

Rolando Vitali

The critique of everyday life

Adorno, Benjamin and the tasks of aesthetic praxis

In order to figure out the very contribution of Adorno and Benjamin's debate to the understanding and the critique of the aesthetic dimension of everyday life, it is first necessary to set some preliminary notions.

Our society is, generally speaking, a capitalistic society, thus characterized by some distinctive elements. As we know, the first and fundamental feature of a capitalistic society is the private ownership of the means of production. However, what does this implies for the definition of everyday life? In her book *Everyday life*, Agnes Heller has defined this concept in extremely general – or rather “abstract” – terms: “we may define the ‘everyday life’”, she writes, “as the aggregate of those individual reproduction factors which, *paripassu*, make social reproduction possible”¹. That means not only individual activities such as nutrition, sleep etc., but also social interactions between individuals not directly related to the productive activity as such, but nonetheless necessary for the *reproduction* of the society as a whole. The most crucial consequence of a society in which both the producers of goods as much as their social relations are private is the establishment of the commodity form as the fundamental institution for the social organization and reproduction. Without the commodity form, how would it be possible to organize and regulate production? Since different producers are private and not associated together, accordingly to a conscious and self-transparent organization, but rather in competition with one another, society must regulate production and distribution through a private medium: the commodity and its exchange. Thus, social reproduction is not regulated *politically*, through self-conscious organization, but through the oscillation of commodity prices. Commodity and market represent the fundamental institutions that guarantee the social reproduction of our society. The sphere of circulation – i.e. the market – hence represents the sphere within which the concrete daily life of individuals unfolds: here individuals, considered as property owners, or holders of commodities – be it their labor force or something else – articulate

¹ A. Heller, *Everyday Life*, Routledge, London 1984, p. 3.

and fulfill their needs in relation with other “property owners”. Commodity’s capacity to mediate social process is precisely the operative substance of its fetishistic nature. The phenomenon of fetishism, according to which commodities assume a *synnlich-übersinnlich* nature², reflects in fact the duplication of the commodity as material object, on the one hand, and as social institution on the other. As Isaak Rubin explained in a text still essential to understand the problems we are dealing with, fetishism and social mediation should be interpreted together:

in a market society, a thing is not only a mysterious “social hieroglyphic”, it is not only “a receptacle” under which social production relations among people are hidden. A thing is an intermediary in social relations, and the circulation of things is inseparably related to the establishment and realization of the productive relations among people. The movement of the prices of things on the market is not only the reflection of the productive relations among people; it is the only possible form of their manifestation in a market society. The thing acquires specific social characteristics in a market economy (for example, the properties of value, money, capital, and so on), due to which the thing not only hides the production relations among people, but it also organizes them, serving as a connecting link between people.³

Now, as I will try to show, the commodity is able to serve as “a connecting link between people” thanks to an aesthetic field. In other words, in order for the market to function as a social mediator, it must build a space of aesthetic interaction that guarantees and mediates the social relation within it.

More specifically, the exchange relationship between commodity-carrying individuals is asymmetrical and contradictory, and this contradiction – which essentially relates to the “dual character” of the commodity described by Marx – is articulated and mediated through the construction of an aesthetic field.

Let’s now focus on this contradiction. On the one hand, the seller considers the commodity exclusively as *exchange value*. This value can be realized only through its conversion into money. Conversely, the buyer considers the commodity exclusively with respect to its *use value*: in this case, the value of the commodity is realized through consumption⁴. In

² See K. Marx, *Capital vol. I*, Penguin, London 1990, p. 165: “the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social”. See also S. Khatib, “*Sensuous Supra-Sensuous*”: *The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction*, in S. Gandesha, J. Hartle (ed.), *Aesthetic Marx*, Bloomsbury, London 2017, pp. 49-72.

³ I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, Black Rose Books, Montréal 1990, p. 10

⁴ Cfr. K. Marx, *Capital vol. I*, cit., p. 126: “Use-values are only realized [*verwirklicht*] in use or in consumption”.

their relationship, they address different aspects of the commodity that do not *touch* each other: in fact, as Marx explains, the exchange-value does “not contain an atom of use-value”⁵, whereas the use-value constitutes “the material content of wealth, *whatever its social form may be*”⁶. How do they relate to one another *on the market*, which means *before* the purchase and the consumption of the commodity? The contradiction between the mutually unrelated interests of the contract partners is not “resolved”, but rather bypassed through what Wolfgang Fritz Haug has called an “Überbrückung *durch* ästhetischen Schein”⁷, that is by bridging this gap through aesthetic appearances. Contact between the exchange value and the use value of the commodity is achieved by transfiguring both in the aesthetic appearance of the commodity. In the suspended space and time of the aesthetic appearance, the commodity *can* materially express its exchange value and evoke that use value, that the consumer in the market can only experience as its price: being independent from consumption, the aesthetic appearance of the commodity is its *promesse de bonheur*, it is the “*Gebrauchswertversprechen*” of the exchange value⁸. Commodities are thus able to organize and mediate social relations by constructing an aesthetic space that *sensitively* expresses their social qualities. The autonomization of this field constitutes what Gernot Böhme has called the “*Inszenierungswert*”⁹ of the commodity: the more social relations are mediated by commodities, the more the latter acquires greater importance.

Our human senses are, thus, more and more *socially formed* right within this aesthetic space. In this framework art is not the privileged way to form human sensibility. Art represents only a specific form of experience in a context in which the aesthetic medium is becoming more and more pervasive, insofar as it represents the medium of the fundamental social interaction of daily life, that is of commodity exchange. The aesthetic dimension of daily life thus shapes much more profoundly the way we experience reality as art does: it actually determines the way we perceive and appreciate art itself. Insofar as every aspect of daily life can potentially be commodified, aestheticization and commodification processes are structurally intertwined: the specific form of life of capitalistic and market society makes a specific use of the aesthetic medium, which tends to make aesthetic field, market and daily life collapse on each other¹⁰.

⁵ Ivi, p. 128.

⁶ Ivi, p. 126 (my emphasis).

⁷ W.F. Haug, *Kritik der Warenästhetik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2009, p. 29.

⁸ Ivi, p. 29.

⁹ Cfr. G. Böhme, *Ästhetischer Kapitalismus*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2016.

¹⁰ In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* Marx has pointed out how the formation of human sensibility is essentially determined by the forms of its socialization

Rather than considering art as the privileged domain of observation, we should conceive the aesthetic field of “everyday” socio-aesthetic mediation as the historical and material space of the formation of human sensibility. Since it is a form of *social mediation*, we should however understand “aestheticity” first and foremost as an articulation of a specific praxis, rather than just as the place of a “passive” or receptive experience. Or rather: the aesthetic experience, that takes place in it, should be understood on the basis of the praxis that it makes possible. Here praxis and experience are unified, both contributing to structuring the subjectivity *and* the field within which social practices unfold. To understand the pragmatic dimension of this diffuse “aestheticity”, however, it is necessary to consider it historically – i.e. materialistically: not as an *abstract* praxis, but as an *agency* situated within a historically determined social totality. This is how a critical theory – that is, a theory that problematizes itself as a moment of the social praxis – is able to grasp the transformative elements that can be discovered within this everyday dimension. It is in this context that the debate between Adorno and Benjamin becomes crucial: it help us, on the one hand, to grasp the historically determined dimension of everyday aesthetic praxis and, on the other, to detect the transformative elements that can emerge from it.

The *Erlebnis* of daily life and the *Erfahrung* of society

From a critical point of view, the problem of fetishism lays in the impossibility to make a proper *experience* [*Erfahrung*] of commodities’ *real* content – that is to say, of *society*. Since social interaction is realized through commodities, social relations appear in the form of thing like object; and since commodities obtain social reality within the aesthetic field, the aesthetic form of the single, abstracted commodity becomes the fundamental medium of social interaction. It should not be forgotten that commodities, just like different sellers on market, are competing with each other. In order to *exist* in the field of circulation different commodities must distinguish themselves *aesthetically* from one another and can only do so by intensifying the stimuli they deliver. Two consequences follow from the overall process of this competition to *prevail aesthetically*

and, more precisely, by the *objectivity* of this socialization: “For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses – the practical senses (will, love, etc.) – in a word, *human* sense – the humanness of the senses – comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanized* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labor of *humanized* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present”. K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto*, translated by Martin Milligan, Prometheus Book, New York 1988, p. 108 ff.

in the market. In order to prevail, commodities have to outperform their competitors by overcoming their aesthetic appearance through stronger stimuli. And since different stimuli distinguish from each other thanks to the degree of their intensity, this competition implies a steady increase in the intensity of aesthetic solicitations. This overstimulation implies in turn a consequent atrophy of the capacity to feel and thus, to experience things. The aesthetic field tends to progressively lose its salience spots of punctual intensity and to turn into a homogenous and hyperstimulated *environment*: “strong stimuli” turn from being the exception in the field of experience, to constitute the background of everyday life in market society¹¹. As Benjamin writes in his essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*:

The greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience [*Erfahrung*] and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*].¹²

Erfahrung, as the kind of organic experience connected to and embedded in a specific historical frame, has become unattainable. This loss should not be understood unhistorically: it would not be problematic if commodities were not, at the same time, regulative institutions of social interaction. In other words, the problem is not the loss of a full experience of things – as if, by returning to an original, non-socially mediated relation with them, a “true” experience were possible; the problem is that the “thinghood”¹³ of commodities conceals the experience of the social content inscribed in them. Commodities are social constructs that incorporate social relations, but we experience them as isolated things, as punctual *apparitions*. Fetishism implies the condensation of social experience in the *Erlebnis* of a thing-like, abstract choc. Hence, the primacy of the punctual sensation, caused by the aesthetical *choc* is simply the symptom of the reduction of social mediation to immediacy and, consequently, its concealment.

Reified socialization thus produces a double paradox: first, the paradox of a social totality extended to all spheres of life that produces an experience of this integration as individualized *isolation*, as singular thing-like, abstract choc. Insofar as social totality is incorporated in the aesthetic pervasiveness of commodities, it can be experienced only as reified immediacy. The social totality that structures and organizes the parts

¹¹ See C. Türcke, *Erregte Gesellschaft: Philosophie der Sensation*, Beck C. H., Munich 2012.

¹² W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings- vol. 4 (1938-1940)*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 319.

¹³ K. Marx, *Capital vol. I*, cit., p. 989.

can be perceived only as partiality, through the thing-like abstraction of commodities. This in turn implies that the subject – who is *objectively fully* subsumed under a social mechanism that determines him “even in its most hidden recesses”¹⁴ – experiences himself too as an isolated, un-socialized particular, thus regressing to a presocialized condition. Benjamin quotes a passage from Valéry that perfectly expresses this kind of regression: “The inhabitant of the great urban centers reverts to a state of savagery – that is, of isolation. The feeling of being dependent on others, which used to be kept alive by need, is gradually blunted in the smooth functioning of the social mechanism”¹⁵. In this framework the aesthetic element, rather than being a *relational field* of experience of otherness, becomes self-referential and collapses into a monadic compulsion: the punctual experience of the commodity, stripped off from its social mediation, corresponds to an equally abstract and immediate individuality. In other words, the experiential mode of apprehension of the object generates a corresponding subjectivity: the more abstract and isolated the former becomes, the more so the latter does.

From a critical point of view, the challenge posed by this reified everyday reality is thus the *aesthetical, sensible re-activation of social mediation*. How do we make possible an experience of society out of the aesthetic experience of the commodity? This question is necessarily connected with the question of the transformative capacity of aesthetic praxis, that is, of art. However, it also implies that the question about art can no longer be addressed on the basis of institutional art, but by focusing primarily on the relationship that aesthetic praxis entertains with the everyday dimension of aesthetic experience. We need to reverse the traditional relationship that identifies art as the model for sensible *Bildung*: it is no longer a matter of thinking aesthetic experience from the experience of art, but of reversing this relationship by placing art within the diffuse aesthetic praxis, structured by the commodity as its fundamental institution.

In order to understand how Benjamin tackles this problem, we have to address not only the passive side of *Erlebnis*, but also the active moment that structures our relationship with the environment as socially mediated. Considering the aesthetic field as a practical relation also means to consider it within man’s “active relation” to nature. As Marx pointed out, “the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which serve as the instruments of production for sustaining their life”, has its parallel in “the productive organs of man in society”. It is in this sense, that “technology [...] lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of

¹⁴ T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Verso, London 2005, p. 15.

¹⁵ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings- vol. 4 (1938-1940)*, cit., p. 327.

his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations”¹⁶. In order to release the experience of the commodity from its fetishistic, objectified fixation, Benjamin shifts the focus from the object to the field, from the *thing to the technical apparatus* that aesthetically mediate the social sphere. The investigation of the technical “*Apparatur*” that represents the *medium* of the experience becomes crucial. According to Benjamin technology cannot be conceived simply as an *instrument* of production, but should be understood, more substantially, as the *medium* that articulate the aesthetic field in its *practical* dimension. The instrumental understanding of technology determines its concept by starting from its goal: that is, from its product. Instead, to conceive technology as *medium* shifts the focus from the teleological relation production-product to the dialectical one producer-production. In other words, it allows us to conceive the active, practical dimension embedded in the “thinghood”¹⁷ of commodities. For this reason, its analysis is crucial to understand the process of formation of human sensorium, especially if we aim to grasp the transformative possibilities inscribed in aesthetic practices.

Aesthetic (trans)formation and technology

As we know from their correspondence, Benjamin’s and Adorno’s strategy to make possible an experience of society out of the reified aesthetic experience substantially diverges. As I will try to outline, whereas Adorno takes the autonomous concept of art to the limit of its own dissolution, thus making sensible through its appearance the negativity of the social totality, Benjamin suggests to adapt human sensibility to the new productive forces, through the aesthetic re-appropriation of technology. These two strategies rely on different interpretations of the specific function of the aesthetic praxis in our society. As pointed out by Susan Buck-Morss¹⁸, whereas Adorno sees art’s transformative power as brought about by the dialectical praxis between the individual artist and the historically developed techniques, with which he is confronted in his artistic practice, Benjamin situated the dialectic within the *objective, material* forces of the superstructure, that is, within the mechanical technologies of today’s art and commodities production. They value in opposite way the significance of “the liquidation of art”¹⁹ within the industrial productive process, dominated by

¹⁶ K. Marx, *The Capital*, cit., p. 493.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 989.

¹⁸ S. Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, The Free Press, New York 1977, p. 147.

¹⁹ T.W. Adorno, W. Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 85.

the reproductive machinery and the commodity form: if Adorno saw this liquidation in the industrial (re)productive system as necessary, but intrinsic problematic²⁰, Benjamin envisioned in it the glimpse of a transformative power. Even more radically, Benjamin claimed that art as autonomous praxis – which Adorno saw as the main refuge for an alternative aesthetic praxis in the context of mass, reified culture – was the aesthetic expression of fascism, or more precisely, that the aesthetic of fascism basically consisted in the preservation of art's autonomy from its “liquidation”. The clash could not be more drastic.

Now, as we shall try to briefly outline, these differences have crucial consequences with regard to the relationship between aesthetic praxis and the aesthetic transformation of everyday life.

In its famous essay *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, Benjamin writes that “the tendencies of the development of art under the present conditions of production [...] neutralize a number of traditional concepts – such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery”²¹. In short, technical reproducibility deprives the artwork of the “*whole sphere of authenticity*”²², upon which traditional modern aesthetics built its fundamental categories. By depriving art of its uniqueness, it also deprives it of its own modern self-definition: its autonomy from commodified productive processes. Yet, according to Benjamin, the obsolescence of such traditional concepts opens new potentially transformative perspectives, insofar as these concepts are *essentially* connected with their common social origin: the property. In this sense, their eclipse also reflects a divergence between material productive forces and social relations, which may lead to social transformation. In this hypothesis, Benjamin draws upon Marx's traditional definition of the conditions that inaugurate an “era of social revolution”:

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.²³

²⁰ Even though Adorno will write in *Aesthetic Theory*, that “the absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity”. See T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum, London 1997, p. 28.

²¹ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings- vol. 3 (1935-1938)*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 101.

²² Ivi, p. 103.

²³ K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in Id. *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 29, Lawrence & Wishart, London 2010, p. 263.

The obsolescence of the traditional aesthetic concepts reflects (il soggetto è l'obsolescenza, giusto?) the contradiction between “the material productive forces” of aesthetic production and the “existing relations of production”, still bounded to private property relations. As we have already mentioned, fascism aims to the preservation of “traditional concepts” of aesthetic production, such as “creativity”, “genius”, “uniqueness” etc. essentially bounded to individual property. Amid such revolutionary conditions, that shake the traditional conditions of artistic production, defending the sphere of authenticity represents a regressive gesture, insofar as it delays and hinders the readjustment between social forms and productive forces. Fascism strives to maintain the actual property relations as much as the traditional concepts of aesthetics to the point of sacrificing society to this preservation. The aestheticization of war is the immediate consequence on this attitude. “The aestheticizing of politics” performed by fascism is then the aesthetic expression of its political task: to preserve actual property relations in front of the contradiction between the “material productive forces of society” and “the existing relations of production”. Fascist art aesthetically compensates the dispossession of the masses through the aestheticization of their sacrifice in war²⁴.

Benjamin writes that “communism replies” to fascism “by politicizing art”. The interpretation of this passage is (probably intentionally) left to the reader. Nonetheless we can state that, since the obsolescence of the fundamental categories of modern aesthetics is precisely what enables a communist politicization of art, the “art” to which Benjamin is referring to, cannot be the art as we know it²⁵. The meaning of aesthetics would change, by describing “the field in which the antidote to fascism is deployed as a political response”²⁶ and not the *content* of the future artistic praxis. The political transformation of art should occur within the *medium* that articulates the social relations, that is on the level of the technical apparatus. I would like to suggest, that it is possible to find some clues about what Benjamin means by “politicizing art” in the paragraph devoted to the already mentioned distinction between first and second technology in the second version of the essay. According to Benjamin, whereas “first technology” coincides with the instrumental reason and is directed to make “the maximum possible use of human beings”, the second one “reduces their use to the minimum”. Second technology “aims”

²⁴ See M. Jay, “*The Aesthetic Ideology as Ideology; Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?*”, in “Cultural Critique”, 21, 1992, pp. 41-61.

²⁵ See S. Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered*, in “October”, 62, 1992, pp. 3-41.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 5.

not – like the first – to “to master nature”, but rather at “an interplay between nature and humanity”²⁷. This “interplay” recalls the mimetic structure of *téchne* in Aristoteles’ *Protrepticus*, where he writes: “nature does not imitate the art, but it imitates nature, and it exists to help by filling in even what nature has omitted”. In a note related to his essay, Benjamin confirms this affinity, by stating that “art is a suggested improvement on nature: an imitation [*Nachmachen*] whose most hidden depths are a demonstration [*Vormachen*]”²⁸. Benjamin suggests that “the primary social function of art today is to rehearse that interplay” between man and nature through second technology, lets glimpse the possibility of a non-instrumental use of technology. The politicization of art would then mean a transformation of technology through the intervention of mimetic²⁹, aesthetic practices in the productive structure, embodied in the technological apparatus of society. Benjamin thus establishes an *immediate* connection between reproducible, industrial art, mimetic re-functionalization of technology and collective re-appropriation of machinery. Art should teach how to collectively reappropriate the technological apparatus, in order to adapt the actual social relations to its emancipative possibilities:

Dealing with this apparatus also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity’s whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free.³⁰

The aim of art and the one of revolution are then identical: “to accelerate” the “adaptation” of social forms to productive forces through the “*innervation* on the part of the new, historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology”³¹. Through the use of the term “innervation” Benjamin suggests the metaphor of the nervous system to clarify the nature of this reappropriative adaptation to second technology. The collective stands to the productive apparatus as the nervous system stands to the organs of its body. This in turn recalls Marx conception that humans will remain enslaved to the process of material production, until the latter will stand “under their conscious and planned control”³²: until then “the automaton itself is the subject, and the workers are merely conscious organs, co-ordinated with the unconscious organs

²⁷ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings- vol. 3 (1935-1938)*, cit., p. 107.

²⁸ W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1972-1999, I.3, p. 1047

²⁹ See F. Desideri, *The mimetic bond: Benjamin and the question of technology*, in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Art*, Continuum, London 2005, pp. 108-120.

³⁰ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings- vol. 3 (1935-1938)*, cit., p. 108.

³¹ Ivi, p. 124 [my emphasis].

³² K. Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, cit., p. 173

of the automaton”³³. Aesthetic practices are thus directed to, or more radically *consist in* the collective appropriation of the apparatus by making the collective its *nervous, sensible and conscious system*. The aesthetic refunctionalization of what Marx famously calls the “automatic system of machinery”, realized by reproducible artworks, is nothing else than the reactivation of “workers themselves” not anymore “in the role of merely conscious members”³⁴, but as its “general intellect”³⁵, as its sensible-aesthetical innervation. Art’s autonomy is completely abandoned: at its place stands the practical reappropriation of technological apparatus. Thus, by becoming the conscious element of the technological apparatus, the proletariat can make sensible experience of society as a whole and, at the same time, realize its practical transformation. In other words, the reappropriation of the means of production coincides with the aesthetical reactivation of the social relation embedded in it. Humanity then would become the nervous system of its machinery, thus able to experience and to master not nature but its medium, its relation to nature. As Benjamin puts it in *One-Way Street*, “technology is the mastery of not nature but of the relation between nature and man”³⁶.

At least in their correspondence, Adorno’s position sharply differs from Benjamin. The transformative force of the aesthetical praxis cannot be exerted on the productive level. Art can operate as non-alienated, non-instrumental praxis only within the field of aesthetic appearance, granted by the autonomous character of artistic production. Adorno’s defense of art’s autonomy – he claims – is not aimed at “to secure the autonomy of the work of art as a special prerogative”³⁷. Rather it indicates a different account of praxis, both in an *aesthetical* and in a *political* sense. It could surprise some reader that in his letter to Benjamin concerning the second version of the essay Adorno stresses so much Lenin’s theory of intellectual avant-garde and accuses Benjamin of falling in naïve anarchism. Yet such political implications represent important clues to understand the fundamental questions here at stake: the point is the role of intellectual and artistic labour in the transformation of existing society. Whereas for Benjamin art should aim at its own *dissolution* in collective practices, in order to innervate with sensible, aesthetic practices the technological, productive machinery, Adorno maintains what we may call a classically “critical” position, as much as

³³ Ivi, p. 544.

³⁴ K. Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58*, in Id. *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 29, Lawrence & Wishart, London 2010, p. 82.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 92.

³⁶ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings- vol. I (1913-1926)*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 487.

³⁷ T.W. Adorno, W. Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, cit., p. 129.

the division between intellectual and material labour. What for Adorno is at stake, is the relationship between theory and mass politics: “I am convinced”, he writes to Benjamin, that “the further formulation of the aesthetic debate” depends “essentially” on a correct “account of the relationship of the intellectuals to the proletariat”³⁸. According to Adorno, the intellectual avant-garde should maintain the primacy that Lenin (allegedly) conferred it. For “the proletariat”, he writes to Benjamin, cannot realize any achievement “immediately”, but “through the theory introduced by intellectuals as dialectical subjects, although they belong themselves to the sphere of works of art which you [Benjamin] have already consigned to Hell”³⁹. Adorno holds the distinction between avant-gardist moment of theory and of art, insofar as they can prefigure a freed praxis, although only as appearance. The transformation may negatively glimpse only insofar as they are non-identical to the social false totality: this is why they have to preserve their problematic autonomy. Adorno is fully aware that this approach necessarily presupposes the actual property relations, as much as the structures that follow from them, namely the bourgeoisie subjectivity, which are “historically condemned”:

For since the overwhelming objectivity of historical movement in its present phase consists so far only in the dissolution of the subject, without yet giving rise to a new one, individual experience necessarily bases itself on the old subject, now historically condemned, which is still for-itself, but no longer in-itself.⁴⁰

³⁸ “It is not a case of bourgeois idealism if, in full knowledge and without intellectual inhibitions, we maintain our solidarity with the proletariat, instead of making our necessity into a virtue of the proletariat as we are constantly tempted to do – that proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity, and needs us for knowledge just as much as we need the proletariat for the revolution. I am convinced that the further development of the aesthetic debate which you have so magnificently inaugurated, depends essentially upon a true evaluation of the relationship between intellectuals and the working class. [Es ist kein bürgerlicher Idealismus, wenn man erkennend und ohne Erkenntnisverbote dem Proletariat die Solidarität hält, anstatt dass man, wie es immer wieder unsere Versuchung ist, aus der eigenen Not eine Tugend des Proletariats macht, das selber die gleiche Not hat und unser zur Erkenntnis so gut bedarf wie wir des Proletariats bedürfen, damit die Revolution gemacht werden kann. Von dieser Rechenschaft über das Verhältnis der Intellektuellen zum Proletariat hängt nach meiner Überzeugung wesentlich die weitere Formulierung der ästhetischen Debatte ab.]” Ivi, p. 132.

³⁹ [“dem Proletariat (als dem Kinosubjekt) unvermittelt eine Leistung zutrauen, die es nach Lenins Satz anders gar nicht zustande bringen kann als durch die Theorie der Intellektuellen als der dialektischen Subjekte, die der von Ihnen [Benjamin] in die Hölle verwiesenen Sphäre der Kunstwerke zugehören”]. Ivi, p. 129 [translation modified].

⁴⁰ T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, cit., pp. 15-16.

These structures are dialectically, at the same time, *appearance* and *expression* of the negative essence of the commodified totality of everyday life. “If today the subject is vanishing” one should take upon “the duty ‘to consider the evanescent itself as essential’”⁴¹. According to Adorno, transformative, aesthetic praxis thus consists in the recognition, or better in the *sensible expression* of the eclipse of the individual as appearance, as *Schein*. “The prevalence of totality over appearance”, writes Adorno recalling Hegel’s relation between *Wesen* and *Erscheinung*, “has to be grasped in the appearances”⁴². Accordingly, artworks’ transformative moment coincides with the immanent critique they exert through the *exposition* of their own appearance-character. Aesthetic transformative practices intervene on everyday life by *suspending* the primacy of the totality and by showing, at the same time, the appearance-character (that is the *ineffectiveness*) of this suspension.

On the contrary, for Benjamin the task of aesthetic practices (and of critical theory) can no longer rely on the primacy of modern subjectivity and, therefore, not even on the concept that determines it as such: autonomy. It is no longer a matter of constituting spaces of resistance, but of innervating the totality by reconfiguring its technical and productive structure in an artistic-aesthetic sense, by overcoming at the same time both the sacral autonomy of aesthetic field and the instrumental character of technical apparatus.

Bibliography

- Adorno T.W., *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum, London 1997.
 Adorno T.W., *Negative Dialectics*, Routledge, New York 2004.
 Adorno T.W., *Minima Moralia*, Verso, London 2005.
 Adorno T.W., Benjamin W., *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2003.
 Benjamin W., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1972-1999.
 Benjamin W., *Selected Writings – vol. 3 (1935-1938)*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2002.
 Benjamin, Walter, *Selected Writings – vol. 4 (1938-1940)*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2003.
 Böhme G., *Ästhetischer Kapitalismus*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2016.
 Buck-Morss S., *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, The Free Press, New York 1977.
 Buck-Morss S., *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered*, in “October”, 62, 1992, pp. 3-41.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 16.

⁴² T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Routledge, New York 2004, p. 303 [translation modified].

- Desideri F., *The mimetic bond: Benjamin and the question of technology*, in A. Benjamin (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Art*, Continuum, London 2005, pp. 108-120.
- Haug W.F., *Kritik der Warenästhetik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2009.
- Heller A., *Everyday Life*, Routledge, London 1984.
- Jay M., "The Aesthetic Ideology" as Ideology; Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?", in "Cultural Critique", 21, 1992, pp. 41-61.
- Khatib S., "Sensuous Supra-Sensuous": The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction, in S. Gandesha, J. Hartle (eds.), *Aesthetic Marx*, Bloomsbury, London 2017.
- Marx K., *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto*, translated by M. Milligan, Prometheus Book, New York 1988.
- Marx K. *Capital vol. I*, Penguin, London 1990.
- Marx K., *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 29, Lawrence & Wishart, London 2010.
- Rubin I., *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, Black Rose Books, Montréal 1990.
- Türcke C., *Erregte Gesellschaft: Philosophie der Sensation*, Beck C. H., Munich 2012.

The critique of everyday life Adorno, Benjamin and the tasks of aesthetic praxis

In capitalist consumerist societies, the commodity form structurally mediates the everyday life. The reification performed by the commodity conceals the social relation through its sensible, aesthetical thing-like form and impedes the possibility to experience society as such. The critique of everyday life both in Benjamin and in Adorno aims to reactivate this possibility. Yet, their strategy radically differs: whereas Benjamin sees a possibility in the sensible re-appropriation of the technological apparatus, Adorno insists that only within the autonomous space of aesthetic autonomy of the work of art it is possible to experience society in its contradictory essence.

KEYWORDS: Reification, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Technology, Artwork.