



Aesthetic Unity

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Despite Adorno's criticism of straightforward reconciliation in the sphere of art, he does not abandon the idea of the artwork's exemplary unity and the way it points to the possibility of reconciliation. He argues that the artwork's reconciliatory power is to be found in its achievement of unity. But this unity is not the integrative harmony advocated by traditional aesthetics, like in the conception of beauty as unity in diversity. Such a conception turns aesthetic unity into a "triumph over the heterogeneous,"¹ according to Adorno. That kind of unity would be no better than the way nature-dominating rationality effects unity in the diversity of nature, which Adorno argues is manifested in Kant's conception of cognitive synthesis (*Einheit in der Mannigfaltigkeit*).²

- 1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 236; *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 157.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme* [1965], in *Nachgelassene Schriften: Vorlesungen*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 14 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 56; *Metaphysics: Concept and Prob-*

Authentic artworks achieve unity in a qualitatively different manner, according to Adorno, and Kant himself admits as much in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: “Kant subordinates artworks to the idea of something purposeful in and of itself, rather than consigning their unity exclusively to subjective synthesis through the knower.”³ The reason or logic of art, the way art synthesizes, allows for another kind of unity to emerge: “The aesthetic unity of the multiplicitous [*Einheit des Mannigfaltigen*] appears as though it had done no violence but had been chosen by the multiplicitous itself. It is thus that unity [...] crosses over into reconciliation.”⁴ The artwork is an exemplary unity because it appears to develop from out of diversity itself, rather than being enforced from without. Aesthetic unity approximates utopia, which in *Negative Dialectics* is described as “a togetherness of diversity [*ein Miteinander des Verschiedenen*].”⁵ But aesthetic unity is not *real*, it is not realized reconciliation or utopia: “No artwork is an undiminished unity; each must simulate it, and thus collides with itself. Confronted with antagonistic reality, the aesthetic unity that is established in opposition to it immanently becomes semblance.”⁶ The artwork has to renounce influence over reality in order to be art, but only thus is it able to constitute a reminder of the unreconciled state of reality. This does not mean, however, that aesthetic unity is free from guilt and domination: “[...] even in the greatest works of aesthetic unity the echo of social violence is to be heard.”⁷ The artwork wants to give duration to what is fleeting, form to what is dispersed, structure to sensuous expressiveness, and this cannot be done without a certain violence. Even so, “the act that binds the mimetic and diffuse in the artwork not only does harm to amorphous nature. The aesthetic image is a protest against nature’s fear that it will dissipate into the chaotic.”⁸

In no way, then, is this alternative unity of the artwork naïvely upheld as the complete negation of the nature-dominating practice of society at large. However, the fundamental forms of controlling and structuring nature, of

lems, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 34. Compare: “By synthesis in the most general sense [...] I understand the acting of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness [*Mannigfaltigkeit*] in one cognition.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 210 [B103].

3 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 166; *Aesthetic Theory*, 109.

4 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 202; *Aesthetic Theory*, 134.

5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al., vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 153; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), 150. Translation altered.

6 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 160; *Aesthetic Theory*, 105.

7 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 202; *Aesthetic Theory*, 134.

8 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 202; *Aesthetic Theory*, 134.

transforming it into a measurable thing—first and foremost space, time, and causality⁹—are in their turn “themselves controlled and freely disposed over” in art, according to Adorno.¹⁰ Thus, the artwork’s reflection of these forms is able to break the domination of nature: “Through the domination of the dominating, art reverses the domination of nature to the core.”¹¹ In mastering what is outside the sphere of art used for mastery over nature, art is able to show that these forms can be used differently: “As a musical composition compresses time, and as a painting folds spaces into one another, so the possibility is concretized that the world could be other than it is.”¹² The alternative unity of the artwork and the way it uses space, time, and causality dissociates these formative categories from their dominating purpose, and shows us that they are not ahistorical invariants, but possible agents of liberation.

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9 These are “Schopenhauer’s *principia individuationis*.” Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 207; *Aesthetic Theory*, 137.

10 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 207; *Aesthetic Theory*, 138.

11 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 207; *Aesthetic Theory*, 138.

12 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 207–208; *Aesthetic Theory*, 138.