⁷ thus enabling the artwork’s transcendence of its spatial and corporeal dimensions. Actually, when referring to the relationship between art and nature, Adorno vaguely recalls Benjamin’s conception of aura, especially as far as it concerns general- and, in addition, natural objects:⁸ “authentic artworks... have consistently felt the urge, as if in need of a breath of fresh air, *to step outside of themselves*” (AT, 63, emphasis mine). On the other hand, he is also concerned with aura’s misuse in culture industry: “The phenomenon of aura, what Benjamin described at once nostalgically and critically, has become bad wherever it is instituted and simulated” for instance in the commercial film (AT, 44-45). What Adorno rightly observes and clearly refers to in the *Paralipomena of Aesthetic Theory*, is the phenomenon of “conservation” and “mobilization” of aura for the purpose of creating mood in commercial film. It becomes the “uniform sauce” for culture industry, which seeks to highlight more the image than the content. This, however, proves to be fallacious for the viewer; the concentration on the separated from the artistic content and from the “nexus of the work”, image, especially in the “close-up” of the film, constitutes an inversion (AT, 311); the once sublime appearance of a nearness as distance becomes a contrived nearness of a distance. To relate this peculiarity to Adorno’s sociological considerations, nearness of the image becomes a mimesis of the well individuated subject in the well “administered world”. However, this demonstrated artistic subject may be guided and manipulated by the mechanisms of culture industry. Therefore, it may not be necessarily individuated but alienated, homogenized, thus referring to the masses. Consequently, this kind of *demonstrated* and technically precise individuality in cinematic-photo-graphic depiction constitutes, according to Adorno, false aura, a blank replica of it. Though ascertaining the loss of aura and its replacement with the cinematic image, Benjamin, as mentioned in the introduction, nevertheless evaluates here positively new possibilities for expressive accuracy and sense for psychographic detail through the depictive precision of a new visual art-form, namely photography.

As far as it concerns the perceptive attitudes of the spectator, influenced by Benjamin’s “polar opposites...distraction and concentration”⁹ –a hint to Brecht’s effect of alienation¹⁰– in his writings on art, especially on music, Adorno repeatedly ascertains the gradual decline of the conscious listener with the ability of critique and formal reflection.¹¹ By facing the products of culture industry, the once critical and informed spectator is now being replaced by the consuming individual. However, this also concerns reproduced sublime artworks of the past, which become corporeal available through optical and tactile proximity or through direct access mechanical reproduction enables; according to Benjamin, the spectator is now tempted to make them his ownership. This constitutes a process of disassembly of the once auratic work. It is true, that it is Benjamin who first ascertains “the desire of the contemporary masses to bring things closer spatially and humanly.”¹² Adorno continues Benjamin’s thoughts in the context of his

critique of culture industry. In addition, in *Aesthetic Theory*, on the occasion of his extremely elaborated analysis of the process of aesthetic experience, he points to the danger of self-projection and naïve identification with the artistic content; he therefore proposes distancing from lived perception, movement to the subject, until self-denial, which he summarizes with a paradoxical and emblematic oxymoron: "artistic enthusiasm is art-alien" (AT, 346). However, under the auspices of mechanical reproduction and culture industry, this kind of perceptual self control tends to become a reminiscent of the past.

From the just above mentioned point of view, Adorno's critique on Benjamin's ascertainment of the loss of aura is plausible; aura indeed might continue to survive, however in a wrong way, as replica of the past, attaining a new cult-value in the promotion and idolization of film- and pop stars.¹³ According to Adorno, in the era "of misuse of aesthetic rationality for mass exploitation" through the promotion of optical "copy-realistic" precision, labeled as "camera rationalism" in reproducible art-forms, the verdict against aura "easily becomes the dismissal of qualitatively modern art that distances itself from the logic of familiar things" (AT, 56). Here, the definition of aura as appearance of the artwork's spatial nearness as distance, is being associated by Adorno with the necessary critical distance, modern, not commercial art, should have from the *logic* and irrational rationality of "familiar things". The correlation is precarious and indirect; artworks of qualitative modern art, by distancing themselves from the logic of familiar things, give a promise of seriousness and of not being trivial and commercial. They also evocate an idea of distance as aesthetic prerequisite for their perception and interpretation. However, by correlating this distance with a salvation of aura, which "slips through the wide mesh of [Benjamin's] theory", Adorno forgets that Benjamin clearly introduced the concept of aura as substitute of the cultic value of the once ritualistic, and not autonomous, artwork. That means, he had rather an uncritical attitude of the spectator in mind, who succumbs to the latter's spell. Insofar, distancing of the kind does not guarantee a critical standpoint.¹⁴ Indeed, in the Paralipomena of AT, Adorno insists on this association by forgetting the authoritative power of aura; as he states, Benjamin's aura "touched an inner-aesthetic element": the necessary distance between "aesthetic object" and "observing subject". Such distance is "the primary condition for any closeness to the content of the works" and, foremost, it guarantees the Kantian "concept of lack of interest" (AT, 310) of the aesthetic judgment and art's purposelessness. Nevertheless, aura cannot serve as exclusive criterion for artistic quality and originality, the loss of which points to the products of culture industry and to the mass reproduction and exploitation of the artistic heritage of the past. Despite Brecht's suspicion against the alleged romanticism of Schönberg's atonality and twelve-tone technique, the juxtaposition of song-style and Schönberg's twelve-tone technique –Brecht's and Adorno's favorites respectively– is in fact a juxtaposition of decorative-commercial and critical, technically advanced, modernistic art that embraces

"negative canon" and "spontaneously reacts to the objective situation" (AT, 56; 33-34). The latter, however, appears without the veil of (pseudo-) aura, thus demonstrating the bare process of technical mastering of the material, or, even, by elevating this process to the artwork itself.¹⁵

Based on the correspondence of the 30s between the two thinkers, Richard Wolin points to Adorno's criticism of Benjamin, namely "of proceeding undialectically" in his notorious essay.¹⁶ Adorno returns to this statement in *Aesthetic Theory* claiming that Benjamin's juxtaposition of auratic and mass-reproduced artwork "neglected the dialectic of the two types" (AT, 56). He detects two levels of dialectic, contemporary art (modern, commercial and politically engaged) should embrace in order to remain true,¹⁷ Benjamin failed to acknowledge; the "dialectic of rationalization" and the "dialectic of technique". As far as it concerns the first, according to Adorno, Benjamin failed to acknowledge a positive moment. In the age of art's mechanical reproduction, Benjamin observed in the loss of aura only negative aspects of aesthetic rationalization. In general, rationalization plays a crucial role within Adorno's theory of art. Stemming from primordial cultic practices, the artwork implies in the process of its creation and as reified object an irrational moment, the "mimetic comportment", for which it always remains a refuge (AT, 53); insofar, art's "enchantment, a vestige of magical phase" cannot be "obliterated" (AT, 58). However, in the process of what Max Weber calls disenchantment and rationalization of the world, the archetypal, magical "mimetic comportment" recedes and the artwork absorbs also rational elements. These concern artistic practices and the "mobilization of technique in an opposite direction than does domination", towards the artwork's formal organization, construction and production. That means that, contrary to the human domination on nature, within art the mobilization of rational procedures is not instrumental.¹⁸ Although art remains a refuge for subjectivity and expression, its salvation beyond the isolation of "a natural reserve of irrationalism", as industrial production aims, is of crucial importance according to Adorno, (AT, 203, 336).¹⁹ This is especially the case for modern art. Because indifferent or, even apathetic, isolation, would also imply societal inertia and deprive modern art of its enlightening mission.

The aporia of the artwork remains its fragile state "between regression to literal magic and surrender of the mimetic impulse to thinglike rationality" (AT, 54). This state of oscillation is being reflected in the mutual interplay of mimesis and rationality in the confrontation of artistic subject and object; on the one hand, mimesis remains an inherent moment of artistic expression: as Adorno states, "expression is a priori imitation". However, this mimetic comportment has to deliberate itself from the boundaries of a "rigid aesthetic superego" (AT, 117). Otherwise, this "imprisonment" would cause a self-projection of the artistic subject into the artistic object. Adorno categorically rejects this possibility, among others when he criticizes the psychoanalytic theory of art and the limitations of artistic intention towards the formation of the artwork (cf. AT, 8; 150). In other words, the subject with his inherently mimetic comportment has to recede. On the other hand, the inherently subjective

mimetic comportment survives in the nevertheless rationalized, through the “process of formalization” (AT, 51), artistic object, paradoxically only in the case of *autonomous* artworks; it appears now as auto-mimesis, as the artworks’ obligatory “semblance to themselves” and not to an external object they would represent or imitate. Adorno does not fully explicate this mysterious transition from mimesis to auto-mimesis, or at least, the reason for his insistence on this notion; he could just operate with the concept of autonomy of artworks. However, both mimesis and auto-mimesis point to a close relationship, to an unmediated effect between external and internal elements, respectively. Semblance to themselves becomes their constitutional law and the close relationship of their elements appears now as meaningful and effective construction, as coherence. This also points to a moment of *rationality* in the “technical procedures” used (AT, 43; 104). Thus, the mimetic comportment of the artistic subject is being moderated, and, insofar rationalized in the process of construction of the artistic object, whereas the objective constructive, and, insofar, rational moment of the artistic object attains a mimetic element in the form of auto-mimesis. If we relate these moments of rationalization and mimesis, inherent in the artwork, to the concept, that triggered controversy between the two thinkers through its treatment in the *Reproduction-essay* (and not in the “*Little History of Photography*”), namely aura, it becomes evident that Adorno tried to rationalize even the latter. He did it by associating aura with the process of the artwork’s formation, namely with the *traces* of artistic craftsmanship, which give an instantaneous but substantial impression to the connoisseur: “*métier*, which appears as breath –the aura of artworks...is the memory of the hand that, tenderly, almost caressingly, passed over the contours of the work and, by articulating them, also mollified them” (AT, 214). Contrary to Benjamin, Adorno’s concept of aura refers not to a vague and fluent area between subject and object; aura is being interiorized, and associated with the artwork’s “content” and objective language (AT, 45; 275). His efforts to objectify aura, thus making it suitable for the artwork of modernity –which has to retain it as value– become evident in its association with “the nexus of its elements” and technique, which underpins this nexus: “Precisely this constituent of art...is what in the artwork escapes its factual reality, what, fleeting and elusive...can nevertheless be objectivated in the form of artistic technique” (AT, 274). Elsewhere, the “transcendence” of the artworks’ factuality, “the breath that surrounds them”, is being highlighted as an effect of the “consistency of their elaboration” (AT, 129). In another context “nexus”, “consistency” and aura’s objectivity become more concrete by the latter’s definition as “uninterrupted sympathy of the [artwork’s] parts with the whole.”²⁰ This organic relationship realizes Adorno’s “postulated principle of the working out of the form”,²¹ thus demonstrating an “internal law”.²² Consequently, according to Adorno’s work-centered- and work-production-aesthetic, there is a relationship between rationality, rationalized mimesis, coherence and aura. On the contrary, Benjamin’s concept of aura remains per definition an external

characteristic and impression of the artwork towards the spectator, thus “pertaining to the medium of perception”.²³ Therefore, he associates aura with a visual communication between artistic object and spectator; there is an “expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze”. Thus, “to perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return”.²⁴ According to Benjamin, this expectation concerns as well natural objects and artworks. To conclude, Adorno’s dialectical and, insofar, positive evaluation of Benjamin’s aesthetic rationality, appearing with the loss of aura, implies the latter’s redemption (not as “false” in the products of culture industry), technicalization and integration into the artwork. Therefore, as mentioned above, its salvation is of crucial importance, let alone that he makes associations between breath (meaning, aura), surrounding the artwork, and truth-content.

On a societal level, the positive evaluation of aesthetic rationality is being juxtaposed to the general process of rationalization supported by instrumental reason. By acknowledging the absurdity and “faulty irrationality of the rational world”, appearing particularly in the exploitation of the means in capitalistic society, he is able to juxtapose art’s inner rationality to this prevalent societal irrationality of the “overadministered world” (AT, 53; 54). The analogy is obvious: the former exploits its means and succeeds as product, as made, whereas the latter causes, through irrational exploitation of the means, societal repression. Here, “rationality” and thus its vehicle, the artwork, stand for societal justice. Actually, *this* utopic constellation, should society imitate; artworks succeed as constructs and reconcile their elements, whereas the elements of (societal) reality are irreconcilable.²⁵ Finally, the dialectical structure of art’s irrationality, expressed through the mimetic element, becomes evident in art’s enlightening mission. This is the way to understand Adorno’s statement that “emancipated from its claim to reality, the enchantment is itself a part of enlightenment: its semblance disenchant the disenchanted [and rational] world” (AT, 58). To continue Adorno’s thoughts and relate them to his scattered statements, art’s “vestige of its magical phase” constitutes an alternative approach to the rationalized world; while the latter cannot but find irrational solutions entailing societal repression, through the naïveté of its irrational enchantment art plays an enlightening role.²⁶ Its rebellion against societal “rationality, which, in the relation of means and ends, forgets the ends and fetishizes the means as an end in itself”, “unmasks [this form of rationality] in the principle of reason”. It unmasks namely its contradictory structure and absurdity. What art can alternatively suggest is the rejection of instrumental rationality in bringing “to light [the naïveté of] what is infantile in the ideal of being grown up” (AT, 43).

Apart from Adorno’s general statements on the role of rationality in art, his insistence on the positive aspects of aesthetic rationality indicates the latter’s role in modernity. He associates aesthetic rationality with “the modern as desideratum”. In particular, rationality concerns the handling of the artistic material, it is “the necessity of going to the extreme” with it. It is not a “pseudoscientific competition with the [prevalent] rationalization of the demystified world”, but an extreme exploitation, control

and determination of artistic means, which can now perform what the obsolete traditional "can no longer fulfill" (AT, 35). Therefore, for an advocate of radical modernism and opponent of any post-romantic expressivity, pseudo-aura bears an illusory moment, and, insofar as aesthetic regression, which constitutes an anathema for Adorno. This becomes even more evident in the sensual pseudo-expressiveness of the products of culture industry, like popular music.

The rational moment emerges within the modern artwork in the "principle of construction" (AT, 56-58). Following Benjamin, Adorno considers montage, as "the single technique that goes beyond camera rationalism". But it still deals with elements of reality by transferring "their intention or, at best," by awakening their "latent language". It would be beyond the scope of this essay to explore Adorno's axiological preoccupation with montage, becoming evident, once again, in his writings on music. To make just a hint, it constitutes one of his main points of criticism of the music of Stravinsky. What perhaps links that criticism with his general aesthetic predilections is that he observes in musical montage the lack of syntax, in other words, of coherence, which he detects in Stravinsky's antipode, Arnold Schönberg. In contrast, construction requires a more active involvement of the creator. It is the modern analogue to the principle of composition of the renaissance (AT, 56). It "tears the elements of reality of their primary context" in order to force them to create a new imposed "unity". This unity acquires an element of normativity, thus of general validity: through it art "attains what is overarchingly binding, or if one will, universal." Thus, it bestows to the artwork the vain promise of escaping from its immanent nominalism. Adorno doesn't explicate the way this happens. To continue his thoughts, it is perhaps the eidetic normativity of the reified form which gives the above mentioned promise. Nonetheless, authentic artworks remain unique.

Paradigmatic for the positive aspect of aesthetic rationality becomes radical modern art, especially the music of the so called, Second Viennese School. Working-out of the musical form²⁷ and the new introduced technique of composing with twelve tones, provided the works with inner coherence. Since Schönberg introduced this new method, he abdicated himself from the tonal legacy of the classic-romantic era. His new method was a rational confrontation with the *problem* of expanding and controlling the musical material, and mastering the form. This method could now perform what the traditional could "no longer fulfill". However, when Adorno returns to the problem of rationality within modern art in *Aesthetic Theory*, he has not only musical Expressionism and Schönberg's twelve-tone technique in mind. Meanwhile, he has experienced the evolution of the so called, New Music. His statements in *Aesthetic Theory* and, foremost, in his *Writings on Music*, oscillate between approval and rejection; on the one hand he is totally aware of the importance of rationalization for modern art and music; on the other hand, as will be stated in the next section, he diagnoses the danger of a total rationalization of the process of artistic creation. What he definitely knows is that rationality became the *modus operandi* for serial composers of the avant-garde of the 50s. Stockhausen's ideal of the

"purity of the work" could only be achieved through rational preselection and preformation of the material.²⁸ The moment of rationalization is evident; a "thoroughly organized" composition was in the era of total serialism a product of calculation. According to Adorno's theory of art, the opposition of this radical rational creative practice to artistic expressivity is obvious; as mentioned above, he considers expression primarily a mimetic comportment of the subject towards its own feelings and intentions. On the contrary, avant-garde composers displayed an allergy towards the obsolescence of expression.²⁹ Indeed, in a letter to Luigi Nono from 20.03.1952, Karlheinz Stockhausen stressed that he tried to be "impersonal ... inhuman" during composing.³⁰

3. Technique, technology and "art in industrial age"

Though ascertaining the decay of aura through mechanical reproduction and though being skeptical regarding the function of the reproduced artwork in culture industry, from an art-theoretical point of view, Benjamin acknowledges that technology opens new paths. As he states, the sense for "hidden details" of the lens brings a "deepening of apperception" and highlights previously "unattainable aspects of the original".³¹ On the other hand, he is concerned about the sociological and political misuse of technology in the 30s. He explicitly quotes Marinetti's manifesto and is totally aware of the danger of mobilization and aestheticization of technology in the war.³² And although he disqualifies Aldous Huxley's considerations on the role of technology within press, artistic production and reproduction as being "not progressive", he explicitly quotes them in an extended footnote: "Advances in technology... have led... to vulgarity". And he continues: "The consumption of reading—and seeing—matter has outstripped the *natural* production of gifted writers and draughtsmen".³³ Therefore, as far as it concerns the "dialectic of technique," Adorno's criticism of Benjamin of proceeding "undialectically" is inaccurate. The two thinkers seem to focus on different aspects by expressing their doubts on the role of technology within art and society. Benjamin's concerns are primarily political and sociological. Adorno's concerns are partly sociological in considering the effect of "the most advanced procedures of material production" however, as far as "they radiate out into areas of life far removed from them" (AT, 34). These areas are the aesthetic of modernistic art, which aims to a sharp and accurate construction and technical progress. At the same time, his concerns also point towards an axiological and ideological disapproval of culture industry, supported by mechanical reproduction. Adorno's critique unveils an elitistic attitude towards the facts, highlighted in Benjamin's and Huxley's above mentioned statements; according to the two thinkers, the growth of population and, consequently the increased needs for education, information, consumption and entertainment caused collateral damages as is the decline of the quality of art through mechanical reproduction and through dissemination of "reading—and seeing—matter".³⁴ Adorno considers mechanical reproduction as part of industrial production. Applied to the sphere of art, the conditions of production of high industrialism imply

procedures of mechanical reproduction. Therefore, mechanical reproduction becomes for Adorno an aesthetic-ideological anathema. This might be the reason for him for not approaching, let alone, accepting this new era with Benjamin's soberness. Indeed, according to Adorno, industrial production influences negatively artistic production of "true modern art"; because "the shaft [modern] art directs at society is itself social...determined by the conflict with the conditions of production". In order to remain autonomous phenomenon and *fait social*, modern art has actually to react dialectically to industrial production and to the prevalent *Zeitgeist* of progress. Its dialectical societal consciousness (and Adorno's approach) appears externally as a "determinate negation" of these conditions, meaning "a set of prohibitions" which serves as "negative canon". However, internally or "inner-aesthetically", the *need* for *progress* inscribed in procedures of industrial production, also implies "the exclusion of exhausted and obsolete procedures" (AT, 33-34). As far as it concerns their critical standpoint to industrial *mass* production, "authentic modern works" react once again dialectically; procedures of industrial mass production on the one hand "radiate" negatively as "*reduction* of the material tolerated", free of the abundance of the *repetitive* ornamental and, on the other hand, positively, as precise construction. As example Adorno mentions Paul Klee (AT, 34).

Advanced *technique* offers challenges to different art-forms, especially to music. As mentioned above, a proponent of New Music, ideally introduced by the expressionistic movement, Adorno considers the advanced *state of the material*, which dialectically absorbs tradition and at the same time improves and resolves its deficits, as indicator of truth-content of an artwork, the lack of which, according to him, emerges as *technical* failure. Therefore, he highlights the difference between advanced "artistic" technique and adaptation to industrial technology: "Artistic technique is no cozy adaptation to an age that with foolish zeal labels itself technological, as if productive forces alone determined its structure, regardless of the relations of production that hold the former in check" (AT, 59). The crucial diptych, technique-technology is being indirectly assigned with another diptych, the properties activity-passivity. Consequently, "cozy adaptation" to technology means passivity, whereas elaborated technique, activity of the *creating* subject: "When fully developed, technique establishes the primacy in art of *making*, in contradistinction to a *receptivity* of production, however that is conceived" (AT, 60, emphasis mine). As mentioned above, structural bearers of this diptych become construction and montage. Here lies the crux of Adorno's negative evaluation of technology and his criticism of Benjamin's notorious essay: the salvation of the conscious (artistic) subject with the ability of *ποιεῖν*.

There is an additional reason for Adorno's distinction between advanced technique and technology and for his emphasis on the former. Thus associated, artistic technique plays a crucial role in the formation of the work and for its understanding. Contrary to the exteriority of technology, technique is being correlated by Adorno with the content of the artwork. Since content remains ineffable and "something not made, technique does not circum-

scribe art as a whole". As reified, it becomes its bearer: "it is exclusively from its concretion that the content can be extrapolated". Consequently, there is an indispensable reciprocity between technique and content and, as he states, any "abstraction" towards the "supratechnical" is ideological (AT 213). Given Adorno's work-centered aesthetic theory, according to which any objective judgments on art have to face the artwork's objectivity as opposed to Kant's objective subjectivism (cf. AT, 163-164), technique, as objective and inherent moment, "leads reflection to the interior of the works". Advanced technique implies advanced state of artistic material. The latter becomes indicator of truth-content, defined among others by Adorno as historically "correct consciousness" (AT, 191).³⁵ Thus associated, technique enables the formation of aesthetic criteria; it "authorizes judgment in a region that does not make judgments". This region is the ultimate level of aesthetic experience, where the enigmatic character of the artwork, its "Fragegestalt", appears. Technique becomes the latter's "definable figure" (AT, 213). Since associated with making, technique's limitation lies in art's tension to "represent...the repressed unmade" (AT, 60). Should the latter constitute a primary need for artistic expression and/or an amateurish artistic intention? Adorno doubts on the latter's significance by criticizing, as mentioned above, the psychoanalytic theory of art. Insofar, intentions if reified as *unmade* and *not thoroughly formalized*, could appear as artless, amateurish failure and as technique's "limitation".

Adorno's distinction between technique and technology could be correlated to his observations in the essay "The Aging of New Music". Originally a radio-lecture of 1954, this essay comprises Adorno's skepticism about the evolution of New Music, as demonstrated in the avant-garde movements of the 50s. His concerns are as well aesthetic, music-theoretical and ideological. As far as it concerns the aesthetic dimension, although generally praising, as mentioned in section *ii*), aesthetic rationality in modern art, he observed in the evolution of avant-garde music its limits. The reason was the extreme technicalization of the two prevalent trends, serialism and electronic music. Total serialism in the static "pointillistic music" was based on meticulous preselection and calculation of the material. In the introduced electronic music, musical material was being deconstructed, altered and analyzed to its primary elements. Adorno considered compositions of this era as "Materialkompositionen". However, in this new trend, he diagnosed an "infatuation with the material". The new technical procedures lead to the intended control of an "integrally rationalized music", thus to "total rationalization".³⁶ This was the consequence –actually the side effect– of the desired, even from Adorno, aesthetic rationality. And it would perhaps be not hyperbolic to claim that such an evolution reminds dialectically the irrationality of the over-administered world which fetishizes the means, in this case the musical material, as an end. Because, as he states, "infatuation with material" or "material fetishism" also implied irrational, almost superstitious, belief in its potentiality.³⁷ On an aesthetic-ideological level and by reminding Adorno's above mentioned distinction, surrender to total technicalization, based on a *system*, means again passivity; the composer tends to act as a compiler of material, assigning gradually

its role to the performer. Thus, technique reached a vanishing point by acquiring the overwhelming, generating power of technology, repressing the creativity of the subject (producer), who handled the latter; systems of calculative composition turned to systems of *production*. His reference to the "pseudoscientific competition with the rationalization of the demystified world" (AT, 35) in art, addresses creative practices of the avant-garde.

As far as it concerns the music-theoretical aspect, by the end of the 50s rationalization and materialization of the compositional process caused, according to Adorno, the collapse of musical syntax, based on coherence.³⁸ Traditionally, the latter was supported by the relationship between musical structures and by the normativity of their temporal succession, analogously to language. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno makes a strict correlation between temporal succession and content: "[The music's] content [Inhalt] is in any case what occurs –partial events, motifs, themes, and their elaboration: changing situations. Content is not external to musical time but essential to it, as time is essential to content; content is everything that transpires in time" (AT, 147-148). Though considering music an intentionless language, this correlation assigned to music a syntactical meaning.³⁹ Musical time, thus defined, is irreversible. But if the new technique undermined the normativity of temporal succession of musical events, thus, it didn't any more support a stable content, as defined by Adorno above. This becomes evident if we take into consideration the variable, interchangeable or even not occurring formal parts of a musical work based on total serialism and, foremost, on aleatorism. Despite the common English translation, it could here be objected that Adorno doesn't anyway have the unmade *Gehalt* but the materialistic *Inhalt* in mind. In that way, there could be *Gehalt* without stable *Inhalt* in avant-garde Music, so in aleatorism. It seems that Adorno doesn't have the theoretical tools to handle this possibility, namely beyond a normative concept of musical work. Finally, on an ideological level, avant-garde, which became the prevalent trend in music in the 50s, supported by a periodical venue –Darmstadt, led to a contradictory and unexpected ideological situation: to the institutionalization of an aesthetic movement as a school and, consequently, to the totalitarianism of its ideals.⁴⁰ If "qualitatively modern art that distances itself from the logic of familiar things" should offer resistance to tradition and to the system, the evolution of avant-garde was a failure. Adorno experienced in the New Music of the 50s a decline of its "critical impulse"; in the static constructions of total serialism a loss of "tension";⁴¹ thus elements of "conformism";⁴² finally, the decay of the initial ideal of freedom. Therefore, he diagnosed "The Aging of New Music".

Although mainly approaching the problem of reproduction in traditional art-forms, Adorno also briefly touches reproduction in film. He returns to the problem of art's "cozy adaptation to technology" or "absorption of industrial processes" by changing the above mentioned diptych, activity-passivity, to internal-"external": "whenever autonomous art has seriously set out to absorb industrial processes, they have remained external to it. Mass reproduction has in no way become its immanent law of form [...]. Even in film, industrial and aesthetic-craftsmanlike

elements diverge under socioeconomic pressure" (AT, 217). Here, a particular application of technology, namely industrial mass-reproduction, becomes the crux for Adorno's criticism. The hidden starting point is Benjamin's statement that mass reproduction is an "inherent" structural factor for the *production* (creation) and *completion* of a film.⁴³ Adorno makes in addition an abrupt transition from the art-theoretical to the ideological level; the socioeconomic pressure does not change the fact of the absorption of technological innovations for the *formation* of the film *work*. Rather, it changes its character, artistic value and distribution. However, could the film-line constitute an absorption of "industrial processes", namely of the assembly-line? Or is the gap between them insurmountable since in the former dominates aesthetic pleasure and in the latter professional knowledge?⁴⁴ To continue Fues's correlation, the gap between them points to Kant's distinction between free- and mercenary art, based on the criteria of freedom and labor respectively.⁴⁵ Contrary to Benjamin and by insisting on the diptych external- internal, Adorno also approaches negatively the scientific aspect of technology's absorption: "As was not infrequently the case in modern movements after World War II, whenever aesthetic technology strove for the scientization of art rather than technical innovation, art was dazzled and went astray" (AT, 59). He also refers explicitly to the difference between "machine art as pseudomorphism" –perhaps a hint to Futurism and to musique concrete of the 50s– and to the "avoidance of industrial thematic material in authentic modern works" (AT, 34). According to him, technology only remains external to "authentic modern works" and its application a superficial transient trend. He insists on the, actually obsolete, ideal of an art with inner formal-syntactical coherence, according to him, "machine art" cannot create and demonstrate: "If technique strives for industrialization as its vanishing point, it does so at the cost of the immanent elaboration of the work and thus at the cost of technique itself", from which content "can be extrapolated" (AT, 217, 213). However, in the case of film, to which Benjamin consistently refers, it is not clear if the distinction between technological aspects and artistic content is possible. Like music, film is a temporal art- form and its content also "transpires" in different levels of time; in the captured narrative time and in the real time of its projection, where technology becomes indispensable. What Adorno does not want to acknowledge is that particularly in film technology becomes the bearer of technique, from which content –according to Adorno, the most important aesthetic entity– "can be extrapolated". An aesthetic entity beyond the technological aspect of film remains the not decisive and epigrammatic *idea* of an artwork (AT, 346). Actually, Adorno prefers explicitly to refer to the interplay of technique and content in other art forms. As mentioned in section *ii*), he considers the cardinal technical principle of film, montage, inferior to the modernistic principle of construction. Indeed, Benjamin does not provide many arguments in this context. However, the juxtaposition internal-external in reproduction's function is clear when he refers to the *process* of *creation*, i.e. *production* of a film-*work* as opposed to the reproduction of a *completed* visual work.

In his aim to put forward his strongest argument against art's absorption of industrial processes, assisted

by technology, Adorno first associates technique, *métier* and craft, considering these notions as synonyms. The question about the role of art in industrial age is therefore the reflection on the grade of its “Technisierung” and “on the relation of artworks to purposefulness”. Artworks, states Adorno, “are defined by technique as something that is purposeful in itself”. He does not explicate this kind of purposefulness, but judging from his emphasis on technical elaboration of the artwork, we may conclude that it is the consistency of construction toward formal completion, what he means. Adorno adopts Kant’s idea of artworks as something purposeful in and of itself with inner teleology (AT, 109). Therefore, “technical forces have no value in themselves” but “in relation to their purpose in the work” (AT, 218), acting as the aristotelian *causa finalis*. However, if art absorbs passively technological innovation for the sake of innovation, the latter will remain purposeless “in and of itself” and not “the immanent law of form”. Adorno does not accept the technological artwork. He goes so far in considering Berlioz’s innovations in orchestration –“a pendant to early world fairs”– as indicating “lack of real compositional elaboration”: “the technological artwork is by no means a priori more consistent than that which, in response to industrialization, turns inward” (AT, 218). In addition, contrary to functional objects and commodities, artworks should remain purposeless. Consequently, “in the process of becoming increasingly technical, which irrevocably binds them to functional forms, artworks come into contradiction with their purposelessness” (AT, 217), tending to thingness: “art that is simply a thing is an oxymoron” (AT, 68). The danger of art’s becoming craftsmanship was also one of his main considerations when he diagnosed the aging of New Music. Finally, in the *Paralipomena* of the *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno makes his arguments crystal clear by relating purpose of the technological artwork to function and instrumentalization: “the function of art in the totally functional world is its functionlessness”, the “opposition” to any “instrumentalization” (AT, 320). According to Adorno, Benjamin’s mistake is that though having touched the “inner-aesthetic element” of the Kantian concept of absence of interest in the “aesthetic comportment” for the definition of aura, he “declared it invalid for the contemporary age of mechanical reproducibility” (AT, 310).

Adorno’s negative suggestion on the dilemmatic question whether and how art is possible and “relevant in today’s world” (of the 60s), does not point to a “utilization of available technical means”, as Benjamin does. He proposes a turning inward, meaning an extreme modernistic tension to *apophysis* and mournful introspection. Thus, art could “speak of the most extreme horror through silence” until death, which Adorno ascertains in the hermetic poems of Paul Celan; they express “the language of the lifeless” and “inorganic”, “that of the dead speaking of stones and stars” (AT, 322). This was perhaps, according to Adorno, the only path for “authentic modern works” in the late 60s. Because, “in the face of the threatened transformation into barbarism, it is better for art to come to a silent rather than to desert to the enemy”. (AT, 320).

4. Postscript

Apart from his concerns on political mass exploitation of mechanical reproduction and the decay of aura, Benjamin’s positive evaluation of the revolutionary interplay of art and science as related to technological progress, reveals an intuitive and forward-thinking evaluation of the challenges of his time. Beyond photography and film, mechanical reproduction indeed offered new possibilities for hybridization of traditional art-forms and for the emergence of new. In so far, the acceptance of mechanical reproduction, free of its ideological implications, pertains to an art-theoretical consideration towards the theory of technical means, indeed the theory of media. At this point, Benjamin focuses on how art can continue to exist in (post) industrial age, while Adorno’s criticism and approach focuses on what art should mean in order to retain its dignity. However, art may fail to retain the latter, thus becoming “permeated by the shame...in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation”, as Celan’s hermetic poetry (AT, 322). Therefore, Adorno makes finally the above negative suggestion. Nevertheless, as we know from his considerations on the art-form he was most acquainted with and *Aesthetic Theory* primarily addresses, namely music, his theoretical tools end in the zenith of modernism of the 60s. And as he states at the beginning of the draft introduction, traditional aesthetics and contemporary art of his time were irreconcilable.

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Notes

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007) 219-220.

² Ibidem, 244.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum Press, 2002) 33. Subsequent references to *Aesthetic Theory* (hereafter, AT) are given in the main text.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", *Illuminations*, 198.

⁵ Ibidem, 188.

⁶ Cf. Guy Hocquenghem and René Schérer, "Formen und Metamorphosen der Aura", in *Das Schwinden der Sinne*, eds. Dietmar Kamper/Christoph Wulf (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1984) 83.

⁷ Ibidem, 76.

⁸ See, Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 186; "The Work of Art...", 222-223.

⁹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art...", 239.

¹⁰ Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994) 190.

¹¹ Cf. *Philosophy of New Music*.

¹² Benjamin, "The Work of Art...", 222.

¹³ Benjamin mentions the "response of film to the shriveling of aura with an artificial built-up of the 'personality' outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of a commodity", see "The Work of Art...", 231.

¹⁴ Osamu Nomura points in addition to the danger of authority, aura evocates. Therefore, it undermines any critical "distancing" from cultic behavior. To continue his argument, the authority of the auratic object may lead once again to neo-cultism towards objects, this time of culture industry. Insofar, as Nomura states, is Adorno's statement not dialectical enough, "Der Begriff der Aura bei Benjamin and Adorno", in *Global Benjamin*, vol. I: *Internationaler Walter-Benjamin-Kongreß 1992*, eds. Klaus Garber & Ludger Rehm (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1999) 404. In the context of culture industry and for any cultic and irrational attitudes towards its functional objects and commodities, the appropriate notion/terminus operandi becomes fetish(ization), Adorno differentiated refers to. Insofar again, false aura leads to fetishization of the object.

¹⁵ By composing his work *Kreuzspiel* in 1951, Karlheinz Stockhausen admitted that he wanted to "experience the creation of music", cf. "Situation des Handwerks (Kriterien der punktuellen Musik)", *Texte zur elektronischen und instrumentalen Musik*, vol. 1 (DuMont Buchverlag: Köln, 1988) 22, translation mine, see also below.

¹⁶ Wolin, 191.

¹⁷ It is evident that only radical modern art fulfills Adorno's aesthetic postulations.

¹⁸ See Donald A. Burke, "Adorno's Aesthetic Rationality: On the Dialectic of Natural and Artistic Beauty", in *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, ed. Andrew Biro (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011) 177-178.

¹⁹ Cf. Peter Bürger, "Das Altern der Moderne", in *Adorno Konferenz 1983*, eds. L. v. Friedeburg & J. Habermas (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1983) 184.

²⁰ Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans Anne Mitchell & Wesley Blomster (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980) 125; see also *Aesthetic Theory*, 214.

²¹ Bürger, 180.

²² Gerhard Richter, "Adorno and the Excessive Politics of Aura", in *Benjamin's Blind Spot: Benjamin and the Premature Death of Aura*, ed. Lise Patt (The Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2001) 31-32. Cf. also Nomura, 26-32.

²³ Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura", *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008) 342.

²⁴ Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 188.²⁵ Cf. AT, 168; Albrecht Wellmer, "Wahrheit, Schein, Versöhnung. Adornos ästhetische Rettung der Modernität", in *Adorno-Konferenz 1983*, eds. Ludwig von Friedeburg and Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1983) 145; Ilias Giannopoulos, "Precarious Autarky: Adorno on Art and Solipsism", *Aisthema International Journal*, vol. VI/1 (2019) 67.

²⁶ According to Adorno, naïveté plays a crucial role within the aesthetic domain. It constitutes a subjective virtue, interacting with knowledge and has to remain intact for an appropriate appreciation of an artwork. In the process of the multilayered aesthetic experience, as analyzed by him, it constitutes a subjective desideratum: "naïveté is the goal, not the origin" (AT, 338). It presupposes openness and receptivity of the experiencing subject, thus letting himself become enchanted by the artwork.

²⁷ Cf. Bürger, 180.

²⁸ Christoph von Blumröder, *Die Grundlegung der Musik Karlheinz Stockhausens*, Beihefte zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft vol. XXXII (Franz Steiner: Stuttgart, 1993) 41.

²⁹ See, Adorno, "The Aging of New Music", *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, ed. Richard Leppert (University of California Press: London, 2002) 191.

³⁰ Quoted after *Im Zenit der Moderne*, eds. Gianmario Borio & Hermann Danuser (Rombach: Freiburg, 1997) 304, translation mine.

³¹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art...", 235; 220.

³² Ibidem, 241-42.

³³ Ibidem, 247-48, emphasis mine.

³⁴ Adorno also approaches this problem by introducing the notion of the "semi-classical" music in the critique of culture industry; it refers to standardized popular repertory of western art music, being promoted by recording companies and the artistic programming of concert halls, which "institutionalize" art. These actions aim to profit, a fact he early realized. As far as it concerns the dissemination of "reading-and seeing-matter" in the context of the increased needs for education of wider parts of population, Adorno introduces the theory of half-education.

³⁵ Cf. Luzia Sziborsky, *Rettung des Hoffnungslosen* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994) 25.

³⁶ Adorno, "The Aging of New Music", 189-191.

³⁷ Peter Bürger observes here an additional danger for an aging of modern art: the immanent historical limitations of the material itself. Therefore, the modern artist feels the urge to abdicate himself from the exclusivity of one material. According to Bürger, Adorno does not acknowledge this urge; whereas he repeatedly and explicitly points to the historicity of musical material, in which the development of the complete society is being reflected, he considers only one as representative and true for an era, so in the notorious juxtaposition of Schönberg and Stravinsky in *Philosophy of New Music*.

³⁸ Adorno, "The Aging of New Music", 191.

³⁹ See Adorno, "Kriterien der neuen Musik". *Klangfiguren: Musikalische Schriften I. Gesammelte Schriften 16* ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1997) 221-222.

⁴⁰ In this era in Continental Europe, whoever didn't follow the aesthetic ideals of Avant-garde became an outsider.

⁴¹ Bürger, 181.

⁴² Ibidem, 183.

⁴³ Benjamin, "The Work of Art...", 244.

⁴⁴ Wolfram Malte Fues, "Reproduktion und Simulation: Walter Benjamins Kunstwerk-Aufsatz und die Ästhetik der Postmoderne", in *Global Benjamin*, vol. I: *Internationaler Walter-Benjamin-Kongreß 1992*, eds. Klaus Garber & Ludger Rehm (Fink Verlag: Munich, 1999) 647.

⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987) 171.