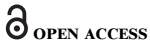




Journal of Adorno Studies



I 1/2025
DOI: 10.7413/joas019

Copyright: © 2025 – The Author(s).
This is an open access article distributed
under the terms of the Creative Com-
mons Attribution License (CC-BY-4.0).

Over the Rainbow

HENRY W. PICKFORD

In crucial and poignant passages in some of his central works Adorno invokes the image and experience of the rainbow. In the third “model” in *Negative Dialectics*, “Meditations on Metaphysics,” for instance, he writes:

What metaphysical experience might be [...] is most readily similar to how Proust imagined it, in the happiness that is promised in the names of villages such as Otterbach, Watterbach, Reuenthal, Monbrunn. One believes that if one goes there one would be in what is fulfilled, as if it existed. When one really is there, what has been promised recedes like a rainbow. And yet one is not disappointed: rather one feels as though one were too near, and for that reason does not see it ...¹

And in the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* we read:

Connoisseurship of art is the combination of an adequate comprehension of the material and

1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970–1986), 366; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 373 (translation modified).

a narrow-minded incomprehension of the riddle; it is neutral to what is cloaked. Those who peruse art solely with comprehension make it into something straightforward, which is furthest from what it is. If one seeks to get a closer look at a rainbow, it disappears.²

In both cases, the image of the rainbow, “at first glance” as it were, appears to be used superficially, to suggest that the rainbow’s and its analog’s appearance (*Erscheinung*) is mere illusion (*Schein*), a *fata morgana* without substance, import or purport: a subjective seeming revealed or unmasked—“if one seeks to get a closer look”—to lack any objectivity. And yet Adorno valorizes the sense of wonder and promise in the experience of the rainbow, and of colors more generally, as in childhood scenes depicted in *Minima Moralia*, for example in §146 (Toy Shop): “Disenchantment with the world of intuitions [*Anschauungswelt*] is the sensorium’s reaction to its objective role as a ‘world of commodities.’ Only when purified of appropriation would things be colorful [*bunt*] and useful at once: under universal compulsion the two cannot be reconciled.”³ Here Adorno associates the colorful or multi-colored with those qualitative features experienced in intuition which have been “stripped away from things” as they exist in a world that has wholly become, in Marx’s famous judgment, “the world of commodities.” Furthermore, these childlike or aesthetic experiences of color, of the rainbow, are representative emissaries of an undiminished world.

As in many of Adorno’s thoughts, Benjamin’s thought is hiding in the shadows here. As Howard Caygill and Eli Friedlander have demonstrated, in early notes, fragments, and essays, Benjamin developed a theory of speculative metaphysics in answer to Kant’s restrictive notion of experience as conditioned in receptive sensibility by the a priori forms of intuition—space and time—and conditioned in active intellection by the categories of the understanding (causality, substance, etc.) so as to secure epistemically the intersubjective validity or objectivity of empirical scientific knowledge.⁴ Kant thereby, however, relegated ideas of reason such as God, immortality, and free-

2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970-1986), 185; *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 122 (translation modified).

3 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970-1986), 260; *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 227–228 (translation modified).

4 Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998); Eli Friedlander, “Learning from the Colors of Fantasy,” *boundary 2*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2018): 111-137; Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Especially important in this regard is Walter Benjamin, “On Perception,” in *Selected Writings*, eds. M. Bullock and M. Jennings, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 93-96.

dom to the noumenal realm of the thing-in-itself, beyond the finite world of phenomenal appearances (*Erscheinung*) as structured by and experienced in space, time and the categories. The infinite, the possibility of transcendence beyond the transcendentially conditioned and delimited world of appearance, the subject matter of speculative metaphysics, could perhaps be thought consistently as ideas, but could not be experienced, could not be known; at best they could be indirectly felt in the mind's travails before objects of sublimity.

However, Benjamin argued, color, and especially the rainbow as an image of childlike color in its plenitude, constitutes an *immanent bounded totality of potentially infinite gradations*; as such, one can experience transcendence toward infinity, the absolute, a quintessentially speculative metaphysical concept:

Color is something spiritual, something whose clarity is spiritual, so that when colors are mixed they produce nuances of color, not a blur. The rainbow is a pure childlike image. In it color is wholly contour; for the person who sees with a child's eyes, it marks boundaries, is not a layer of something superimposed on matter, as it is for adults....

... the rainbow refers not to a chaste abstraction but to a life in art. The order of art is paradisiacal because there is no thought of the dissolution of boundaries – from excitement – in the object of experience. Instead the world is full of color in a state of identity, innocence, and harmony. Children are not ashamed, since they do not reflect but only see.⁵

“The rainbow. Look at it; it is only color, nothing in it is form,” says a painter in Benjamin's short dialogue “The Rainbow: Conversation about Fantasy [*Phantasie*].”⁶ Suggesting a fundamental distinction between natural and art beauty, Benjamin claims that color is experientially, metaphysically prior to any spatio-temporal form that is imposed by the transcendental conditions of knowledge and likewise imposed by a mimetic painter: “The standard of colorfulness [*Farbigkeit*] of a painting lies in how much the color develops the substance of infinity [*Unendlichkeitsgehalt*] out of the spatial form of the object [*räumliche Gegenstandsform*], how much it places an object in the surface, lends it depth from itself.”⁷ Rather than being an attribute of objects, for Benjamin color is itself a *medium* that is perceptible independent of concrete

5 Walter Benjamin, “A Child's View of Color,” in *Selected Writings*, eds. M. Bullock and M. Jennings, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 51. Other texts relevant to this complex in Benjamin's thought include *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, “A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books,” “Painting and the Graphic Arts,” and “Painting or Signs and Marks,” and two unpublished fragments on the rainbow, discussed below.

6 Walter Benjamin, “Der Regenbogen: Gespräch über die Phantasie,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 24 (my translation).

7 Walter Benjamin, “Der Regenbogen oder die Kunst des Paradieses,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 563 (my translation).

forms in which it may derivatively inhere. Here he follows Goethe, of course, whose famous study of the medium of color also speaks of the rainbow:

814. [...] we may assert that the chromatic scale, as given by us, produces an agreeable impression by its ingredient hues, we may here remark that those have been mistaken who have hitherto adduced the rainbow as an example of the entire [colour] scale [...] since in this phenomenon, as well as in the ordinary prismatic series, the yellow-red and blue-red cannot attain to a union.⁸

From color-as-medium's metaphysical quality of formlessness, Benjamin extrapolates and interprets the experience of color phenomenologically as a limit case of *mimetic comportment*, in which mind resembles world, or rather, the subject-object epistemic relation is dissolved into a "pure seeing": "... I was nothing but seeing. All other senses were forgotten, vanished. Even I myself was not, not my understanding, which deduces [*erschließt*] the things from the images of the senses. I was not someone seeing, I was only seeing [*ich war nur Sehen*]. And what I saw was not things...., only colors. And I myself was colored [*gefärbt*] in this landscape."⁹ Children's games and play with colorful objects, which Benjamin lovingly describes in several texts of this period, and which find echoes in childhood vignettes described in *Minima Moralia*, easily move in and out of pretense, performative mimetic enchantment and reflective distance, anticipating the dialectic of semblance (*Schein*) that Adorno will elaborate in *Aesthetic Theory*.

By invoking Benjamin's philosophical ruminations on the rainbow within a theory of metaphysical and aesthetic experience that grounds a sense of possibility and transcendence beyond the confines of the commodified world of appearances, Adorno, who as an adolescent barely beyond his own childhood read the *Critique of Pure Reason* weekly with his early mentor Siegfried Kracauer, like Benjamin would have recognized the subtext of those ruminations. In section §8 of the *Critique*, entitled "General remarks on the transcendental aesthetic," Kant uses the analogy of the rainbow to describe his picture of empirical realism and transcendental idealism. Common belief will draw the distinction between phenomenal appearance and thing-in-itself *within* empirical experience, and thereby lose the transcendental distinction at work in Kant's project. Kant illustrates the misstep with the example of a rainbow:

- 8 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (London: John Murray, 1840 [reprint Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970]), 319-320; Original: *Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, ed. Erich Trunz, vol. 13 (Munich: Beck, 1981), 502-3.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, "Der Regenbogen, Gespräch über die Phantasie," 20. Cf. also the section "Colors" in Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*.

Thus, we would certainly call a rainbow a mere appearance of a sun-shower, but would call this rain the thing in itself, and this is correct, as long as we understand the latter concept in a merely physical sense, as that which in universal experience and all different positions relative to the senses is always determined thus and not otherwise in intuition. But if we consider this empirical object in general and, without turning to its agreement with every human sense, ask whether it (not the raindrops, since these, as appearances, are already empirical objects) represents an object in itself, then the question of the relation of the representation to the object is transcendental, and not only these drops are mere appearances, but even their round form, indeed even the space through which they fall are nothing in themselves, but only mere modifications or foundations of our sensible intuition; the transcendental object, however, remains unknown to us.¹⁰

Benjamin's account of color, and his recasting the rainbow as the experience of a bounded infinite totality in intuition but independent of form, can now be seen as a 'critical redemption' (*kritische Rettung*) of Kant's illustrative model, to show the possibility of experiencing the absolute, the transcendent, immanently. That there is no more powerful model of utopian thought Adorno clearly recognized, when he began the final section, "Finale," of *Minima Moralia* with the following thought: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption [*Erlösung*]. Knowledge has no light but that which shines [*scheint*] on the world by redemption," that is, light as the undiminished medium of infinite color.¹¹ Or, as he writes in *Negative Dialectics*: "The utmost distance alone would be proximity; philosophy is the prism that catches its color."¹²

Henry W. Pickford is Professor of German and Philosophy at Duke University. His research interests focus on modern philosophy and literature in German and Russian, with emphasis on the German philosophical tradition from Kant to Critical Theory. He is the author of *The Sense of Semblance: Philosophical Analyses of Holocaust Art* (Fordham University Press); *Thinking with Tolstoy and Wittgenstein: Expression, Emotion, and Art* (Northwestern University Press; Russian translation with Academic Studies Press); co-author of *In Defense of Intuitions: A New Rationalist Manifesto* (Palgrave Macmillan); co-editor of *Der aufrechte Gang im windschiefen Kapitalismus: Modelle kritischen Denkens*

10 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A45-46/B62-63, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 187.

11 Adorno, *Minima Moralia, Gesammelte Schriften*, 4:283; *Minima Moralia*, 39 (translation modified).

12 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:66; *Negative Dialectics*, 57 (translation modified).

(Springer Verlag); editor and translator of Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (Columbia University Press) and *Selected Early Poems* of Lev Loseff (Spuytenduyvil Press); and author of over thirty articles and book chapters. He is currently co-authoring the book *Adorno: A Critical Life*, co-editing the *Oxford Handbook to Adorno*, and editing and translating Adorno's *Graeculus: Selections from the Notebooks*. More information about his work can be found at academia.edu.