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The Idea of Mimesis:

Semblance, Play, and Critique in the Works of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno

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ABSTRACT

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Title: The Idea of Mimesis: Semblance, Play and Critique in the Works of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno

Critical Theory demands that its forms of critique express resistance to the socially necessary illusions of a given historical period. Yet theorists have seldom discussed just how much it is the case that, for Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, the concepts and language it employs, as well as the aesthetic comportment it would champion for the sake of generating a critical distance from these illusions, require an understanding of the mimetic faculty. The point of departure for this work is thus an attempt to delineate both the essential and the historical features of this faculty, in the hope of understanding the conditions under which the force of critique can truly find language today. With this is in view, I illustrate the manner in which these features of mimesis, namely its semblance (*Schein*) and play (*Spiel*) character, are initially at work in our experiential relation to nature, but are ultimately subject to a violent taboo that wrenches us from nature and thereby wages a desperate battle against the attempt to give voice or call a halt to the unnecessary suffering of an antagonistic historical circumstance. This shows that there is a dialectic of enlightenment built into the comportment of mimesis itself, that latent within it is the simultaneous potential for progress and regression. More specifically, it shows that mimesis is, as it were, banished from an immediate absorption with nature, and, therefore, needs to migrate into the neutralized and sorrowful (*traurig*) sphere of art—the sole refuge within which the outermost consequences of mimetic development are granted full expression. Parallel to the Kantian category of philosophical "ideas," I, accordingly, argue that the recognition of this immanent struggle to end myth is synonymous with a mimesis awakened to a regulative striving after the idea of peace or reconciliation, i.e., a striving that, if realized, would at last assuage the hostility between rationality and mimesis, concept and intuition. Mimesis is thus, on the one hand, capable of sensing the material trace or hearing the musical echo stored up in the unreconciled state of language. But if, on the other hand, it becomes dislodged from the sensitivity that "reads" with and against the tempo of its material circumstance, it could just as well disavow precisely the possibility of this peace and thus regress to a catastrophic form of instrumental rationality. By virtue of immersing itself in the most minute details of the present historical constellation, exposing the falsehoods involved in, for instance, the harmony of traditional beauty, or the triumphalism and sovereignty of the traditional sublime, I argue that mimesis not only marks an indispensable moment in the dynamic movement of critique, it also brings to the fore the pressing need for a materialist conception of aesthetics.

Contents

Abbreviations

All works that are part of Benjamin's and Adorno's *Gesammelte Schriften* will be cited in parenthesis within the body of this text. In order to distinguish between them, references to Benjamin's work will be cited in the English edition first, followed by a slash and the appropriate GS number. References to Adorno's work will cite the GS number first and the English edition will follow the dash.

AT   T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

AP   Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Cited with convolute letter and number in brackets.

BE   T.W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

CC   T.W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

DOE Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

GS   T.W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1-20 (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972). Cited as volume and part number with decimals.

GS   Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1-7 (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977). Cited as volume and part number with decimals.

ML   T.W. Adorno, "Music and Language: A Fragment" in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 1998), 1-6.

MM   T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2002).

NS1 T.W. Adorno, *Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik*. In *Nachgelassenen Schriften*. Vol. 1. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag, 1994.

PNM T.W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New* Music, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

ND   T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973)

OTS Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998)

SW   Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). Cited as volume number and part number with decimals.

These flourishes and cadenzas! Do you hear the conventions that are left in? Here – the language – is no longer – purified of the flourishes – but the flourishes – of the appearance [*Schein*] – of their subjective – domination – the appearance [*Schein*] – of art is thrown off – at last – art always throws off the appearance [*Schein*] of art. Dim-dada!

<div align="right">—Thomas Mann, Doctor Faustus</div>

Introduction: The Redemption of Nature

Nothing shocks anymore. Everyone knows that. Coming to any other aesthetic or philosophical conclusion would smack of modernist heroism today. This sentiment is likely part of the reason why, when faced with the choice, theorists interested in the various threads of cultural criticism more often than not side with Walter Benjamin's work over Theodor W. Adorno's. Whereas the former appears to be optimistic about the commodity form, particularly as it plays out in film, the latter, pessimistic elitist that he is, appears to only find a, so to speak, critical ferment in the antiquated and classist "high" art of the Twentieth Century. At least this is the story we are told. Such a story, of course, presupposes that there is an irresolvable conflict between these two thinkers and that what is said of Benjamin and Adorno is true. For those familiar with Benjamin's corpus, however, his use of the concepts of shock, of historical rupture, of the moment of awakening, play such an important role that one is not only forced to consider the modernist tendencies in Benjamin's own thought, one is also forced to question just how close he might be to Adorno's thought. Who could deny, for example, how much these concepts resonate with Adorno's persistent concern over the shudder (*Schauer*) of experience and the manner in which it drives the famous concept of the dialectic of enlightenment?

From the start, then, this demand to hear the shudder, to hear what might be termed the call of suffering, strikingly brings to the fore the similarities between Benjamin and Adorno. More specifically, the general impulse behind Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, of which Adorno took keen interest as early as the "Actuality of Philosophy" and as late as

Aesthetic Theory, [1] situates their shared philosophical task as that which strives after the

redemption (*Erlösung*) of nature. With this vague outline of their mutual project in view, it is

perhaps most fitting to begin our introduction to the idea of mimesis by addressing two

seemingly unrelated passages from the respective thinkers of this study. The fragmentary

character of these passages, ripped from their context, yet rearranged in the hope of letting them

speak for themselves, is not merely appealed to in the spirit of Benjamin's conception of citation

(*Zitat*) (SW2.2: 454/ GS2.1: 363), it is appealed to in the spirit of both thinkers' task, the idea of

which will hopefully guide this work as well.

In the *Trauerspiel*,[2] first completed in 1925, Benjamin writes,

> [b]ecause she is mute, fallen nature mourns [*trauert*]. Yet the converse of this statement leads still deeper into the essence of nature: her mournfulness [*Traurigkeit*] makes her mute [*macht sie verstummen*]. In all mourning [*Trauer*] there is the inclination to speechlessness [*Sprachlosigkeit*], and this infinitely more than the inability [*Unfähigkeit*] or reluctance [*Unlust*] to communicate [*Mitteilung*]. (OTS: 224/GS1.1: 298, translation modified)

Some twenty years later, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer write,

> [p]hilosophy has perceived [*erblickt*] the chasm [*Abgrund*] opened by this separation [of sign (*Zeichen*) and image (*Bild*)] as the relation [*Verhältnis*] between intuition [*Anschauung*] and concept [*Begriff*] and repeatedly but vainly attempted to close it; indeed, philosophy is defined by that attempt. (GS3: 34-35/ DOE: 13, translation modified)

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[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998); Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* in GS 1.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 203-430; Theodor W. Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," trans. Benjamin Snow, *Telos* 31 (Spring 1977): 120-33; Adorno, "Aktualität der Philosophie" in GS 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972); Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Adorno, *Äesthetische Theorie* in GS 7, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972).

[2] Aside from the below passage, which requires a verb modification, throughout this work I will often leave the term *Trauer*, translated by Osborne as "mourning," untranslated. I will also sometimes, depending on the context, translate it as "sorrow." I do this so as to avoid any confusion with Freud's terminology. Although the feeling of *Trauer* is not a psychological category for Benjamin, it is actually closer to Freud's conception of *melancholia* than it is to his conception of mourning. It is also helpful to leave the noun *Trauerspiel* in the German because this avoids misunderstanding just how different "sorrow-play" is from tragedy for Benjamin. For more on the similarities and differences of the conception of *melancholia* in Benjamin and Freud see Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 164-179; Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

Contrary to the above-mentioned narrative about the fundamental difference between Benjamin and Adorno, Benjamin was, in truth, just as dedicated as Adorno to what, at bottom, amounts to the *dialectical* attempt to think this relation of intuition and concept. Indeed, already in the earliest works on Kant, in resistance to his reification of the possibilities of experience, Benjamin attempted to think a form of intuition or imagination that is not, paraphrasing him, relegated to a "sorrowful [*traurig*]" need for certainty, or "mature" adjustment to the Sisyphean status quo (SW1: 101/ GS2.1:159). We might even be justified in saying that, like Adorno, Benjamin was always concerned with historicizing the Kantian imagination, to the extreme point at which it runs into disharmonious confrontation with the coercively schematizing, historically reducible understanding. In this respect, the dissolution of semblance (*Schein*), the downfall (*Untergang*) of the beautiful and the organic, and the shattering of the Kantian symbol of morality articulated in the *Trauerspiel* book, would be nothing other than a consequence of thinking through the historical character of this ancient philosophical task.

Conceiving of both Benjamin's and Adorno's work in these terms would not, however, mean that their attempts to burst open (*aufsprengen*) the continuum of history (SW4: 395/ GS1.2: 701), to burst out of the fetters of the concept, instead of adhering to the abstract mastery of subsumption (SW1: 70/ GS2.1: 151), was to be done at the expense of thinking through the other side of the, so to speak, intuitive excess. Hanging in the balance of the philosophical task of critique was rather the promise of a condition that has assuaged the hostility or antagonism of intuition *and* concept, nature *and* spirit. What must be overcome in Benjamin and Adorno's view is that which Benjamin in various registers calls the "poverty of experience," the degradation of expression (*Ausdruck*) into mere journalistic communication (*Mitteilung*), or the passive acceptance of the mythological world of perpetual punishment (SW4: 403/ GS:1.3: 1234), in

which, as "Capitalism as Religion" already teaches us, the demonic spell of *Schuld* is unleashed on all of humanity for all time (SW1: 288-9/ GS6:100-02). In short, Benjamin and Adorno clearly take up this ancient philosophical task of closing the sign and image for the sake of a happiness that would, at last, redeem (*erlösen*) nature from the mythological spell within which it is currently locked. Hence Adorno, despite learning well from Kant and Hegel, refused to abandon Stendhal's conception of art as the *promesse du bonheur* (GS7: 461/ AT: 311). "Not merely the objective possibility," insists the author of *Minima Moralia*, in homage to Benjamin's "Concept of History,"[3] "but also the subjective capacity for happiness can only be achieved in freedom" (GS4: 100/ MM: 91). The idealist insistence from Kant onward that freedom possesses a "higher level essentiality [*Wesenhaftigkeit*],"[4] bifurcated from the impulsive moment of *sensuous* pleasure, was not simply a mark of their theoretical shortcoming, it signified their complicity with the concept, at the expense of the *eros* of mimesis, the happiness of a subject-object intimacy that is prior to and co-extensive with the concept.

If, along these lines, we neglect this guiding theme of the redemption (*Erlösung*) from myth, and the correlative idea of the reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) between concept and intuition, we not only risk misunderstanding what critique and redemption mean for Benjamin and Adorno, we also more pressingly threaten to miss hearing the reverberation of the shock, the tensions that are echoed and stored up in the unreconciled state of historical experience, historical language, today.

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[3] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 389-400; Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" in GS 1.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 691-706.

[4] Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 4, translation modified; Adorno, *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme* in *Nachgelassenen Schriften*, vol. 14 (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag, 1998), 14.

For what, after all, is critique? From its inception it is, no doubt, built on a faint (*schwach*) promise. Whether in the famous examples of Plato's repudiation of *doxa* or Kant's resistance to a dogmatism that inadvertently leads us into flights of metaphysical fantasy,[5] the weakness of this promise consists in the fact that philosophy always arrives belatedly onto the, so to speak, scene. It confronts the illusions after the semblance that upholds the political circumstance of Ancient Athens, or after the semblance that fosters confidence in Leibnitz's grandly ill-conceived system, have already been established. Insofar as it always secretly knows that it is not the *praxis* needed to avoid the potentially devastating consequences of these illusions, critique cannot, in truth, be separated from a feeling of guilt which paradoxically insists that it can nevertheless do something. Indeed, critique is, no matter the form it takes—as art or as philosophy—something that happens in presentation (*Darstellung*) alone. In a certain sense, then, it is never the answer; it is always, rather, a moment in a process that continually fails at realization.

That critique could itself reflect the *a priori* sorrow (*Trauer*) of never being adequate to its object, i.e., ending the necessary illusion, and by extension, releasing itself from the nexus that forecloses the good life inscribed in its concept from the beginning, is a piece of historico-philosophical insight. Perhaps no two thinkers of the Twentieth Century knew this insight better than Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. Yet, to truly think the idea in whose name critique acts, to bear fully the weight of continually missing the unity of intuition and concept, image and sign, demands that thought push itself to its limits, or as Adorno once put it, grasp "its own impossibility" "for the sake of the possible" (GS4: 281/ MM: 247). This suggests that what calls thinking, or, as we will see, what calls the performance of artworks as a refuge for a banished mimesis, is essentially linked to what Adorno also famously maintains about dialectics.

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[5] See Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Paul Carus (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), 5.

In his words, "[the dialectic] moves [*bewegt*] by way of extremes [*durch die Extreme*], and, through the outermost consequence [*durch äußerste Konsequenz*], drives thought [*treibt Gedanken*] to *sudden reversal* [*zum Umschlag*], instead of qualifying it [*anstatt ihn zu qualifizieren*]" (GS4: 94/ MM: 86, translation modified; my emphasis).

Benjamin, in a similar manner, begins one of his most important essays about the shock of historical experience, "Surrealism," by discussing the superficial appearance (*Augenschein*) that deceives when the frantic push for *praxis* takes precedence (SW2.1: 206/ GS2.1: 295). From the outset this text is concerned with something like a reversal (*Umschlag*) that only gives the appearance of the true moment (*Augenblick*) of reversal. Is it mere chance that soon after his consideration of the spell that fetters us to what we politically oppose by falsely puffing up the revolutionary potential of the "poetic," Benjamin mentions Andre Breton's attempt to "stretch the outermost limits [*äußersten Grenzen*] of possibility" (SW2.1: 207/ GS2.1: 295-6)? If radical thought or artistic presentation senses the *Trauer* of political impotence, the guilt of critique that is compelled to adhere to an aesthetic "organization of pessimism," this must imply that the positive determination of that which is speechless (*sprachlos*) violates the ban on graven images, and becomes a "celebration in advance [*Vorfeier*]" (SW2.1: 216/ GS2.1: 307). Positively claiming to have closed the distance between sign and image risks disavowing the objective constellation that holds them, at present, violently apart. Such an aporia appears to cut off the ideal of naming the name, speaking for or giving voice (*ertönen lassen*) to the essential interrelation between subject and object, before it has even been attempted. Once again, we are confronted with the problem of hearing the shudder or lament (*Klage*) of nature.

In the face of such a predicament, that is, in the face of the concurrent need to find the expressionless language of sorrowful nature, and the knowledge of the impossibility of fulfilling

such a task, Adorno and Benjamin arguably turn to one idea above all others. That idea, that

"break " in the symbolic order (GS6: 153/ ND: 150), is the idea of mimesis. The reason for the

centrality of mimesis in both of their works is not simply because of the fact that, when we

understand it outside of its traditional associations with "representation" or mere "imitation,"[6]

mimesis conjures up a certain, so to speak, synesthetic explosiveness that counters the myopic

and colorless features of instrumental rationality. Nor is it simply because the mimetic impulse to

become similar to nature, to lose oneself in an immersion with a more immediate subject-object

relation, presages an experiential comportment that, unlike idealism's hubristic banishment of

nature, has finally achieved peace with it. Even further than these two explanations, which are

surely true, something of the fundamental elements built into mimesis itself, the *potential*

manner in which they *could* transform themselves, gives mimesis an irresistible, critical force.

In a mere footnote, buried like discarded refuse from the second edition to the

"Technology" essay, Benjamin declares that slumbering within mimesis, waiting to be awoken,

are the elements of play (*Spiel*) and semblance[7] (*Schein*) (SW3: 127/ GS7.1: 368-69). Although

Adorno may have contributed to Benjamin's redaction of this passage from the third edition, this

claim about the constitutive characteristics of mimesis is our point of departure for understanding

both thinkers' idea of mimesis. Adorno never disagreed with Benjamin, for instance, about how

the omnipresence of compulsory, toilsome work under advanced capitalism propels us, as if by a

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[6] For a traditional but thorough account of mimesis in literature see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953). For another excellent historical account of the various conceptions of mimesis from Plato and Aristotle to Benjamin, Adorno and Derrida, see Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture – Art – Society*, trans. Don Reneau (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995). Gebauer and Wulf are especially helpful in facilitating a departure from Auerbach's realism and essentialist presupposition about mimesis.

[7] The most common translation of *Schein* in Adorno and Benjamin scholarship is semblance. In regular usage, the verb *scheinen* means "to seem," or "to appear" a certain way. "Semblance" captures the potentially illusory aspect of *Schein*, but does not quite connote the German sense of the shining or lighting involved in *Schein*. What is more, there is no escaping its close link to *Erscheinung*, appearance. Given all of these resonances, I will often simply leave it untranslated as well.

sling shot, before the dialectical other of work. He never disagreed, in other words, that this condition, which today more than ever siphons qualitative difference into the brutal seriousness of the value-form, inexorably drives us towards play. Without yet understanding the intricate manner in which Benjamin and Adorno illustrate the play of mimesis, the play, to repeat, of becoming something other than oneself, frivolously resisting the unnecessary coercion of surplus labor-time, this element immediately fosters a sensitivity for that which attempts to twist out of the practical curse that remains plagued by subjective intentions and purposive (*zweckmäßig*) action. It conjures up, in short, a situation beyond the bad dichotomy of work and play.

Similarly, the potential reversal (*Umschlag*) of dialectical extremes unmistakably surfaces after a brief consideration of the element of *Schein*. Whether viewing it under the form of historical perception, or as the *appearance* (*Erscheinung*) that migrates into works of art, this component of mimesis always resonates in multifarious ways. It connotes at once the truth of appearance, the shining of the light, but also the *mere* appearance, the semblance that remains veiled by illusion. The amazing breadth of contrast entailed in *Schein* thus brings to mind Adorno's conception of ideology. On several occasions, Adorno refers to the "truth moment [*Wahrheitsmoment*] of ideology" (GS6: 152/ ND: 149). By this he means the moment that gives the lie to the notion that ideology—the superstructure—is completely false, while its other, truth, is completely true. What, in this nuanced respect, could critical art be but the mimetic *Schein* that is simultaneously false and true, ideologically complicit with domination *and yet* also a momentary flash of utopia? What, moreover, could the critical presentation of *Schein* be, but that which stands in as the appearance of the potential direction that socially tabooed impulses could take, but that despite their truth, remain false for having been tied to the unreconciled conditions of production that generate them? In this way, we might even go so far as to say that *Schein*, the

beautiful appearance that is, after all, *just play*, is a credit (*Gutschein*) that momentarily shines forth in resistance to the subjective spell of debt (*Schuld*), without ever fully cashing out. It cannot altogether release itself from its unhappiness, but we are mistaken to think that the false hope for the pristine, the drive for u-topia, that emerges from out of objective suffering, will simply be cast off, no longer *sensed* in the mimetic moment of cognition, by virtue of the historical trajectory of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*).

Schein is inextricably linked, then, to critique. The desire that leads us astray, that manifests itself in all mimetic productions, from *mana* to religion to art and pre-critical philosophy, is not wholly false. Rather, it too faintly promises that its object could be laid bare, opened to the excess of possibilities, and, acting for the sake of the *real* reconciliation it always secretly wanted, seized as the critique of the *mere Schein* that ought (*sollen*) to go under (*untergehen*). Such a mimetic impulse is, therefore, always moved by a process of secularization or profanation that desires to bring the illusions of transcendence back down to earth. In order to live up to the promise endemic to it, the passive doubling of the expropriation of mimesis, expressed in the form of disembodied elevation, is increasingly renounced. As the critique and rescue of transcendence, mimesis begins to sink down (*untergehen*) to the realm of the mundane, stubbornly clinging to the notion that critique could nonetheless engender the downfall (*Untergang*) of the rule of dogmatism, blind convention; that it could, in a word, instigate the downfall of a judgment that remains treacherously allied with Thrasymachus's mythical law.[8]

This brief sketch gives us a hint of the fact that, as we will address throughout this work, mimesis is, first and foremost, dynamic or historical. Just as for Marx the form of "protest" of all

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[8] This is, of course, a reference to Thrasymachus's argument that might makes right. Benjamin and Adorno always imply that the structure of myth is bound up with that which perpetuates the fatalism of submitting to domination or the rule of the stronger. See Plato, *Republic*, Books 1-10, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 338c.

religious expression is at the same time the "demand [for our] *real* happiness";[9] just as this out-cry is therefore compelled to shed, through historical development, its illusory disposition, the movement of mimesis is pushed to its critical extreme for the sake of the same illusionless principle. Thus, despite appearances, the appeal to mimesis by both thinkers is not an external imposition that, after the fact, simply employs a political or moral imperative. Benjamin already implied the immanence of mimesis to experience in his first articulations of it in the "Doctrine of the Similar."[10] There we witness the separation of sign and image, and the "fragile" demand placed upon mimesis to read the cryptogram of nature in history's fleetingness. Adorno, stretching still further, goes as far as to claim that mimesis itself contains a dialectic of englightement (GS7: 50/ AT: 29). We might even say that it *is* the site of the dialectic of enlightenment unfolding into an antagonistic rationality. Mimesis could, on the one hand, potentially sublate itself, pushing thought to fold back (*umschlagen*) upon itself, recognizing the trembling moment that identity expels, but it could also, on the other hand, descend into the regressive naturalization of what is not natural, taking revenge for the irretrievably lost. This contrast at once marks its character as an idea and the degree to which it is entwined with the movement of history. Children play in sand boxes and adults need umbrellas for the rain. Such proof of the mimetic taboo has reasserted itself ontogenetically and phylogenetically from time immemorial. Children hear music with all the paradise of immersion,[11] with all the hope of a

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[9] Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law.* Introduction," in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, ed. James S. Allen, et al (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 176; Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung," in *Werke*, vol. 1, ed. Karl Dietz (Berlin: Verlag, 1976), 378-391, 379. Hereafter, I will refer to the *Collected Works* and the *Werke* alongside their respective volume number, and each will be followed, after a comma, by the respective page numbers of the reference.

[10] Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar" in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.2, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). 694-698; Benjamin, "Lehre vom Ähnlichen" in GS 2.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974). 204-210.

[11] See Peter Handke and Wim Wenders, *Der Himmel über Berlin: ein Filmbuch* (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp, 1995), 78: "Als das Kind Kind war,/ erwachte es einmal in einem fremden Bett/ und jetzt immer wieder,/ erschienen ihm

"mimetic genius" (SW2.2: 721/ GS2.1: 211) that is given hope "for the sake of the hopeless ones" (SW1: 356/ GS1.1: 201), but they are also always within an inch of precocious adulthood, within an inch of banishing their playmates from the playground, degenerating into a vicious mode of protective self-preservation.

This simultaneous potential of mimesis also foreshadows what we will see is the need that drives it to follow the objectivity of the matter, what Adorno famously calls the primacy of the object (*Vorrang des Objekts*) (GS6:185/ ND: 183). Adorno, of course, planned to dedicate his unfinished last work, *Aesthetic Theory*, to Samuel Beckett. The previous allusion to an imagination that ultimately militates against a coercive concept, a normalized symbolic, points directly towards Beckett's scarcely examined concept of *Comment c'est* (*commencer*).[12] Is not *how it is* the essence of a critically engaged mimesis? If Adorno, as we will observe, is correct that experience has always been based on a mimetic taboo that violently wrenches sign from image and thus moves calamitously in the direction of altogether eliminating a *sense* (*Sinn*) for the object, then a mimesis that still, as it were, lives, that still says No, would be forced to engage in precisely that activity that is forbidden. It would be forced to become the mimesis of *how it is*, for the sake of beginning anew, instead of fleeing into the traditional fantasy of harmony. Hence the violent act of dispossession, which sets in motion the dialectic of enlightenment and which eventually leads to the nominalistic apathy for all subject-object relations, is not simply the cause

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viele Menschen schön/ und jetzt nur noch im Glücksfall,/ stellte es sich klar ein Paradies vor/ und kann es jetzt höchstens ahnen,/ konnte es sich Nichts nicht denken/ und schaudert heute davor."

[12] Adorno references this title to Beckett's late novel three times in *Aesthetic Theory*. *Comment c'est* obviously played a major role in orienting the thoughts of a book that was to be dedicated to Beckett. Moreover, this "novel" contains no punctuation and thus, on the one hand, presents an unparalleled degree of explosive imagination by leaving the accents and lacuna equally open to a comedic and horrifying emphasis. On the other hand, there is no denying just how much this work presents an account of the fragmented memory of objective spirit, of the unspeakable torture involved in no longer being able to wholly synthesize experience amidst the "mud" from which the narrator speaks. The play on the French "how it is" (*comment c'est*) and "to begin" (*commencer*) thus speaks to the negativity of experience that Adorno never ceased to point out in aesthetic criticism. In a mimetic immersion with how it is, the allegory of a new beginning shines forth. See Samuel Beckett, *How it is*, trans. Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

that necessitates a migration[13] of mimesis into the realm of art as refuge. While exceedingly true

about mimesis in general, such violence against mimesis is as little a story of art history as

Adorno's migration to the United States is an idiosyncratic confrontation with "damaged life."

To cite Horace, Marx's continual refrain: *De te fabula narratur*.[14] The banishment and migration

of mimesis is our story too.

It is not for nothing that Marx himself, who of course once declared philosophy's need to

change the world,[15] refers to the source of the false *Schein*, value, as something "purely social."[16]

If anyone prefigured just how much labor stands in-between the split of nature and spirit,

mimesis and rationality, potentially taking on regressive characteristics, but also potentially

becoming human for the first time, surely it was Marx. Thus, when one takes the critical moment

(*Augenblick*) seriously, the extreme point of ruptured circulation, ruptured momentum, one is

likely drawn to Part II of *Capital*, Volume 2: "The Turnover of Capital (*Der Umschlag des*

Kapitals)."[17] In this work, also discarded like so much refuse from serious consideration, we

discover the pivotal concept of *Umschlagszeit*, the turnover-time of capitalism. Having already

theorized the constrained modes of appearance (*Erscheinungsformen*) under the capitalist mode

of production[18]—a position that strikingly anticipates Benjamin and Adorno's aversion to the

appearances that are forced into subjective communication (*Mitteilung*), forced to step into

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[13] I owe the basis of my understanding of the migration of mimesis in Benjamin and Adorno's thought to the groundbreaking work of Shierry Weber Nicholsen. See Nicholsen, "Aesthetic Theory's Mimesis of Walter Benjamin" in *Exact Imagination, Late Work* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 140-41.

[14] Cited from Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 90/ *Werke* 23, 12.

[15] Engels and Marx, *Collected Works* 5, 5/ *Werke* 3, 533f.

[16] Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 149/ *Werke* 23, 71.

[17] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 2, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin Books, 1978); Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 2 in *Werke*, vol. 24, ed. Karl Dietz (Berlin: Verlag, 1963).

[18] See, for example, *Capital*, vol. 1, 127/ *Werke* 23, 51.

appearance (*in Erscheinung treten*) as the *Schein* of exchangeability[19]—Marx establishes the

underpinnings of today's even more frantic, decapitated propulsion to intensify the exploitation

of labor. The escalating need to shorten this turnover time, driving out one product after another,

one human after another, in a *tempo* that is always ahead of itself, already adapting itself to the

next revolution in the forces of production, anticipates the so-called immaterial labor[20] of

advanced capitalism, in which pausing to take a breath, sensing the aura, causes more pain than

submitting to the rhythm of the alienated spectator who can now opt to "experience [his or her]

own annihilation [*Vernichtung*] as a supreme aesthetic pleasure" (SW4: 270/ GS1.2: 508).

Two more passages from Benjamin and Adorno are germane to these questions centered

on what is now emerging as a critical mimesis that strives after its immanent idea of

reconciliation (*Versöhnung*). In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes,

> [t]he old prehistoric shudder [*Schauer*] already envelops [*umwittert*] the environment [*Umwelt*] of our parents because we ourselves are no longer bound to this environment by tradition. The perceptual worlds [*Merkwelten*] corrode [*zersetzen*] more rapidly; what they contain of the mythic comes more quickly and more brutally [*krasser*] to the fore [*zum Vorschein*]; and a wholly different perceptual world must be speedily erected [*aufgerichtet*] to oppose it. This is how the accelerated tempo of technology appears in light of the primal history of the present [*aktuellen Urgeschichte*]. (AP: 462 [N2a,2]/ GS5.1: 576, translation modified)

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[19] The following passages from *Capital,* vol. 1 run parallel to what we will discuss at length as the moment of stepping into appearance (*in Erscheinung treten*), the moment that, in keeping with the communicative, instrumental character of conceptual identity, sells out the singularity of the object, but also points to something outside of that mode of mastery. The commodity form is, therefore, concomitant with the coercion and false equivalence of a mode of identity that effaces mimesis and fetishizes the subjective substitute. It cannot be accidental that Benjamin and Adorno both employ a Marxian variation of the verb *eintreten*, to enter in, to emerge, or more literally, to step in: "The natural form [*Naturalform*] of the commodity becomes its value-form. But, note well, this *quid pro quo* only occurs in the case of a commodity B (coat, or maize, or iron, etc.) when some other commodity A (linen etc.) steps [*tritt*] into a value-relation with it, and then only within the limits of this relation" (*Capital* 1, 148/ *Werke* 23, 71 translation modified). "But as soon as it steps forth [*auftritt*] as a commodity, it changes into a sensuously supersensuous thing [*verwandelt er sich in ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*]" (*Capital* 1, 163/ *Werke* 23, 85, translation modified). "Money constantly removes [*entfernt*] commodities from the sphere of circulation, by constantly stepping [*tritt*] into their place in circulation, and in this way continually moving away from its own starting-point. Hence although the movement of money is merely the expression [*Ausdruck*] of the circulation of commodities, the situation appears [*erscheint*] to be the reverse of this, namely the circulation of commodities seems to be the result of the movement of money" (*Capital* 1, 211-12/ *Werke* 23, 129, translation modified). For more on this dominance of the commodity form and the consequence it has on all modes of appearance, see Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,1971).

[20] See Maruzio Lazarrato, "Immaterial Labor," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paulo Virno (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133-150.

Then, in a letter to Benjamin, cited later in the *Arcades Project* as well, Adorno maintains that,

> [w]ith the vitiation of their use value, the alienated things are hollowed out [*ausgehöhlt*] and, as ciphers,[21] they draw in meanings [*Bedeutungen*]. Subjectivity takes possession of them while it invests [*einlegt*] them with intentions of desire and fear [*Intentionen von Wunsch und Angst*]. And insofar as defunct things [*abgeschiednen Dinge*] stand in as images [*Bilder*] of subjective intentions, these latter present themselves as immemorial and eternal. Dialectical images are constellations between alienated things and incoming meaning, pausing [*innehaltend*] in the moment [*Augenblick*] of undifferentiatedness [*Indifferenz*] between death and meaning. While things in appearance [*Schein*] are awakened to what is newest, death transforms the meanings into what is most ancient. (AP 466 [N5, 2]/ GS5.1: 582, translation modified)

Yes, the *Umschlag* is a hit (*Schlag*) over the head; its speed, bound up with the frantic deflection of ancient trauma that forgets from whence it came. But does not its truth remain a cipher to be read, gone the second we try to identify it? What, then, would be the condition of momentarily glimpsing the rescue of nature, if in actuality the *Umschlag* never turned back on itself, never felt the eternal recurrence of the same as self-incurred damnation?

Benjamin and Adorno, who never tired of trying to think this moment that calls a halt to the "progress" of our *Umschlagszeit*, that interrupts convention in and through an encounter with it, in and through critically gleaning the play of meaning as it passes away or dies out in language, give a distinct answer to this question. For them the condition of recognition would require a particularly embedded, historical mode of mimetic comportment—one that aims to spellbind the spell (*der Bann bannen*). It would, to state it differently, require a faculty that understands the radical transformation necessary to harness the moment prior to outright determination, the mimetic moment of *Indifferenz*. The possibility of interrupting the *Schein* of newness—the glare that blinds us from the ancient wound, the *Urgeschichte* of perpetual punishment—means that there is as much a critical moment in the apprehension of nature's changing constellation as there is in the apprehension of history's constellation. Seizing it may

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[21] The concepts that Adorno is addressing in this formulation also parallel Benjamin's early conception of nature-history (*Naturgeschichte*) in the *Trauerspiel*, quoted from Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* 60 (Summer 1984): 111-24, 119/ GS1: 345-,365: "[w]hen […] history comes onto the scene, it does so as a cipher to be read. 'History' is writ across the countenance of nature in the sign language of transience."

well require a mimesis that cannot name its object, that is compelled to migrate from actual experience into the sorrowful and politically neutralized realm of art, but follow the object it must nonetheless do, lest it completely forget the promise of happiness. It is only with a dynamic idea of mimesis, then, that we avoid selling out the silence of nature. By steering clear of the direct presentation of it, autonomously following mimesis into the deepest recesses of the hardened and alienated, the least "organic," the tension-filled moment of reversal, the shock of the turnover (*Umschlag*), can find its decision (*Entscheidung*) without having to qualify itself under the banner of morality. With good reason, music, i.e., the eloquent play between sound and nature (*Laut und Natur*), rests at the heart of Benjamin and Adorno's conception of the "non-sensuous similarity" involved in mimesis, not the photo-realism of Benjamin's least dialectical text, the "Technology" essay. Just as music is at once closest to and most distant from us, that which is furthest from nature, which only bears *non*-sensuous similarity to it, more forcefully calls forth the indetermination of subject and object, such that the line between nature and history starts to blur and is seized in a snapshot, just before it is once more incorporated into (positive) dialectics. To express it by merging Benjamin's and Adorno's thought, without mimesis—that immediate, pre-cognitive register of nature-history (*Naturgeschichte*), that dynamic faculty which is always on its way to objectification—the possibility of presenting the saturated chance of now-time (*Jetztzeit*) as it erupts into a quivering image of *how it is* (*Comment c'est*), would be squandered. The constellation is just that historical. Language is just that historical. They wait to be heard, ever protesting the taboo on mimesis.

Throughout this work the reader will observe more than a few instances that veer from a straightforward adherence to discursive presentation. This tendency is not merely done so as to enact a mimesis of Benjamin's and Adorno's own styles, both of which clearly aim to resist foundational or logocentric thinking. It is also, more importantly, done to remain as faithful as possible to the truth-content of each of their works. Indeed, to insist that their writings could ever be reducible to the implied seamlessness of a logical syllogism without glaringly betraying the polyvalent meanings stored up in them, is to do nothing less than efface the mimetic, non-subsumable moment built into all cognition. In order, therefore, to avoid such a reduction while nevertheless contextualizing the course of our discussion that is compelled, for the sake of the subject matter itself, to stretch the boundaries of a univocal narrative, I offer the following synopsis of the chapters:

Regarded as a whole, Chapter One is guided by the attempt to read Benjamin's depiction of mimesis and language alongside the early works on *Trauerspiel* and *Goethe's Elective Affinity*, as well as the late work on "History." Instead of viewing his work, as is often done, primarily through the lens of the "Technology" essay, this broader approach leads us to see that Benjamin's better inclinations actually run counter to many of the claims in the "Technology" essay. More specifically, the famous transition from the ritual to the exhibition stage of experience, in which a critical role is attributed to play at the expense of the simultaneous transformation of semblance, is shown to be, on Benjamin's own terms, overstressed and untenable. As opposed to a position that claims that the *complete* downfall (*Untergang*) of the aura and semblance instigates the possibility of politicized perception, in truth, Benjamin on the whole asserts that the disenchantment of mimesis leads to a sorrowful, musical comportment that preserves something of the latter two concepts. With this in view, I demonstrate that for

Benjamin there is a similar structure operative in what he describes as the onomatopoetic or material trace between sound and thing, and the mournful attempt to find the language of nature's lament (*Klage*) via music. In showing this fundamental mimetic relationship, i.e., in illustrating that subject and object, microcosm and macrocosm, are not indifferent to each other, but are rather bound to one another through the polyphonous cluster of "non-sensuous similarity," we begin to notice how mimesis is historically constituted. It becomes clear that the elements of immediate, perceptual experience, once gleaned by the ancients, have migrated to and are stored up in the echo of language. Sign and image do, indeed, become divided, mediated, but this does not mean that attempting to give voice to their non-identical unity is completely destined to fail. It rather means that in order for similarity to spring forth, in order for it to step into appearance (*in Erscheinung treten*), the magical or intuitive side of mimesis must align itself with the communicative or conceptual realm. A promise, accordingly, emerges in the historical development of mimesis. *Schein* must remain a component of an unreconciled world, but art and language, which take on the lineage of immediate mimesis, could bear the implicit desire for *Schein* to completely grow dim, completely go under (*untergehen*), thereby instituting *real* reconciliation. We come to see, in other words, that mimesis will ultimately be driven to resist traditional harmony in the expressionless or interrupted moment (*Augenblick*) of critique; it will thus paradoxically move toward the sublime recognition of intentionless nature. In this way, as we transition to Adorno's understanding of mimesis, I argue that Benjamin has not only laid the grounds for grasping the dialectic between mimesis and rationality, he has also laid the grounds for understanding Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the dialectic of enlightenment.

Chapter Two begins by highlighting the importance of employing Adorno to fill in the gaps of Benjamin's mimetic narrative. While it is argued that Benjamin has set the foundations

for understanding the dialectic of enlightenment as a mimetic death-struggle against myth, we observe that Adorno's account of why, in fact, the sign and image become separated, is more thorough. The shudder before the chaos of external and internal nature gives rise to a taboo on mimesis. This taboo is always on its way towards an attempt to master that which cannot be mastered; it implicitly pushes mimesis into becoming the coercion of an identity-thinking (*Identitätsdenken*) that would, if wholly successful, not only do away with hearing the lament or suffering of nature, but also efface that true relationality of nonsensuous similarity. The taboo on mimesis is not, however, something that we should completely eschew. Of course, the historical violence against mimesis, based on dispossession and fear, eventually maintains ideologically that a reconciliation between subject and object has somehow already been achieved, but this does not mean that mimesis—conceived as a quasi-regulative idea—is incapable of recognizing its own fetters and in that way striving to fulfill the, as of yet, fetishized unity of mimesis and rationality. Thus we learn that if this predicament does not result in the embrace of the subject-formation that emerges from out of primal repression, mimesis could lose touch of the material trace, forget the objective tension registered between word and thing, and, in the late form of the culture industry, the late form of identification as adaptation (*Angleichung*) to death, reveal that Kant's secret of the schematism is really only the schematism of production. In short, the death drive, dialectically aligned with *eros*, could be harnessed for the sake of the *sublation* of mimesis, but nothing in the laws of its internal movement safeguards the actualization of this possibility. The analysis of this chapter, to be sure, once again generates an inkling of how both language and art are compelled to become the refuge of a mimesis that is banished from empirical experience. So as to situate the specific manner in which, according to Adorno, artworks attempt to achieve this rescue of the sensuous moment by inaugurating and then

maintaining critique, I thus conclude by distinguishing between the different forms of mimesis involved in aesthetic and nonaesthetic language.

Having set up the promise of a mimetic experience that is fundamentally dialectical, but nevertheless consigned to express its possibilities in the pacified realm of art, we are, by Chapter Three, in a position to observe how Adorno takes up Benjamin's notion of the *Untergang des Scheins* as the trajectory of mimetic critique. This chapter is thus guided by the attempt to understand Adorno's concept of the "redemption of *Schein*" (GS7: 164/ AT: 107). Through a close reading of *Aesthetic Theory*, we discover that, just as the more dialectically attuned moments in Benjamin know that *Schein* is locked within the paradox of wanting to be real happiness, Adorno conceives of *Schein* as wanting to destroy the conditions of its production, the plight of a reified world. In order to illuminate a critical comportment that, to state it differently, must aim to negate *Schein* itself, it becomes evident that artworks need to rescue something of the auratic and magical elements of experience in an attempt to re-enchant what has become disenchanted. More specifically, we learn that the aura never was, in actuality, simply a matter of the "here and now" of the object of nature. Rather, it always promised the more (*das Mehr*) of experience, promised a situation outside or transcendent to its own presentation. If it is true that this conception of the aura informs the comportment of art, then, when we couple it with the consciousness that a secularized instantiation of magic could resist the formal violence of identity's value-form, we discover that the traditional, static category of the beautiful cannot maintain its misrecognition without reversing into the ugly. Stated simply, the dynamic development of mimesis impels artworks to fight against the falsehood of harmony (*Stimmigkeit*). Once more following Benjamin on the critical movement of art towards the sublime, we begin to see that binding the shudder, hearing its reverberation in that which avoids

organic *Schein*, is another way of saying that mimesis follows objectivity into the extreme point of how it is (*Comment c'est*). With a view, then, to concretizing our analysis of art's metamorphosis as the manifestation of mimetic development, I conclude by examining the music of Beethoven. Before transitioning to the dynamic of play, we realize that play and *Schein* cannot be held apart as rigidly as Benjamin once maintained. Beethoven's play already points to the developments of Twentieth Century art, whereby humor increasingly becomes the vehicle of critical expression.

The final chapter of this work is thus driven to think the outermost consequences of the play element in mimesis, just as the previous chapter did so regarding *Schein*. Unlike the Benjamin of the "Technology" essay, who neglects the potentially regressive character of play, Adorno's aesthetics provides a conception of play that is, indeed, potentially critical, but that is also conscious of how much play always borders on a frightening disciplinarity. Hence I show that the latter possibility is bound up with the repetition compulsion and therefore, instead of attempting to absolve the guilt of *Schein* through a transformed play, descends to the affirmation of mere sport. If play is granted too much importance, or is conceived as being abstractly removed from the antagonism of the object impinging on experience, it threatens to become that very adaptation to death that was previously discussed in Chapter Two. We come to grasp, then, that for Adorno there are serious consequences indexed in the comportment of artworks once they begin to sense just how horrifyingly complicit play has traditionally been. Now finally in a position to understand the actual emergence of the sublime in the realm of art, it turns out that the sublime is just as subject to historical transformation as the beautiful was. Even more strongly stated, the sublime is the truth of the beautiful, or, in Adorno's terms, "dissonance is the truth about harmony" (GS7: 168/ AT: 110). If this narrative is correct, then it follows that Kant's

conception of the supersensible substratum or clean split between nature and spirit, actually comes to look clownish, puffed up, or laughable for having missed the degree to which humans are currently imprisoned by their empirical conditions. Transforming its character and thus for the first time reflecting the natural element that was previously banished, the movement toward the sublime anticipates the modern farce. It, in other words, already points towards a comportment of artworks that is based on the convergence of the sublime and play (GS7: 295/ AT: 198), the expression of which is the downfall (*Untergang*) of tragedy and traditional comedy. I thus bring the discussion to a close by asking whether or not the consequence of our analysis, the consequence of following mimesis where it wants to go, is that both aesthetic taste and aesthetic comportment need to be legitimated in objective terms.

The conclusion to this project is an attempt to explore some of the characteristics that such an objective aesthetics might consists of amidst the so-called postmodern condition. By grasping the manner in which autonomy and mimesis are counterparts to the same historical process, we not only dispel several of the misreadings of Adorno's work, we lay the grounds for a materialist aesthetics that is dedicated, just as Benjamin and Adorno once were, to the idea of mimesis. In a manner that, in the form of an introduction, can only be hinted at, I begin to show that the musicality of mimesis is compelled to move in the direction of electronification, the expression of today's unprecedentedly reified, digitized experience. The language of music merges with the machine. It comes to resemble this alienated, hallowed out world, precisely so that it can upset the course of a condition that has run out of tears—a condition that, more than ever, seems to be left with nothing but deranged, maniacal laughter.

Before finally entering into to the body of this work, I would like to forestall an

ambiguity that will likely surface for the close reader. In the end, my analysis is an attempt to

give voice to precisely the impossibility of giving voice to a mimesis that is dynamic, that is

always on its way towards something other than itself, namely rational or spiritual form. Were it

otherwise, mimesis would simply be the Kantian imagination, stagnate, incapable of showing

itself differently at different historical hours. There is, indeed, a slippage between the concept

and intuition, and, furthermore, a mimetic process that sets their dynamic into motion while

determining each side as co-extensive with the other. This indicates that to speak as abstractly

about *Schein* and *Spiel* as I do in the following work, is a sort of betrayal of the matter itself, a

descent into what Hegel long ago called picture-thinking.[22] This is also not to mention the fact

that, despite referring to these concepts and their relationship repeatedly, Adorno never once

explicitly spoke, like Benjamin, about the joint play and semblance built into mimesis. Yet if one

does not endeavor to see the fault-lines that, out of need (*Nötigung*), push or compel mimesis to

identify with and against the hardened and alienated (GS7: 39/ AT: 21), shuddering or shocking

thought from the slumber that would uphold an idealistic separation from nature, then being able

to locate the critical capacity of artworks, let alone a philosophy that analyzes them and historical

experience, is doomed to failure. Expressed differently, neglecting to glean the historical

character of mimesis, play, and semblance would reduce mimesis to the emptiness of a

transhistorical category that cannot ultimately say anything about an altering sensitivity for the

changing historical constellation. In short, as we will see in our analysis of Benjamin, not

endeavoring to describe the dynamic of mimesis, and therefore forsake it in our very description,

would amount to abandoning the possibility of reading, of translation.

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[22] See, for example, G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 37.

For this reason, I ask for the reader's patience about whether what is illustrated is happening solely on the level of mimesis, on the level of its doubled play with the objectification process, or on the level of pure conceptual form. Adorno and Benjamin always suggest the simultaneity of both of these dialectical opposites, requiring that mimesis rub against communication in order to step into appearance (*in Erscheinung treten*). My task is, likewise, a kind of violent translation that is resigned to the humble effort of harnessing certain inflections in the work of these great thinkers.

Part One: The Experiental Grounds of Mimesis

Chapter 1: The Language of Mimesis

In a 1933 letter to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin wrote that he had devised a "new theory of language."[1] Although at the time he assumed that this theory would remain a private matter— apparently only to be discussed amongst his closest friends—it soon became abundantly clear that it would not only subtly migrate into the whole of his future work, it would also resonate with his earlier conception of language. Just how much this new theory, consisting of Benjamin's idea of an historically dynamic mimetic faculty, is in keeping with the earlier work, has gone largely unnoticed by present scholarship. For it by no means departs from the so-called theological musings of the earlier works on *Trauerspiel*, "Language as Such," and *Goethe's Elective Affinities*. Rather, if anything, the idea of mimesis enriches and expands these texts, while nevertheless preserving their general impulse. More specifically, Benjamin's early concern with humanity's biblical fall from nature, and its attempt to eloquently express (*ausdrucken*) or lend a voice to (*ertönen lassen*[2]) this sorrowful (*traurig*) predicament, is in no way foreign to his delineation of the historical transformations of mimesis.

Such considerations of the cohesiveness of Benjamin's thought should begin to disabuse the commentary from rigidly separating the alleged theological and Marxist stages of Benjamin's

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[1] Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gerschom Sholem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 28.

[2] See SW1: 260/ GS4.1: 18: "On the other hand, as regards the meaning, the language of translation can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to [*ertönen zu lassen*] the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*." The German is quite significant here. *Ertönen lassen* is a modal verb combination that can be used to describe singing, or needing to say something important. But even more, it is used to describe a type of blowing. One could use it, for example, to say that they are blowing air into an instrument. It therefore rings with the etymology of aura, which is originally a breeze, wind, or air. The persistence of aura or the spark of life will be a crucial theme as we continue.

thought.[3] After all, Benjamin himself was quite conscious of the unity of his intellectual development. He even went so far as to imply that his burgeoning work on the mimetic faculty could bridge the gap between these two, seemingly disparate, fields.[4] Thus the resurgent interest in language should not be interpreted as resulting from Benjamin secretly taking Scholem's side over Brecht about the supposed insuperability between Marxism and theology. The now famous essays on "History" and "Technology," which followed the more explicit theorization of mimesis, to be sure, bear the imprint of both Brecht's Marxian influence *and* Benjamin's own linguistic, metaphysical concerns. For instance, the "Concept of History" focuses not only on the earlier problems of speaking to suffering, of speaking against history's continual pile of "wreckage [*Trümmer*]" (SW4: 392/ GS1.2: 697), it does so precisely in and through its attempt to conceive historical materialism as the presentation (*Darstellung*) of a truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*)[5] that ruptures the ever-recurrent instantiations of myth and ideology, fate and progress.

Considering these intricate layers of Benjamin's thought, one might wonder if the true import of the oft-cited "Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" has been

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[3] Since a major portion of this work will try to draw on the similarities between Benjamin and Adorno, it is noteworthy that—however much it is, of course, secularized—the theological impulse in Adorno's work is not subject to this rigid binary either. For more on the non-oppositional relationship between theology and materialism in both Adorno and Benjamin see Rolf Tiedemann, "Concept, Image, Name: On Adorno's Utopia of Knowledge" in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 123-145.

[4] See Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 372.

[5] Benjamin's first formulation of his concept of truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) is in the early work on *Goethe* (SW1: 300/ GS1.1: 128). As we will see below, especially in Section IV of this chapter, the concept of truth-content is central to understanding Benjamin's and Adorno's projects. The core of this concept rests on the fact that truth-content is neither reducible to the historical circumstance that helps produce its formation, nor is it reducible to the more direct material-content that is presented in the work. Truth-content is, therefore, that part of the work that says something more, that promises, or reveals a truth that is perhaps too untimely for its age. This is why Adorno would say something to the effect that Bach's music emerges from his relationship with the church, or Beethoven is tied to bourgeois heroism, but the truth-content of their works far exceeds these conditions. In this respect, we might say that truth-content is the fracture in historicism that is always present, yet always recognized too late. For more on this theme of Benjamin's and Adorno's philosophy speaking for that which comes too late or was "missed," see Rebecca Comay, "Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*," in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. Andrew E. Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2005), 32-59, 58-59.

adequately grasped. Perhaps even more than in the essay on "History," with this essay we most acutely observe the, as it were, centrifugal force of mimesis drawing together the various features of Benjamin's *oeuvre*. To state it more strongly, this essay does not simply consist of commentary on new developments in Twentieth Century technical art, it is rather a historico-philosophical index of a dynamic conception of mimetic experience (*Erfahrung*)—one that was and arguably remains on the precipice of crisis. Let us, therefore, begin with it, so that we can as succinctly as possible bring to light Benjamin's theory of mimesis as the mediating term in historical experience, the mediating term in what we will call the task of critique that ultimately migrates into the comportment of artworks. Addressing the language of mimesis in this chapter will put us in a position to understand several important themes that are operative in both thinkers' idea of mimesis. Firstly, it will demonstrate how much the above-mentioned constituents of mimesis, namely semblance and play, are indeed, historically constituted. Next, we will learn that, despite identifying how important these constituents are, the "Technology" essay mistakes, on Benjamin's own terms and against the spirit of his other works, the precise manner in which the dynamic of disenchantment transforms mimesis. Lastly, by reading this dynamic as that which unfolds in the direction of critical comportment, i.e., that increasingly senses the need to give voice to speechless (*sprachlos*) nature, we will reveal how Benjamin, in fact, grounds Adorno's theory of the dialectic of enlightenment endemic to mimesis.

I. The Role of Mimesis in the Age of Technical Reproduction

Part of the reason why commentators, with perhaps the exception of Fabrizio Desideri,[6] have rarely attempted to read the "Technology" essay as pivotal in illuminating the central importance mimesis plays in the whole of Benjamin's thought, is that until recently, many likely only read Benjamin's third version of the text. For reasons that can only incite speculation, but that were likely due to Adorno's harsh criticism (CC: 129), a crucial footnote from the second version, which is directly concerned with conceiving mimesis as a kind of register of experience, was deleted from the third version. Benjamin obviously invested a great deal of energy into thinking through this version of the idea of mimesis, because in addition to resembling the "Doctrine of the Similar" and its redacted counterpart, "On the Mimetic Faculty," it is intimately linked to the fragments of the same period, "The Significance of Beautiful Semblance" and "On Astrology." In the first half of this extended footnote we can already witness the constellation of several key elements coming together:

> The significance [*Bedeutung*] of beautiful semblance [*schönen Scheins*] is rooted in the age of auratic[7] perception [*auratischen Wahrnehmung*] that is now coming to an end. The aesthetic theory of that era was most fully articulated by Hegel, for whom beauty is "the appearance [*Erscheinung*] of spirit in its immediate…sensuous form, created by the spirit as the form adequate to itself." Although this formulation has some derivative qualities, Hegel's statement that art strips away the "*Schein* and deception [*Täuschung*] of this bad [*schlechten*], transient [*vergänglichen*] world" from the "true content [*Gehalt*] of the appearances [*Erscheinungen*]" already diverges from the traditional experiential basis [*Erfahrungsgrund*] of this doctrine. This ground of experience is the aura. By contrast, Goethe's work is still entirely imbued with beautiful *Schein* as an auratic actuality [*Wirklichkeit*]. Mignon, Ottilie, and Helena partake of that reality. "The beautiful is neither the veil [*Hülle*] nor the veiled object but rather the object *in* its veil": this is the quintessence of Goethe's view of art, and that of antiquity. The decline [*Verfall*] of this view makes it doubly urgent that we look back at its origin. This lies in mimesis as the primal phenomenon [*Urphänomen*] of all artistic activity. (SW3: 127/ GS7.1: 368, translation modified)

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[6] Fabrizio Desideri, "The Mimetic Bond: Benjamin and the Question of Technology," in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, 108-120.

[7] It is interesting to note that the nearly identical fragment "The Significance of Beautiful Semblance" ("*Die Bedeutung des schoenen Scheins*," GS7.2: 667-68) does note employ the adjective "auratic."

Shierry Weber Nicholson has gone a long way to clarify the meaning of the opening lines of this passage.[8] She has shown that, contrary to a common misconception, Benjamin's theory of the aura does not maintain that the aura only emanates from art-objects and, once the transition from the ritualistic stage to the exhibition stage of art occurs, only these art-objects lose their aura. Rather, as evidenced by the appeal to auratic perception (*Wahrnehmung*), apprehending the aura, the "unique appearance of a distance [*einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne*]" (SW4:255/ GS1.2: 479), is a matter of the identificatory, or better, mimetic, distance endemic to experience and its relationality itself. The transformations of artworks do not happen by accident, they are always grounded in or have a material basis (*Erfahrungsgrund*) in experiential comportment.[9] By virtue of what Hegel calls the essential doubling immanent to the movement of rationality,[10] the particularly modern drive to "get closer [*näherzubringen*]" to everything (SW4:255/ GS1.2: 479)[11] must alter not just experience itself, but also its self-understanding achieved through artistic or ritualistic (re)productions.

Thus Nicholson is right to highlight the link between mimesis and aura, as Benjamin does above, by appeal to a similar passage in the late work on Baudelaire. "If we think of the associations [*Vorstellungen*] which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, seek to cluster [*zu gruppieren streben*] around the object of perception, and if we call those associations the aura of that object, then the aura attaching to the object [*Gegenstand*] of an intuition [*Anschauung*]

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[8] For more on this connection between the aura and mimesis see Nicholsen, "Aesthetic Theory's Mimesis of Walter Benjamin," 155-158.

[9] Along these lines, Gregg Horowitz has addressed in Adorno's work this problem of locating artistic comportment via a robust, materialist method, while nevertheless avoiding the descent into historicism. To express it differently, Horowitz attempts to illustrate how for Adorno, like Benjamin, the double-bind of following historical rootedness yet also maintaining historical distance is always a demand placed on thought and artworks. See Gregg Horowitz, "Art History and Autonomy," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 259-285.

[10] G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 31: "Things in nature are only *immediate* and *single*, while man as spirit *duplicates* himself, in that (i) he *is* as things in nature are, but (ii) he is just as much *for* himself; he sees himself, represents himself to himself, thinks, and only on the strength of this active placing himself before himself is he spirit."

[11] This impulse to get closer to everything is the basis of Adorno's conception of bourgeois *Entkunstung*, literally to de-artify, or to abolish artistic qualities. See GS7: 32/ AT: 16.

corresponds precisely to the experience which, in the case of an object of use, inscribes itself as long practice (SW4: 337/ GS1.2: 644, translation modified). Aside from highlighting the transitions of perception and tempo at work in the movement from feudal to industrial society, we observe that this mimetic perception is not reducible to imitation, adequation, or the visual realm. Related, instead, to the unconscious, to Proust's involuntary memory, mimesis must be a type of identification that, un-beckoned, could synesthetically call forth a rich cluster of experiential associations. What is more, for a certain experiential age, these sensuous representations and their, as we will see, "nonsensuous similarity," remain at a distance, apparently veiled out of sacred appreciation for the singularity or non-exchangeability of objects. However subject to change, something of mimesis appears, therefore, to always resist bourgeois categorization. Or, following Benjamin's conception in the *Trauerspiel* and "Language" essay, instead of subsumption, classification, or the rigid mode of having (*Haben*), of knowledge as property, mimetic language appears to be bound to *eros* (OTS: 29/ GS1.1: 209). In this regard, mimesis is, in part, tied to the "reading" the translator employs.[12] "[A] translation," writes Benjamin, "instead of imitating the original, must lovingly and in detail [*ins Einzelne*] incorporate the original's way of meaning [*Art des Meinens*]" (SW1: 260/ GS4.1: 18).[13] To simply imitate would be too reified, too reductionistic, it would not have the courage of sympathetic absorption with the other without thereby devouring or wholly unveiling that other.

We should not forget, however, that this auratic mode of perception which, to repeat, lacks the modern technological compulsion to incessantly unveil every aspect of nature, is apparently coming to an end or going under. This does not necessarily imply that mimesis itself

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[12] For more on Benjamin's connection between reading and mimesis see, again, Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination*, 140-42. Roger Foster has also acutely pinpointed this connection by showing that it implies that the language elicited by the immersion of mimetic reading is mute or expresses something "more." See Roger Foster, *The Recovery of Experience* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 30.

[13] For more on the connection between mimesis and the task of translation see Ibid., 57-78.

is deteriorating, it simply indicates that the features of it that were particularly accented in another age, are now shifting their emphasis. Of essential importance to our analysis, the two elements that Benjamin identifies as constitutive of the dynamic of mimesis are play (*Spiel*) and semblance (*Schein*). Notice just how historical, indeed dialectical, he claims their role is as he continues the footnote:

> The mime [*Nachmachende*] makes what he makes only illusorily (*scheinbar*). And the oldest form of imitation had only a single material to work with: the body of the mime himself. Dance and language [*Sprache*], gestures of body and lips, are the earliest manifestations of mimesis.—The mime makes his matter illusorily [*Der Nachmachende macht seine Sache scheinbar*]. One could also say that he plays [*spielt*] the matter [*die Sache*]. Thus we encounter the polarity informing mimesis. In mimesis, tightly interfolded like cotyledons, slumber [*schlummern*] the two aspects of art: *Schein* and play [*Spiel*]. Of course this polarity can interest the dialectician only if it has a historical role. And that is, in fact, the case. This role is determined by the world-historical conflict [*weltgeschichtliche Auseinandersetzung*] between the first and second technologies [*Technik*]. *Schein* is the most withdrawn [*abgezogenste*]—but therefore the most ubiquitous [*beständigste*]— schema of all the magic procedures [*magichen Verfahrungsweisen*] of the first technology, whereas play is the inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimenting procedures [*experimentierenden Verfahrungsweisen*] of the second. Neither the concept of *Schein* nor that of play is foreign to traditional aesthetics; and to the extent that the two concepts of cult value and exhibition value are latent in the other pair of concepts at issue here, they say nothing new. But this abruptly changes as soon as these latter concepts lose their indifference toward history. They then lead to a practical insight, namely, that what is lost in the withering [*Verkümmerung*] of *Schein* and the decay [*Verfall*] of the aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the space of play [*Spiel-Raum*]. The space of play [*Spielraum*] is widest in film. In film, the moment of *Schein* [*Scheinmoment*] has been entirely displaced by the moment of play [*Spielmoment*] (SW3: 127/ GS7.1: 368-69, translation modified).

It is perhaps not very contentious to claim that *Schein* and *Spiel* are, whether in aesthetic or nonaesthetic experience, the fundamental elements of mimesis.[14] To partake in the passive and active repetitions of sensation, of indentificatory and inter-sensory doubling, undoubtedly seems to involve a kind of fictional re-staging, a playing in the realm of the illusory. But the question concerning the true consequences that the withering of *Schein*, aura, or this reproductive unveiling, has for a dynamic, historical conception of mimesis, is another issue. As we will see, the manner in which we read the above mentioned historical conflict, how we understand the

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[14] For an historical review of these philosophical concepts see Friedrich Schiller, "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man" in *Essays*, eds. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993),87-178; Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, 1-41; Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1-2, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1979), 211-220; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans., Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1975).

shifts in inflection, the dialectical reversals (*Umschläge*), once this *Untergang* has begun, not only bring to light the whole of Benjamin's philosophical impulse, it marks the point of departure for Adorno's understanding of art and historical experience as well as his critique and rescue of Benjamin's project.

If we are to understand the interrelations between these thinkers that we are claiming ground their configuration of mimesis as constitutive to the task of critique, then we need to grasp the specific manner in which *Schein* and *Spiel* are aligned respectively with the now famous categories of ritual and exhibition art. Benjamin asserts that the truth of their polarity is only recognized through the historical conflict of two technologies (*Techniken*). Once again, the portion of the text that explains this provocative distinction was eliminated from the third version. Even if this deletion amounts to an improvement because it eliminates, as Adorno insists, those portions of Benjamin's text that are not dialectical enough (CC: 131), the degree to which it influenced, as we will see in Chapter Two, Adorno and Horkheimer's conception of the dialectic of enlightenment, as well as the degree to which it helps illustrate the nuanced alterations that mimesis and its elements undergo, make it especially worthy of consideration.

Benjamin's conception of the different forms of technique (*Technik*) employed by different epochs is likely rooted in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*,[15] and the impact it had on the French intellectual climate of the Thirties.[16] Without laboring over the similarities and differences between Benjamin and his contemporaries, we can at least observe that he inherits their conception of the *Zweckmäßigkeit* or instrumentality built into our relation to nature. Whereas the first technology—aligned with the ritual phase—utilizes magic in order to ward off

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[15] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1950), 78.

[16] Josef Früchtl gives a detailed account of this intellectual climate that lead to Adorno's idea of mimesis in Früchtl, *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Wurzberg: Konigshausen & Neumann, 1986).

terrifying demons and spirits, the second technique—aligned with the exhibition phase—has apparently calmed the fear that produces magic in the first place, and has therefore lost, as Hegel already observed,[17] the need to project eternality and worship onto aesthetic or nonaesthetic objects. As much as Adorno would, in my view correctly, come to criticize this notion that contends "mastery over nature [*Naturbeherrschung*]" is more predominate in the ancient technology (SW3: 107/ GS7.1: 359), Benjamin is arguably engaged in a task that also tirelessly occupied Adorno, namely the attempt to historicize Kant.

The play that is allegedly afforded to all humans *a priori*,[18] is, in Benjamin's view, only granted after civilization has assuaged its fright before nature. In other words, disinterest, the pre-condition for the free play of the imagination and the understanding,[19] only emerges as a possibility after humanity has achieved a kind of *Untergang*, or, as Freud might put it, a curtailment of its omnipotent pretensions.[20] When bodily needs are no longer the immediate concern of civilization, it can apparently shed something of its compulsion for mastery, and enact a less frantic *Zwischenspiel* between nature and spirit as a rehearsal of the striving towards the newly sparked idea of freedom.[21] In Benjamin's words, at a particular historical hour the

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[17] Cf. Hegel, *Hegel's Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, 104.

[18] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Hereafter all citations of this text will be accompanied by the volume and line number that corresponds to the German standard edition. If the refernce is more general, the citations will be accompanied by section number. See Kant, *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1910).

[19] Ibid., 5: 210.

[20] Resembling Kant's description of the beautiful, this historical curtailment of blind impulse is part of the reason why, in his fragment "Imagination," Benjamin claims that the "imaginative de-formation of forms [*phantasievolle Enstaltung der Gebilde*] is distinguishable from the destructive collapse [*zerstörerischen Verfall*] of the empirical" by being that which is "without compulsion [*zwanglos*]" and that which "induces feelings of delight." (SW1: 280-1/GS6: 115, translation modified).

[21] For more on how the idea of freedom emerging for humanity influenced Benjamin, see Immanuel Kant. "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" in *Kant: Political Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). The question we will be asking below concerns whether the harmony Kant identifies as part of a purposive, moral world, is indeed a tenable position. Benjamin gives the impression that the moment of this historical recognition of harmony comes too late. In other words, at precisely the moment when it is reflected as a promise, the "calm" and "painless" harmony of our faculties also begins to show itself as a semblance-harmony. The play associated with the promise of freedom would, then, not truly realize itself until it—against Kant—became dissociated from harmony and teleology, despite the fact that the latter two are only "reflective" judgments for Kant.

"[d]erivation of the aura as the projection of a human social experience [*gesellschaftlichen Erfahrung*] onto nature [is possible]: the gaze is returned" (SW4:173/ GS1.2: 670).[22] As much as the *Untergang* or profanation of experience, intensified even further by technological development, is the sorrowful loss of the magical cluster of associations that once comprised our relation to the world and ourselves, it is equally a promise of freedom through a recognition of the spell humanity casts upon itself.[23] That these mimetic clusters are mirrored, so to speak, in humanity's objectification of itself, in its art and language, and thereby observed for what in part constitutes them, namely a horrified reflex, seems to be the condition for the possibility of a new, more playful relationship to these objectifications. A critical distance emerges precisely when subjectivity is reflected as a constitutive moment in all subject-object, i.e., experiential, relations. It is in this context that one should understand Benjamin's optimism for film, as well as the intertwined question of whether this, so to speak, coming down to earth necessarily leads to a simultaneous decrease in the experience of the beautiful and increase in the politicization of perception.[24]

Cf. SW1: 281/GS6: 115: "The de-formation of fantasy [*Enstaltung der Phantasie*] is the unending dissolution [*Auflösung*] of the purified, beautiful semblance [*gereinigten schönen Scheines*] that is discharged [*entladen*] from all seduction [*Verführung*]" (translation modified). To be engaged in this dissolution, this immanent critique of semblance, is already to be moving beyond the play of the beautiful.

[22] Michael Rosen, who provides a good account of the differences and similarities between Adorno and Benjamin on the aura and ideology critique, neglects to grasp the significance of a passage like this. Whereas he argues that Benjamin is different from Adorno because Benjamin does not think that the "correspondences" or non-sensuous similarities of nature are reducible to the projected social labor invested in objects, the truth is that neither Adorno nor Benjamin think that these objects are undialectically constituted by "pure" nature, on the one hand, or social labor taken as the exclusive concept, on the other. As will become clearer below, Adorno believes that there is truth in the "synesthesia" of non-projected, non-instrumental nature, and Benjamin clearly believes that there is a tremendous amount of social labor stored up in the expression of the language of things. Rosen's citation of the letter in which Benjamin "takes his stand" against Adorno's thesis on the labor invested in things is not, therefore, an instance of Benjamin's clear refusal of "Hegelian Marxism." See Rosen, "Benjamin, Adorno, and the Decline of the Aura," in *Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 40-56.

[23] Again, the similarities to Kant are telling. Cf. Kant, "What is Enlightenment" in *Kant: Political Writings*, 54: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity."

[24] The potentially reactionary character of this politicization is an issue to which we will frequently allude. It is clear that even in the early drafts of the "Technology" essay Benjamin realized the extent to which the crisis could, as it were, turn either way. The fascist film was hanging, in other words, in the balance. See SW4: 269/ GS1.2: 506: "The

Whatever the case may be, we cannot, of course, avoid observing just how much this particular account of play's heightened role—literally an increase in the space of play (*Spiel-Raum*)—parallels Benjamin's depiction of baroque experience.[25] In both cases, it is the decline or ruin (*Untergang*) of semblance that gives rise to more play. In the *Trauerspiel* and *Elective Affinities*, semblance and aura are essentially connected to the organic, to harmony. When, therefore, Benjamin famously characterizes the baroque world as absolutely devoid of eschatology (OTS: 66/ GS1.1: 246), he is not describing a circumstance fundamentally different from the empty, disharmonious, and contrapurposive world that technical reproduction creates. Both are, at bottom, confronted with an increasingly hardened, disenchanted world; both have lost faith in the power of magical conciliation; both even seem to be marked by a loss of beautiful presentations (OTS 178/ GS1.1: 353-354).

And yet, upon closer examination, we discover that certain aspects of all three versions of the "Technology"[26] essay are nevertheless at odds with Benjamin's earlier depictions of modern disenchantment. Can we simply attribute this divergence to the fact that Benjamin is describing two different historical milieus, namely early and advanced capitalism? Despite the insight into the essentiality of the two elements of mimesis, the delineation in the "Technology" essay of how the historical unveiling or closing of the unique magical distance alters the other side of the mimetic polarity, namely *Schein*, is arguably at odds with what one could call, following Adorno, the dialectical precision of the earlier analysis. Thus, after reading the second version, Adorno comments that, "you [i.e., Benjamin] speak of play and semblance [*Schein*] as

logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life," whereas Benjamin desired the politicization of aesthetic life.

[25] Rebecca Comay draws a similar connection when she notes that the alienation from nature in *Trauerspiel* already signals Benjamin's conception of the transition from cult-value to exhibition-value in the "Technology" essay. Comay, "Mourning, Work, and Play," *Research in Phenomenology* 23 (1993): 105-130.

[26] Despite acknowledging, at the behest of the Institute for Social Research, that he needed to be more conscious of the undialectical moments in the previous drafts of this essay, the third version maintains a kind of faith in the *Spielraum* of film. See SW4: 265/ GS1.2: 499.

the elements of art; but I cannot see why play should be dialectical, while semblance—the semblance you once salvaged in the figure of [Goethe's] Ottilie, who now fares just as badly as Mignon and Helena—is supposed not to be" (CC: 129). And still further, as he concludes this letter: "What I should like to postulate, therefore, is *more* dialectics" (CC: 131).

We will return at length to this question about the true transformation of *Schein*, but for now we can anticipate the course of our discussion by way of a few guiding questions. Has Benjamin truly captured the essence of the historical shift of mimesis when he maintains that modern disenchantment (*Entzauberung*), the liquidation of magic, and the eventual emergence of technical reproduction, lead to the complete dissolution of *Schein*? Or is it rather the case that *Schein* lives on, transformed, ever in tension with play? Does a last vestige of the endeavor to uphold the beautifully veiled object as it tremblingly falls away or momentarily flashes forth, survive in mimetic duplication, or are artworks and historical experience wholly consigned to a cold, illusionless, and therefore politically instrumental mimetic comportment?

These Adornian questions are not asked simply for the sake of giving a biographical account of a famous debate. Their very gesture is, on the contrary, predicated on the desire to save what are arguably the *better* inclinations in Benjamin's thought. The truth of the matter is that, as opposed to Arendt's almost smug affirmation of Benjamin's supposed undialectical attitude, or even Rebecca Comay's more acute distinction between the two thinkers,[27] Benjamin sought to be as dialectical as possible in his historico-philosophical analysis. More precisely, his entire project, culminating in the *Arcades Project*'s complicated and often misunderstood doctrine of dialectics at a standstill, is in essence an attempt to shatter dialectics *through* dialectics—the same impulse at the heart of Adorno's undertakings. My claim is that if we glean

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[27] Hannah Arendt, "Introduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 15; Rebecca Comay, "Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*," 50-56.

the truth-content of the earlier writings of which Adorno was so fond, we will understand why, in fact, Benjamin's optimism concerning the political force of film and the seeming proletarian advantage attained by its playful distraction or entertainment (*Zerstreuung*) is actually (SW4: 265/ GS1.2: 499), *on Benjamin's own terms*, misguided. What was previously maintained in Benjamin's work, and what, according to my argument, is preserved in the "History" essay and the other analyses of mimesis, is precisely that view that grasps the latest instantiation of play *and* semblance. Moreover, this more precise dialectical view is exactly what constitutes Adorno's bringing to fruition, rescue, or reformulation of Benjamin's idea of mimesis. The theoretical shortcoming in Benjamin's articulation in the "Technology" essay is, as we will see, best summed up as Benjamin's abandonment of what the other writings know to be the true consequence of the disillusionment of the aura: the emergence of the prominence of music. Let us turn, then, to the earlier writings and read them alongside the more explicit descriptions of mimesis, as it is with the interrelation of these texts that we can begin to grasp what I will call the musicality locked within Adorno and Benjamin's idea of mimesis.

II. The Implicit Mimesis of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*

The unity between the metaphysical concerns of Benjamin's work on *Trauerspiel* and mimesis can be located, as we have already alluded to, in their mutual concern for the problems of expression (*Ausdruck*) and meaning (*Bedeutung*) that result from humanity's so-called fall from purity. Both depict a situation characterized by, if not a kind of block in the capacity of language to express its historical circumstance, then at least a radical shift in the comportment of expression. In the writings on *Trauerspiel*, this block (*Hemmung*) is what distinguishes it from the immediacy of both Adam's and tragedy's language, and in the "Mimetic Faculty" it is that

which marks the transition of mimesis from the immediacy of ancient perception to the mediated character of written and spoken language.

If we are to understand not only how these works are linked in Benjamin's thought, but also how their intertwinement brings to the fore what I take to be the more fruitful depictions of the dialectic of *Spiel* and *Schein* as well as the musicality immanent to mimesis, the first thing we need to heed is the extent to which Benjamin once again grounds both of these theories in experience. Contrary to how they are often treated, Benjamin's *Origin of German Trauerspiel* and the two essays on the same subject that preceded it, are not works of mere art criticism that simply delineate the constitutive features of a baroque literary form. Despite the frequent claims that the works on *Trauerspiel* predate Benjamin's materialist turn, these works are nonetheless thoroughly historical.[28] In other words, *Trauer* and the play (*Spiel*) that responds to this feeling, are elements of historical experience, not just literary effects or techniques. The play of sorrow is subject to historical transformation; its comportment emerges at a particular time, in a manner that is materially distinguished from, say, the life of the Greeks and the tragedy that ensues from it.

Even further than this experiential tie, it is clear that by virtue of what Benjamin describes as a process in which *Trauerpiel*, "exhausts [*erschöpfen*] artistically the idea of repetition" (SW1: 57/ GS2.1: 136), he implicitly understands the historical experience of sorrow play to be mimetic in nature. How else can we make sense of his appeal to the "mirror-nature" (SW1: 57/GS2.1: 136) of the play involved in *Trauerspiel*, or what he calls mourning play's

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[28] Cf. Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 372. Referring to the *Trauerspiel* book and his philosophical development after it, Benjamin suggests that he always had a, so to speak, implicit historical ear: "This book, of course, was certainly not materialistic, even if it was dialectical. But what I did not know at the time I wrote it, soon thereafter became increasingly clear to me: namely, there is a bridge to the way dialectical materialism looks at things from the perspective of my particular stance on the philosophy of language, however strained and problematical that bridge may be."

"two metaphysical principles of repetition" which are "the cycle and repetition, the circle and the fact of duality" (SW1: 60/ GS2.1: 139)? Benjamin must be articulating a complex—indeed non-specular and perhaps bodily—variation of Hegel's conception of the *Verdoppelung* of spirit's productions. On the one hand, the staging of sorrow (*Trauer*) assists in self-understanding, serving as a kind of cyclical coming back to oneself, but, on the other hand, this mimetic duplication falls short, it remains fragmented or split from the roundedness of the circle. The drive to produce dramatic works that, as Benjamin puts it, consist of "play for the sorrowful [*Spiel vor Traurigen*]" (OTS: 119/ GS1.1: 298, translation modified), should therefore be interpreted as a particular phase in the need of mimesis to lend voice to or speak *with and against* the constellation of phenomena comprising a particular stage of objective spirit.

What exactly is at work in this mimetic identification, this lending a voice (*ertönen zu lassen*), or more literally, this bringing to sound and language that critically remembers the elements of experience? As we have already suggested, it involves a kind of perception that, not unlike Kant's productive and passive imagination,[29] both registers and produces (*Wiedergabe*) a cluster of experiential correspondences (SW2.2: 694/ GS2.1: 204). More specifically, mimesis, no matter its historical shift, always conjures up "non-sensuous similarity [*unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit*]." To grasp this difficult yet crucial concept, we need to take a closer look at how Benjamin understands the "historical development of [the] mimetic faculty" (SW2.2: 695/ GS2.1: 205).

The magical and auratic period of humanity is, according to Benjamin, distinguished by a more "forceful compulsion [*gewaltigen Zwang*] to become similar and to behave mimetically" (SW2.2: 720/ GS2.1: 210). In other words, this auratic phase of perception is more prone to become absorbed in its environment. The result of this capacity is that the ancients were far more

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[29] Cf. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 314.

sensitive to the plethora of inter-sensory associations, the imaginative pathways that exceed

simple categorization, and that in Proustian fashion, could catch hold of a scent, a color, only to

be transported into an image of the past.[30] Selfless in their absorption, the ancients possessed a

kind of loving and childlike attention to detail, to the intricacies of the matter, or the smallest

links that determine and configure particulars within the whole of nature.

The implication of this heightened, immediate, sensitivity for mimetic identification, is

that assimilation to one's environment is not merely a matter of becoming sensuously identical to

it. Indeed, Benjamin claims ancient mimesis was far too playful for that, far too bound to the

"countless similarities perceived unconsciously" in experience (SW2.2: 695/GS2.1: 205).

Instead, he refers to the "speed" (*Tempo*) with which humans could perceive and emulate a

similarity between, for example, dance and a constellation of stars, or the speed with which the

"astrologer reads the future in the stars" (SW2.2: 697/ GS2.1: 209).[31] It is obvious that there is no

concrete or sensuous resemblance between human movement and star configuration, yet there is

still the possibility for apprehending and creating a nuanced repetition that delicately links them,

the possibility, that is, for establishing a kind of playful elective affinity that approaches, but

does not quite touch its other. Again we notice the similarity to the task of translation. "[A]

translation touches the original lightly [*flüchtig*]," writes Benjamin, "and only at the infinitely

small point of the sense [*unedlich kleinen Punkte des Sinnes*], thereupon pursuing its own course

according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux [*Freiheit der

Sprachbewegung*]" (SW1: 261/ GS4.1: 20). Just as the child, "play[ing] at being…a windmill

and train," does more than merely imitate adults, i.e., does more than engage in an imitation of

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[30] See Benjamin, "The Image of Proust, " SW 2.1: 237-247/ GS 2.1: 310-324.
[31] It should be said that, as many commentators have noticed, the mystical tone of the "Doctrine of the Similar*"* is
mitigated in the later version, "On the Mimetic Faculty."

something sensuously close, so too did humans once see the indirect similarities of nature instantaneously (SW2.2: 694/ GS2.1: 205).

It is important to note that the development of this mimetic faculty is grounded in what the *Trauerspiel* book calls the "play-element" (*Spielmoment*) (OTS: 83/ GS1.1:261). "[P]lay is to a great extent [the mimetic faculty's] school" (SW2.2: 694/ GS2.1: 204-05, translation modified). However much the repetitions or rhythmic variations of ancient mimesis might be, as Adorno says, "a reflex of human self-objectification"(GS7: 152/ AT: 103), it nevertheless avoids aiming at establishing univocal identity. To state it differently, because mimesis deals with *non-sensuous* similarity, it must be receptive to what Adorno came to call the non-identical moment in identity. This should, no doubt, remind us of the magical, auratic or ritual stage of perception described in the "Technology" essays. Although it is not explicitly stated, *Schein* must be a dominant feature of mimesis at this stage, because the incessant unveiling of identity has not yet commenced. This is also why, echoing Kant, Benjamin asks, "what use [*Nutzen*] does this [playful] schooling of his mimetic faculty bring to him?" (SW2.2: 694/ GS2.1: 205, translation modified). Clearly he is implying that mimesis is based on a purposeless or non-utilitarian moment in identification. Although out of desperation it could become a "mimetic shock absorber [*mimischer Stoßdämpfer*]" (SW4: 328/ GS1.2: 631), i.e., a indentificatory defense mechanism that, in brute seriousness, renounces play for the sake of protection, it could equally preserve this sort of lighthearted absorption.

Winning back, so to speak, something of this element of play for modern experience, cannot, however, be the consequence of a mere subjective change in attitude. Benjamin frequently suggests that once this "critical distance" has objectively closed, something is irretrievably lost. "[W]e must suppose that the gift [*Gabe*] of producing similarities (for example,

in dances, whose oldest function this is), and therefore also the gift of recognizing them, have changed in the course of history" (SW2.2: 720/ GS2.1: 211). What does it mean, then, for us to have lost these "magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples"? (SW2.2: 721/ GS2.1:211). Benjamin suggests mimesis might become, like the above defense mechanism, increasingly "fragile" (*hinfällig*)—a point that we will see guides the whole of Adorno's and Horkheimer's narrative—but it could also mean the "transformation" of mimesis into another, perhaps "higher" realm (SW2.2: 721/ GS2.1: 211). "[W]e, too, possess a canon," insists Benjamin, "according to which the meaning of nonsensuous similarity can be at least partly clarified. And this canon [*Kanon*] is language [*Sprache*]" (SW2.2: 721/ GS2.1: 211).

Following out this distinction between the ancients and us, we observe that the central difference resides in the fact that a further step in mediation has occurred over time. "[N]ow language," Benjamin continues, "represents the medium in which the things [*die Dinge*] meet and step into relation [*in Beziehung treten*] with each other, *no longer directly* [*direkt*], as once in the mind of the augur or priest, but in the their essences, in their most volatile and delicate substances, even in their aromata" (SW2.2: 697-98/ GS2.1:209, translation modified; my emphasis). That the essence can be revealed in language suggests that the linguistic "archive" of the play involved in nonsensuous similarity has, in one respect, the potential to expresses something perhaps even more vital, or as Benjamin puts it, "higher," about the matter itself (*die Sache selbst*). But this passage also gives the impression that we are, in another respect, further removed from a direct and unmediated expression of nature's mimetic similarities.

If we, accordingly, no longer wholly possess this intuitive capacity, no longer possess what Benjamin, echoing Kant once more, provocatively calls "mimetic genius" (SW2.2: 721/

GS2.1: 211),[32] then this indicates that with time an increasing displacement has occurred between the sensuous manifestation of the thing or "center" and that which the thing or center means (SW2.2: 696/ GS2.1: 207). In fact, it is precisely the nonsensuous similarity of mimesis, i.e., the concurrence of similarity and difference, subject and object, that first establishes the possibility of a meaning (*Bedeutung*) resonating between this division of sign and image.

> [H]ere it is worth noting that writing [*Schrift*], perhaps even more than certain sound-combinations in language [*Lautzusammenstellungen der Sprache*], clarifies, in the relation of the graphic image [*Schriftbild*] of words or letters to that which is meant [*dem Bedeuten*] or more specifically [*beziehungsweise*] that which gives the name [*Namengebenden*], the essence [*Wesen*] of non-sensuous similarity [*unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit*]. Thus the letter "beth" has the name of a house. It is therefore non-sensuous similarity which not only creates [*stiftet*] the tension [*Verspannung*] between the spoken word and what is meant; but also the tension between what is written and what is meant, as well as that between spoken and the written word. (SW2.2: 697, GS2.1: 208, translation modified)[33]

For Benjamin mimesis is, to repeat, always the underlying factor in the expression (*Ausdruck*) of meaning. There is of course a relation between the spoken word and what it means—perhaps one that is originally onomatopoetic (SW2.2: 721/ GS2.1: 212)—just as there is a relation between the written word and what it means; but each of these relations are empty without some sort of nonsensuous similarity existing in the playful, so to speak, interstices. Secondly, it appears that insofar as nonsensuous similarity migrates into language, a process paralleling that which occurs in mythical name giving is recuperated. Following our above logic, then, this nonsensuous mimetic play would, on the one hand, approximate itself towards the pure expression of name giving, that is, the pure expression prior to the originary bifurcation, or *Urteil*,[34] of an inscription

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[32] Cf. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §§46-50.

[33] It is interesting to note that in the later, redacted version of the mimesis essay, "On the Mimetic Faculty," Benjamin eliminates this reference to the name. Although approximating oneself to the pure expression of the name remained a central feature in Benjamin's thinking, this edit could be the result of Adorno's frequent criticism that Benjamin was appealing to an irretrievably lost immediacy. Below I try to claim that the earlier "Doctrine of the Similar" already avoids this charge by heeding the dialectic of intuition and the concept, but there is reason to believe that Adorno had an impact on Benjamin's slight modification. For more on this topic of immediacy see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 88-90.

[34] In the essay "Language as such" Benjamin connects judgment with the Fall. Having entered into what we will see below is the "communicative struggle," judgment no longer "rests blissfully" (SW1: 71-72/ GS2.1: 153) in the

and its signification. Yet, on the other hand, because of the further mediated step, because of a newly registered tension (*Verspannung*), it now would appear to lack something of the pure, unintentional truth with which primordial name giving was endowed. It would, that is to say, fall short of the Hegelian ideal of following the matter itself, entirely surrendering to a mimetic "immersion [*Eingehen*] and absorption [*Verschwinden*] in it" (OTS: 36/ GS1.1: 216).

The consequence of this lost capacity for an immediate perception is that mimesis is always already in some way communicative. Because a gap between the name and its meaning has opened up, a need to close it commences. The pure, Adamite expression of the matter, which Benjamin characterizes as being at once akin to ideas and reposing in its own Eden-like "nobility [*Adel*]," is lost to us (OTS: 36/ GS1.1: 216). Aside, then, from it purposeless or playful element, Benjamin implies that the modern form of linguistic mimesis is also constituted by its response to a certain type of *Trauer*. In other words, it is a response to a feeling of impotence in its expression; a response, which, in its sorrow, is compelled to speak, to find the language of the incommunicable or speechless (*sprachlos*). This is why Benjamin, anticipating Adorno, links mimesis to rationality dialectically:[35]

> This, if you will, magical side of both language and writing does not, however, merely run parallel, without relation to the other, namely the semiotic side. Rather, everything mimetic in language is an intention with an established basis [*fundierte Intention*] which, as such [*überhaupt*], *can only step into appearance* [*in Erscheinung treten kann*] in connection with something alien, the semiotic or communicative element [*Mitteilenden*] of language. Thus the literal text of writing [*buchstäbliche Text der Schrift*] is the sole basis on which the picture puzzle [*Vexierbild*] can form itself. Thus the nexus of meaning [*Sinnzusammenhang*] implicit in the sounds [*Lauten*] of the sentence is the basis from which something similar can, from a sound [*aus einem Klang*], instantaneously shine forth [*kommen zum Vorschein*], like a flash [*blitzartig*]. (GS2.1: 208-09/ SW2.2: 697, translation modified; my emphasis)

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manner that name-giving once did. Noteworthy here is Benjamin's connection to Hölderlin. It would be interesting to draw out the connections between Benjamin, who of course wrote his other *Habilitationsschrift* on the Romantics, and Hölderlin with regard to what appears to be their mutual, though perhaps deliberate, misuse of the etymology of *Ur-teil* as a kind of primal division. See Friedrich Hölderlin, "Über Urtheil und Seyn," in H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Development: Toward the Sunlight 1770 –1801* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 515-16.
[35] See GS7: 86-90/AT: 53-56.

Let us for now bracket this notion of similarity flashing up momentarily. We will ultimately find that it is crucial to the critical musicality of the modern instantiation of mimesis. What we presently need to focus on is how Benjamin avoids completely favoring the intuitive or so-called magical side of mimesis. Insofar as entering into appearance (*in Erscheinung treten*)[36] is even a possibility, there has to be a rational, purposive or communicative element at work. We cannot think of experience happening but through the inextricable connection of concept and intuition.[37] In this respect, the translation of *Sinn* as "meaning" instead of "sense" in this context seems appropriate, although the double connation heightens the dialectic Benjamin is grappling with. Though human utterances (*Lauten*) are not at first synthesized, schematized into their intentionality, the vibrations (*Schwingungen*) that accompany them, their sensuous element, already imply, insofar as they will eventually *shine* forth into experiential appearance, a relation to something nonsensuous. Mimesis is, accordingly, nothing else but the dialectical play or oscillation between the sensuous (*Sinn*) and its nonsensuous, but similar other, and this tension filled, rhythmic, relation,[38] constitutes the possibility of meaning (*Bedeutung*).

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[36] Trying to think through this entering, or literally, stepping into experience, was a constant concern for Benjamin. As we will see below regarding the *Trauerspiel*, the *Concept of German Criticism* also displays this problem of the critical capacity of mimetic expression: "[t]his conceptual medium [*begriffliche Medium*] steps into appearance [*in Erscheinung tritt*] in the witty observation, as it does in the mystical term, like a bolt of lightning [*blitzartig*]" (SW1: 140/ GS1.1: 49, translation modified). We should also observe the fleetingness of this moment of synthesis, as it plays a major role in trying to understand the *critical* tempo of mimesis. Benjamin evidently never tired of trying to complicate or expand the understanding of the intuitive moment in Kant's conception of experience; indeed it consumed him from the very beginning. Resonances with this problem of the dialectic of intuition and concept are manifest in his essays "Experience," "On Perception," and "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy."

[37] The parallel to Kant should also be obvious here. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), A279/ B335. All references to this text will list the pagination of the A and B editions that correspond to *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*. If the reference is more general, only the section number will be listed.

[38] The similarities between this conception and psychoanalysis are fascinating, if nevertheless slightly different. Cf. Freud, "The Economic and Problem in Masochism," in *General Psychological Theory*, 191: "We should be much farther on with psychology if we knew what this qualitative peculiarity [between pleasure and pain] was. Perhaps it is something rhythmic, the periodical duration of the changes, the risings and fallings of the volume of stimuli; we do not know." In a similar, although more directly mimetic manner, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe tries to follow out the implications of a primordial, rhythmic understanding of experience. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989). This could also mark a difference between Benjamin and Adorno. Whereas Benjamin, especially in his essay on "Karl Kraus," comes close to Lacoue-

Thus, as much as mimesis finds an archive in language, Benjamin does not mean this in a simplistic manner. Rather, language remembers the past, recovers something of ancient mimetic comportment, only so long as it simultaneously gestures to that which is outside of the meaning-bearing, semiotic side of language. As we will observe below, this means that the truth that mimesis elicits is essentially bound to an expressionless (*Ausdrucklos*) moment, a caesura that breaks with the very intentionality and meaning it founds. What is more, this suggests that, contrary to the "Technology" essays, mimesis can never outright escape from the element of *Schein*. How else can we account for a mimetic identification that paradoxically founds the expression of meaning in language (establishing a similarity between *Laute* and *Dinge*), but also resists this meaning in an approximation of pure, intentionless presentation? The intuitive, mimetic moment of momentarily gesturing to that which falls outside the alien, conceptual or semiotic realm, must remain, in a certain regard, illusory. For in the strict sense of the term experience, the force (*Gewalt*) of this moment resides in the fact that it is not as yet empirically fulfilled. In rupturing the momentum of the established interpretation of objective spirit, the normalized intentionality of the matter, it promises a reconciliation that, precisely because of its deferral, cannot stave off an illusory or ideological component.

III. The Musical Character of Mimetic *Trauerspiel*

With this initial picture of nonsensuous similarity and its inextricable link to *Spiel* and *Schein*, we are approaching a better understanding of what I am calling, echoing Adorno, the better inclinations in Benjamin's portrayal of the dynamic of mimesis. But in order to attain an

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Labarthe and highlights the rhyme and rhythm of language and mimesis, Adorno does not appear to assign the same essential importance to it. See SW2.2: 454/ GS2.1: 363.

even more precise grasp of the true dialectic of mimesis, we need to take a further step towards understanding its intimate relationship with *Trauer-spiel*.

We have already alluded to Benjamin's conception of biblical name-giving. It is no accident that in his description of this liminal concept, Benjamin describes the lack of play involved. "Adam's name-giving [*Namengeben*] is so far removed from play [*Spiel*] and caprice [*Willkür*] that it actually confirms the state of paradise as a state in which there is as yet no need to struggle [*zu ringen*] with the communicative meaning of words [*mitteilenden Bedeutung der Worte*]" (OTS: 37/GS1.1: 217, translation modified). If this state of pure immediacy is not subject to the meaning resonating between sign and signified, not yet subject to the communicative struggle, then based on everything we have observed so far, this is another way of saying that mimesis, or at least its congealed, linguistic variation, has not yet come into existence.[39]

Once it has come into being, i.e., once the, so to speak, fall has occurred, a series of possible mimetic relations of necessity emerge. More specifically, given the historical context, tragedy emerges with its own mimetic comportment, its own play of meaning, just as *Trauerspiel* emerges differently, under different historical circumstances. Yet, surprisingly enough— especially considering Aristotle's famous discussion of the mimesis entailed in tragedy[40]— Benjamin suggests that tragedy is actually closer to the biblical, non-mimetic origin than *Trauerspiel* is. Or it is at least further removed from how we have seen Benjamin depict the linguistic lineage of nonsensuous similarity. To begin with, tragedy has a type of immediate

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[39] It is important to consider the manner in which Benjamin is thinking of this so-called purity. Based on the continual theme of the origin being an historical concept, instead of a pristine beginning, it must be the case that Benjamin is thinking this utopian language as a philosophical idea. In this respect, we might say that its speaking, which is devoid of the communicative struggle, is better understood as trying to *approach* the possibility of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*), not trying to retrieve what once was.

[40] Aristotle, *Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 47-51.

relation to words that is not present in the mimetic play of *Trauerspiel*. "In tragedy, word [*Wort*] and the tragic spring up [*entspringen*] together, simultaneously, on the same spot. Every speech [*Rede*] in tragedy is tragically decisive. It is the pure word [*reine Wort*] itself that has an immediate [*unmittelbar*] tragic force" (SW1: 59/ GS2.1: 138, translation modified). Again, we notice the emphasis on the lack of mediation, perhaps even the lack of ambiguity in the expression.

Devoid, then, of multiple resonances or the "enigmatic"[41] play of meaning which constitutes the modern form of mimesis and *Trauer-spiel*, Benjamin suggests that tragedy is actually closer to something like determinate judgment.[42] This could be part of the reason why he explicitly connects tragedy with "an excess of determinacy [*übergroßer Determiniertheit*]" (SW1: 56/ GS2.1: 135). Not only is tragedy presumably missing a kind of free-play, it also seems to have retained the pretension to communicative purity. "When language has an impact by virtue of its pure meaning, that impact is tragic. The word as the pure bearer of its meaning [*reiner Träger seiner Bedeutung*] is the pure word [*reine Wort*]" (SW1: 60/ GS2.1: 138). We can therefore understand why Benjamin distinguishes tragedy from *Trauerspiel* by claiming that the former, which has no "pantomime" (SW1: 59/ GS2.1: 137), is "situated in the laws governing the spoken discourse [*gesprochenen Rede*] between human beings" (SW1: 59/ GS2.1: 137, translation modified). Although we have seen the inevitable communicative or instrumental moment of mimesis, the difference here seems to be that the tragic form of discourse is not as harshly confronted with the dialectic between intuition and the semiotic, sensuousness and nonsensuousness, immediacy and mediation. Rather it has retained a faith, as it were, in

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[41] "Mourning (*Trauer*) is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it" (OTS: 139/ GS1.1: 318).
[42] Benjamin is clearly interested in Kant's conception of reflective judgment and its distinction from determinative judgment. For more on this distinction see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §5.

language, and does not have to cope, in the same way as *Trauerspiel*, with the disjunction between expression and that which is expressed, sign and image.

Another way of stating this is that the sorrow (*Trauer*) present in the alienated, modern world, and its confrontation with "fallen nature" (OTS: 180/ GS1.1: 356), gives rise to a melancholic need to question the ontologization of the *logos* more radically than the experience which gives rise to tragedy.[43] This is why tragedy still in part maintains, however unorthodoxly Benjamin means it, a kind of hope in the eschatological, or at least the teleological, whereas *Trauerspiel* or the baroque world "knows no eschatology" (OTS: 66/ GS1.1: 246). Although for tragedy there is some disjunction in the expression of meaning—the Greeks are, of course, distinguished from Adam—communication has not been completely problematized and thus community as the end or *telos* still retains a vestige of its promise.

> The greater the tragic word [*Wort*] lags behind [*zurückbleibt hinter*] the situation—which can no longer be called tragic where it reaches it [*wo es sie erreicht*]—the more has the hero escaped the ancient statutes to which, when they finally overtake him, he throws only the mute shadow of his being [*stummen Schatten seines Wesens*], the self [*Selbst*], as a sacrifice, while his soul [*Seele*] is rescued to [*hinübergerettet*] the word of a distant community [*fernen Gemeinschaft*]. The tragic presentation [*Darstellung*] of legend thereby acquired inexhaustible actuality [*Actualität*]. In the face [*Angesicht*] of the suffering hero, the community learns reverence and gratitude for the word with which his death endowed it – a word which flashed up [*aufleuchtete*] in another place as a new gift whenever the poet extracted some new meaning from the legend. (OTS: 109/ GS1.1: 287-288, translation modified)

A kind of fidelity to the communicative power of the word is undeniable in this picture of tragedy. Although there is an agonal tension and a "lag" immanent to tragedy that Sam Weber has observed points to Benjamin's conception of tragedy's eventual dissolution,[44] it is the hero that suffers with the problems of expression, not the audience. The hero experiences

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[43] In a similar vein, Benjamin writes in "Language as such" that, "this difference [*Unterschied*] [between the spiritual essence (*geistige Wesen*) and the linguistic essence (*sprachliche Wesen*)] seems [*scheint*] so unquestionable that it is, rather, the frequently asserted identity [*Identität*] between spiritual and linguistic essence (*Wesen*) that constitutes a deep and incomprehensible paradox, the expression of which is found in the ambiguity [*Doppelsinn*] of the word *logos*" (SW1: 63/ GS2.1: 141, translation modified). The point here is, of course, that questioning this paradoxical ambiguity only becomes a possibility at a particular historical hour.

[44] Samuel Weber, "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's Origin of the German Mourning Play," *MLN,* Vol. 106, No. 3 (Apr., 1991): 465-500.

"speechlessness" and "silence," but the audience, living in a world that gives rise to tragic production, "learns reverence and gratitude for the word [*Wort*] with which [the hero's] death endowed it"(OTS: 108-109/ GS1.1:288-89). This is to say that, in the Ancient Greek world, the state of mimetic experience is not as yet entirely disillusioned with its expressive capacity; words still carry a meaning that will ultimately find resolution as they light up (*aufleuchten*). Thus, experience, which is to say, the struggle of mimesis with the semiotic, has not taken on its modern, disenchanted form. When, however, mimetic experience is characterized by an awareness of the play of the signifier that secretly, though unreflectively, always comprised mimesis, when it becomes more concerned with the sensuous and intuitive element of meaning, and thus aspires after a kind of musicality which exceeds communicative language and the word, then we have entered into the mimetic play of *Trauer-spiel*.

It should, accordingly, come as no surprise that the two questions that Benjamin claims capture the essence of *Trauerspiel* are questions directly related to the issue of mimesis and its historical migration into language. In Benjamin's words,

> [h]ow language [*Sprache*] in general [*überhaupt*] can fill itself with sadness [*mit Trauer sich erfüllen*], how language can be an expression of sorrow [*Ausdruck von Trauer*], is the basic question of the mourning play [*Trauerspiel*], along side that other question: How sorrow as feeling can gain entry [*Eintritt findet*] into the linguistic order [*Sprachordung*] of art. (SW1: 59-60/ GS2.1:138, translation modified)

That there is even a question, indeed a "riddle (*Rätsel*)," concerning what it would take to gain entry into the linguistic order, i.e., step into appearance (*in Erscheinung treten*), or what it would take to appropriately express sorrow, indicates once again that the mimetic comportment constitutive of the baroque era is different from that of the tragic. As we have witnessed, the word is still, more or less, adequate to its expression for the experience which spawns tragedy.

Our question is therefore situated by the specific comportment of *Trauer-spiel*, and the degree to which its form of mimesis addresses these problems of expression.

Benjamin implies that *Trauerspiel* is more pressingly compelled to employ the play element of mimesis. "For compared with the irrevocability of tragedy, which makes an ultimate actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] of language [*Sprache*] and its order, every formation [*Gebilde*] whose living soul is the feeling (of sorrow [*Trauer*]), must be called a game [*ein Spiel*]"(SW1: 61/ GS2.1: 139, translation modified). But what does Benjamin really mean by this feeling of sorrow that is linked to play? In the first place, it appears to be, as we have mentioned, an historically specific phenomenon. But above all else, Benjamin argues that *Trauer* is a feeling that arises as a result of a sort of betrayal (*Verrat*), block, or delay (*Hemmung*) in meaning:

> [T]he mourning play does not describe the motion through the spheres that carries feeling from the pure world of words [*Worte*] out to music and then back to the liberated sorrow of blissful feeling [*befreieten Trauer des seligen Gefühls*]. Instead, midway through its journey nature finds itself betrayed [*verraten*] by language [*Sprache*], and that immense delay [*ungeheure Hemmung*] of feeling turns to sorrow. Thus, with the ambiguity [*Doppelsinn*] of the word, with its *meaning* [*Bedeutung*], nature falters [*ins Stocken gekommen*], and whereas the created world wished only to pour forth in all purity, it was man who bore its crown….These plays present [*darstellen*] a delay [*Hemmung*] of nature, as it were an overwhelming damming up [*Stauung*] of the feelings that suddenly [*plötzlich*] discover a new world in words [*Worte*], the world of meaning [*Bedeutung*], of a callous [*gefühllosen*] historical time. (SW1: 60/ GS2.1: 138, translation modified)

To be sure, this is once again an elucidation of Benjamin's conception of fallen nature, only now we can detect that it should be equated with the loss of instantaneous mimetic perception. The immediate force of Adam's word or tragedy's purer communication is no longer; a delay or blocking diverts meaning from any univocal intention. This is why there is no, so to speak, roundedness to the expression. Meaning falters or pauses (*stocken*) along its trajectory because, in a historical situation where the word is not adequate to the expression of a lament (*Klage*), the play between the sensuous and nonsensuous element of meaning (*Bedeutung*) becomes a greater issue. Is it an accident that this double-*sense* of words mirrors almost exactly the dialectic

endemic to mimesis and rationality that we previously discussed? Or, is this double-sense of *Bedeutung*—to *signify* and thus present something sensuous, but also to *mean* something more than the sensuous inscription—extraneous to the identification of mimesis?

Historically speaking this block and refracted doubling is synonymous with an increasing alienation from nature. Indeed, this alienation is so dominant, the resultant feeling of melancholy so debilitating, that history has actually been naturalized, as nature-history (*Naturgeschichte*),[45] into an inevitable path of more and more meaninglessness. It is "no longer the annual cycle with its recurrence of seedtime, harvest and fallow winter, which rules the passage of time, but the implacable progression of every life towards death" (OTS: 151/ GS1.1: 328-329). Another way of describing this historical change is to say that a time without fulfillment, "historical time," has propelled a kind of shudder in the temporality of experience. More precisely, sorrow (*Trauer*) only emerges when this caesura in the purposiveness of the word becomes dominant. The transformative task of mimesis is thus to provide a kind of consolation for an inconsolable condition: to provide, again, "play for the sorrowful" (OTS: 119/ GS1.1: 298, translation modified). If it can confront this gap in meaning by somehow eloquently arranging the sensuous, bodily, and auditory elements of a newly recognized, ambiguous signification, i.e., if it can configure the now more open, more free, but equally more melancholic possibilities latent within the matter, it can apparently be successful.

And it is precisely with this possibility of success, this possibility of being eloquent or speaking (*Sprache finden*), that we finally arrive at what makes the comportment of mimetic sorrow-play akin to music:

> [W]e find a word of another sort that is subject to change, as it moves eloquently [*gewandt*] from its origin [*Ursprung*] toward a different point, its estuary [*Mündung*]. Word [*das Wort*] in transformation [*Verwandlung*] is the linguistic [*sprachliche*] principle of the mourning play.

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[45] Cf. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974),64.

> Words have a pure emotional life cycle in which they purify [*läutert*][46] themselves by developing from the sound of nature [*Laute der Natur*] to the pure sound of feeling [*reinen Laute des Gefühls*]. For such words, language [*Sprache*] is merely a transitional phase within the cycle of its transformation [*Zyklus seiner Verwandlung*], and in them the mourning play speaks [*spricht*]. It describes the path from natural sound [*Naturlaut*] via lament [*Klage*] to music. (SW1: 60/ GS2.1: 138, translation modified)

Unlike Aristotle's conception of tragedy, which asserts that tragedy conjures up pity and fear,[47] here we notice a response to a feeling that is already governing a particular historical experience. In order to give voice or speak to its plight, *Trauer* needs to be transformed (mimetically) or undergo change (*Verwandlung*), and it apparently does so by eloquently or nimbly (*gewandt*) organizing the lament into a purer expression. Is not this purer expression, this finding language, precisely an attempt to approximate the (*scheinbar*) purity attributed to name giving?

What is more, just as music is the eloquent organization of sound, *Trauerspiel*, "intimately familiar [*innig vertraut*]" with music (OTS: 213/ GS1.1: 387), organizes the sensuous moment into something abounding with nonsensuous similarity to the original sound (*Naturlaut*). "Whereas in tragedy the eternal inflexibility of the spoken word [*Starre des gesprochenen Wortes*] is exalted, the mourning play gathers [*sammelt*] the infinite resonance of its sound [*Klanges*]" (SW1: 61/ GS2.1: 140). The particular concentration and organization of sound, the sensuous moment, is nothing other than what Benjamin illustrates as that implicit synthesizing process of a sense (*Sinn*) that, in its play, in its transformation, gives rise to nonsensuous similarity: a remembrance of the past's cry of sorrow. For this reason Benjamin goes so far as to say that, "the phonetic tension [*phonetische Spannung*] in the language of the seventeenth century leads directly to music, the opposite of meaning-laden speech [*Widerpart*

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[46] The resonance between *Laute* and *läutern* is fitting. To begin mimetic transformation, to organize a sound that is no longer a mere lament, is to engage in a kind of auditory purification.

[47] When thinking Benjamin's understanding of mimesis alongside Aristotle's, a longer excerpt of the passage we have been appealing to is likely helpful: "these [dramas] are not so much play which causes sorrow [*Trauer*], as that through which sorrow [*Trauer*] finds its satisfaction: play for the sorrowful [*Traurigen*]" (OTS: 119/ GS1.1: 298, translation modified).

der sinnbeschwerten Rede]" (OTS: 211/ GS1.1: 384-85). What could this transition to music be but a recognition of that part of mimesis that carries on the legacy of the magical or intuitive moment of experience? Opposite to the meaning-laden, semiotic or communicative side, there is always, of course, this intuitive, more immediate moment in identification. The play of sorrow seems to be distinguished by taking particular interest in the latter, despite the fact that, in order to step into appearance (*in Erscheinung treten*), it always needs the communicative side as well. When we, accordingly, ask Benjamin's guiding question again, namely, how does *Trauer* enter the sphere of language, we find a similar answer to the question of how language eventually takes on the lineage of mimesis. That is, we discover they both *play* on language, take hold, like the mime, of its bodily rhythms, so as to gesture to something, if but for a momentary flash, outside of language and the sorrow of its playful, fallen state.

In this respect we can begin to see why it is not incongruous to assert that the musicality of mimetic *Trauerspiel*, which better heeds the dialectic between communication and the intuitive, is in fact allegorical. Benjamin goes so far as to explicitly link the allegorical comportment of *Trauerspiel* to "allegorical intuition."[48] This means that, paralleling our description of mimesis, the allegorical is a comportment grounded in historical experience, as well as that which strives to speak for something beyond, or other than[49] mere historicism. Furthermore, just as mimesis tries to instantaneously light up the excess of the concept, only to have it fall away the second it is identified, so too does the allegorical, as if it were the transition from the dominant to the tonic, quickly shift in its play. "But if the secular [*weltliche*] drama must stop short on the borders of transcendence [*Grenze der Transzendenz*]," asserts Benjamin,

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[48] For more on allegorical intuition see Bainard Cowan. "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory," *New German Critique* 22 (Winter, 1981): 109-122.

[49] Allegorical in the ancient Greek literally means to speak about something else. Benjamin is playing on the term to elicit the sense of speaking to an otherwise, to transcendence.

"its seeks, nevertheless, to assure itself of this, playfully [*spielhaft*] in detour [*auf Umwegen*]"

(OTS: 81/ GS1.1: 260, translation modified). We cannot help but notice that, literally speaking,

this round-about path echoes the "intermittent rhythm [*intermittierende Rhythmik*]" (OTS: 197/

GS1.1: 373, translation modified) and delays constitutive of *Trauerspiel*. But even further than

this eloquent transition to a music-like expression, it also parallels, to be sure, the mediated

character of mimesis once it has sedimented into the archive of language.

If, then, allegorical *Trauerspiel* conjures up what we will later discuss as the shining

moment of redemption, the moment that, in a flash, points beyond the barriers of sorrow and

mere bourgeois knowledge, it must be the case that *in*[50] its musical play, something beyond play

is illuminated. Benjamin claims precisely this:

> Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged
> knowledge [*Wissen*], the arbitrary rule [*Willkürherrschaft*] in the realm of dead things [*Dinge*], the
> supposed infinity of a world without hope. All this vanishes with the *one* about-turn
> [*Umschwung*], in which the immersion [*Versenkung*] of allegory has to clear away the final
> phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, re-discovers itself, no longer
> playfully in the earthly world of things [*spielarisch in erdhafter Dingwelt*], but seriously
> [*ernsthaft*] under the eyes of heaven. (OTS: 232/ GS1.1: 406, translation modified)

Here we notice just how much this conception of immersion (*Versenkung*) mirrors the

compulsion of ancient mimesis to become absorbed in its world.[51] Instead of fleeing before the

fallen, dead state of the sorrowful world, this allegorical response sinks down, as it were, to its

level, confronts it face to face. And yet, maintaining a kind of negativity, it does not entirely

touch that fallen state. It plays at a distance, maintaining something of the auratic veil. Suddenly,

in *one* vibrating shift, in a swinging about-turn (*Umschwung*) analogous to a musical cadence—

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[50] See SW1: 63/ GS2.1: 143: "It is fundamental to know (*fundamental zu wissen*) that this spiritual essence [*geistige Wesen*] communicates [*mitteilt*] itself *in* language and not *through* [*durch*] language. Languages, therefore, have no speaker, if this means someone who communicates *through* these languages. The spiritual essence [*Das geistige Wesen*] communicates itself in, not through, a language, which means that it is not outwardly identical to linguistic essence [*von außen gleich dem sprachlichen Wesen*]" (translation modified).

[51] As we will see at length below, this conception of immersion is arguably the basis for Adorno's conception of "modern" mimesis: "Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated [*Mimesis ans Verhärtete und Entfremdete*]; only thereby, and not by the disavowal of the mute [*Verleugnung des Stummen*], does art become eloquent [*beredt*]" (GS7: 39/ AT: 21, translation modified).

the *Umschlag* of the circle—this play dissipates. What could this be, but the expressionless, serious moment of nonsensuous similarity? In fact, the deep pause of breath (*Atemholen*) that accompanies *Trauerspiel* and once again brings to mind the fleetingness and musicality of the experience, is frequently associated with what we have shown nonsensuous similarity discerns: a richer remembrance of the matter itself (OTS: 44/ GS1.1: 225-226); richer because it perceives the possibilities that have always, in truth, been latent within the historical development of the matter.

It is along this line that maintains that the mimesis of *Trauerspiel* is and is not playful, is and is not language, that we should understand why Benjamin eventually claims that "allegory […] is not a playful image technique [*spielarische Bildertechnik*], but a form of expression" (OTS: 162/ GS1.1: 339, translation modified). As much as the hieroglyphs and written fragments that comprise the *Trauerspiel* are both playfully arranged and playfully oscillate, their movement is in the name of something beyond play for play's sake. It is, at bottom, in the service of the redemptive, expressive moment of mimetic remembrance. This is the basis of Benjamin's assertion that the continual "interplay of sound and meaning [*Widerspiel zwischen Laut und Bedeutung*] [that] remains a terrifying phantom for the mourning play […] must find its redemption [*Erlösung*]" (SW1: 61/ GS2.1: 139, translation modified). Although the supersensuous (*übersinnlich*e) and nonsensuous (*unsinnlich*e) are not, in the end, identical concepts, already in the early essays on *Trauerspiel* Benjamin anticipates what he would later describe as the ability of mimesis to say more than the empirical world: "for the mourning play that redemptive mystery is music—the rebirth of the feelings in a supersensuous [*übersinnlich*e] nature" (SW1: 61/ GS2.1: 139, translation modified). The historical tensions in the gap between sign and signified, inscription and meaning, that spark the expressionless expression of

*non*sensuous similarity, must be parallel to the musical passageway of *Trauer* as it finds its voice in the *super*sensuous. For both imply, as we will see, a moment of spirit, of critique, that springs forth in refusal to acquiesce before its condition.

IV. Mimesis as the Rupture of History

The preceding explication, to be sure, points to the fact that mimesis cannot be separated from a type of remembrance of the past. But we need to be careful, as we continue, not to conflate this remembrance with nostalgia. Unlike the unmediated presentation that Adorno argues was present in the proposed introduction to the *Arcades Project* (CC: 280-88), the remembrance implied in Benjamin's idea of mimesis remembers in and through its register of the present state of objective spirit. In other words, it approximates the *origin* of name-giving, not by somehow emulating the ancients, restaging tragedies, or directly exhibiting empirical details, but rather by adhering to that ideal of mimetic absorption, of following out the phonetic tensions that have migrated into the smallest details of the *current* state of language. Eloquence does not shine forth by completely fleeing from the hardened, less magical or less fluid relations of the current world, it emerges in a critical engagement with that world.

Remarkably, Benjamin knew this mimetic insight before he even made it explicit. In the *Trauerspiel* book he argues that,

> origin is not, therefore, discovered by an examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development. The principles of philosophical contemplation [*Richtlinien der philosophischen Betrachtung*] are recorded in the *dialectic* which is inherent in origin [*Ursprung*]. This dialectic shows singularity [*Einmaligkeit*] and repetition [*Wiederholung*] to be conditioned by one another in all essentials [*in allem Wesenhaften*]. (OTS: 46/ GS1.1 226, my emphasis)

The primal spring of origin (*Ursprung*) is, at bottom, historical. To speak in the name of the

past's lament is, paradoxically, to break open the possibilities of the present, not as they are

prescribed by the eternal repetition of fatalism, or as they might have been in some pristine

beginning, but by, as it were, scraping the elements against each other, igniting what seemed to

be dead and conventional. This is why Benjamin also describes this prescient mimetic

knowledge as the dialectic of "convention and expression [*Konvention und Ausdruck*]" (OTS:

175/ GS1.1: 351). In a Nietzschean manner,[52] the once fluid playfulness of the cluster of

experiences congeal until their expressive force seems all but annihilated. The mimetic, critical

moment is receptive, however, to the concrete possibilities that still live, so to speak, in these

linguistic reifications. Hence this life, this shining potential for expressivity—all the more lost in

an age of technological reproducibility that expunges singularity—remains, despite everything,

the concern of mimesis.

That mimesis is tied in this regard to singularity and expression should not be

unexpected. Grasping the consequence of this compulsion to follow the matter recapitulates

exactly what we have suggested throughout our analysis: mimesis is expressive precisely in its

gesture to the expressionless, precisely in the dialectic that establishes meaning but also thereby

points to that which is outside of it. In a word, it is only the current state of meaning that can

elicit the non-identical. Even though this excess might light up in the most unforeseen objects, in,

for example, a commodity discarded by the speed of the *Umschlagszeit*, it nevertheless has to

evoke something utterly non-exchangeable. Were this not the case, mimesis would simply be the

regression to one-to-one correspondence, to mere reification or sensuous imitation, not that

which speaks with singular expression. Desperate to uphold the perpetuation of the same, to

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[52] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Continental Aesthetic Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 53-62.

master the alienation of incoming and outgoing meanings (AP: 466 [N5, 2]/ GS5.1: 582), this regressive, mimetic variation, would suppress the fact that the mirror image is, in truth, refracted, inadequate to a singularity that can never be brought fully into proximity.

This makes it impossible to think mimesis other than through its relationship to what Benjamin calls the "*Zeitmoment*." If the expressionless expression of mimesis is indeed unprecedented, then it can apparently only spark at the precise instant when the constellation of auratic sensations come together. "The perception [*Wahrnehmung*] of similarity," writes Benjamin,

> is in every case bound to a flashing up [*Aufblitzen*]. It flits past [*huscht vorbei*], can possibly be won again, but cannot really be held fast as can other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly [*flüchtig*] and transitorily [*vorübergehend*] as a constellation of stars. The perception of similarities [*Ähnlichkeiten*] thus seems [*scheint*] to be bound to a moment in time [*Zeitmoment*]. It is like the addition of a third element—the astrologer—to the conjunction of two stars; it must be grasped in a moment [*Augenblick*]. (SW2.2: 695-696/ GS2.1: 206-207)

The transitoriness of what mimesis gleans should now be evident. Despite the difficulty of seizing this passing similarity, the mimetic task remains that of halting the momentum of meaning. As we will address in what follows, Benjamin never ceased struggling to conceive this *Augenblick* of recognition. Indeed it pervades the earliest writings and is the guiding thread of the late works. Another way to express what is at stake in this fleeting perception, is to say that the fallen state of endless dialectical transitions[53] must be brought to a momentary standstill. To catch hold of the image that lights up in this moment of rupture is to have the right tempo, to "read" in accordance with "the stream of things [*Fluß der Dinge*]" (SW2.2: 698/ GS2.1:209). The things themselves are waiting to speak, waiting to be perceived for what they promise. If they can be spellbound, if the jut forward can be stopped as it happens, then Benjamin suggests

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[53] Conceiving dialectics as a fallen state is first theorized in Benjamin's "Language as Such." The binary of good and evil that perpetuates, as Nietzsche observed, the mythological cycle of guilt and atonement, is exactly what Benjamin is trying twist free of. With good reason, Adorno ultimately declared that "dialectics is the ontology of the false condition (*die Ontologie des falschen Zustandes*)" (GS6: 22/ ND: 11, translation modified).

language in general, or artworks in particular (into which mimesis has migrated), can exact the work of critique. "Thus, even profane reading [*profane Lesen*], if it is not to forsake understanding [*Verstehen*] altogether, shares this with magical reading: that it is subject to a necessary tempo, or rather a *critical moment* [*kritische Augenlicke*], which the reader must not forget at any cost lest he go away empty-handed" (SW2.2: 698/ GS2.1: 209-210, my emphasis). Unlike the "Technology" essay, this account of the lineage of mimesis suggests that something of the magical lives on. It may now be a more fleeting affair, indeed a far more musical one, but mimesis nevertheless enchants something of what seemed to have become entirely disenchanted. What is more, this re-enchanting is essentially bound to the work of criticism. Not taking hold of the critical, mimetic moment is tantamount to forfeiting the capacity to "read" the constellation of nature-history (*Naturgeschichte*).

Given this sketch of mimesis, it should be evident that the mimetic variation of *Trauerpiel* is not, for Benjamin, opposed to our current, hyper-technical age. In fact, it should be evident that certain aspects of the articulation of the dynamic of mimesis in the "Technology" essay actually run counter to the spirit of Benjamin's work. By contrast, the return to the *Trauerspiel*, however nuanced its dissimilarity to the present, captures the essence of the transformation of modern mimesis. And this is without mentioning the fact that Benjamin is clear about the parallels between the play of sorrow and Twentieth Century experience (OTS: 55/ GS1.1: 235). We would simply have to neglect Benjamin's very consistent terminology to miss how much he contends that the above remainder of magical intuition is applicable to the contemporary tenor of experience. After all, by the time of the "History" essay, Benjamin was still asking those same quasi-theological questions. The possibility of speaking to the past, of giving voice to the betrayal of nature, still stood as his most urgent philosophical concern.

Thus, in the "Paralipomena" to this late essay, technological development—doubtless tied to the movement of modern science—is depicted not as that which facilitates the potential proletarian revolution, but as that which stands over and against the authentic remembrance of mimetic comportment.

> [T]he 'scientific' character of history, as defined by positivism […] is secured at the cost of completely eradicating every vestige of history's original determination [*Bestimmung*] as remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. The false aliveness [*Lebendigkeit*] of the past-made-present, the elimination of every echo of a "lament" [*Klage*] from history, marks history's final subjection to the modern concept of science. (SW4: 401/ GS1.3: 1231, translation modified)

This undoubtedly underscores the "fragile" opposition between the sympathetic or erotic perception of mimesis and a hardened, controlling understanding. Unlike the train of thought in Benjamin that arguably turns into a Brechtian realism, in this instance we notice Benjamin trying to think those last rudiments of true remembrance that once again gather the musical echo of sorrow. In fact, he attempts this precisely by emphasizing how the current technological mode of existence can only ideologically appeal to the spark of life we have associated with mimesis.

Is it therefore a coincidence that the terminology of the essays on mimesis is nearly identical to the "Concept of History" when they respectively describe a "*weak* [*schwaches*] rudiment of the once forceful [*gewaltigen*] compulsion to become similar" (SW2.2: 698/ GS2.1: 210, translation modified) and a "*weak* [*schwache*] messianic force [*Kraft*]" (SW4: 390/ GS1.2: 694)?[54] The messianic power we have within us is nothing other than our capacity to be historical, to be an index of that mimetic insight that eloquently weaves the past and present together.[55] However much our pretensions to divinity have collapsed, we still have within us a

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[54] As we will see below, this conception of a weak force is also present in *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, when Benjamin is addressing very similar issues. He describes, for instance, a "weak premonition [*schwache Ahnung*], as the almost hopeless shimmer of dawn [that] gleams [*leuchtet*] to the tormented ones" (SW1: 348/ GS1.1: 191, translation modified)

[55] See SW2.1: 244/ GS2.1: 320. Drawing on Benjamin's reading of Proust, Shierry Weber Nicholsen illuminates how a so-called "convoluted" or "intertwined [conception of] time [*verschränkte Zeit*]," is sensed by both mimetic and auratic perception. Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work*, 168-173. See also AP: 479 [N13a,1]/ GS5.1: 600: "our life (*Leben*), it can be said, is a muscle [*Muskel*] which has enough force [*Kraft*] to contract the whole of

capacity to catch a glimpse of redemption (*Erlösung*)—that condition beyond the communicative

struggle that, in a flash, mimesis summons forth.

Moreover, the depiction of the *Zeitmoment*, the tempo against the bad tempo, or the

moment indispensible to critically reading the objective constellation, is also virtually identical

in the mimesis and history essays. Thus in the "Concept of History" Benjamin asserts that, "the

true image of the past *flits* by [*huscht vorbei*]. The past can be seized [*festzuhalten*] only as an

image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability [*Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit*], and

is never seen again" (SW4: 390/GS1.2: 695).[56] We will discuss this conception of appropriating

the moment of danger at length as we continue. For now we can at least note that it is not without

cause that the musical transformation of mimesis is accompanied by an increase in the promise

of freedom. In Marxian fashion, freedom is fundamentally dialectical. Reification—the greatest

danger because of its link to death—points to its other. In Adorno's words, "freedom itself and

unfreedom are so entangled that unfreedom is not just an impediment to freedom but a premise

of its concept" (GS6: 262/ ND: 265). When the elements of historical experience are in danger of

falling completely silent, when they become progressively hardened, fragmented, chained by

convention, they might also, nevertheless, be setting themselves up for a, so to speak, explosion

(*aufzusprengen*) that bursts open the continuum of history (SW4: 395/ GS1.2: 701).

Benjamin's use of the verb *aufzusprengen* should, of course, remind us of the historical

character of *Ursprung*. To force open or burst the false, historicist, progression model of history,

in which one event piles upon another, unfolding its inevitable *Zweck*, is to be mimetic in the

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historical time. Or, to put it differently, the genuine [*echte*] conception of historical time [*Konzeption der historischen Zeit*], rests entirely upon the image of redemption [*Bild der Erlösung*]."

[56] Compare Benjamin's method to the following: "There is no better way of characterizing the method which historical materialism has broken with. [This traditional method of rejecting everything that unfolded later within history] is a process of empathy [*Einfühlung*]. Its origin is indolence of the heart, the *acedia* which despairs of appropriating the genuine historical image as it briefly flashes up [*fluechtig aufblitz*]" (SW4: 391/ GS1.2 696).

dialectical sense that we have explicated. More specifically, it is to play on intentionality, only to show that intention, the semiotic side of stepping into appearance, is not the whole story. Benjamin must mean something along these lines when he insists that, in resistance to the mythology of historicism, historical materialism harnesses, "an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended [*gemeint*] in that image" (SW4: 391/ GS1.2: 695).

Such an intentionality that the present must recognize in the transitory image of the past might, of course, give the impression of teleology. In other words, it might give the impression that, insofar as the present does not recognize its purposive fulfillment as latent in the past, it has misrecognized this image. Benjamin does, after all, continually attempt to think the concept of true fulfillment or fulfilled now-time (*erfuelte Jetztzeit*) (SW4: 395/ GS1.2: 701). But everything else he says in this essay suggests a far more complicated interpretation of fulfillment. Indeed, the teleological reading of Benjamin's concept of (mimetic) historical materialism is far too mythological for him; it misses, that is to say, what he means by the critical *Augenblick* that ruptures the inevitability of myth. He must be playing, then, on the interrelation between the intentional and intentionless when he announces the above demand to recognize the truth of the past.

This is also why Benjamin is so vehemently opposed to both the "straight" and "spiral" conceptions of history. They are ideological or merely serve history's "victor[s]," because, in their fatalist appeal to necessity, their *acedia* or "indolence of the heart," they do nothing but perpetuate the feeling of "*Traurigkeit*" (SW4: 391/ GS1.2: 696). How, then, does this mimetic, historical capacity for gleaning the matter avoid the latter barbarism, and elicit the possibility of real fulfillment, indissolubly connected to happiness and the representation of redemption

(*Erlösung*) (SW4: 389/ GS1.2: 693)? Once more, it takes hold of the moment of the matter's recognizability, seizing the *now* of objective spirit with all of its sedimented tensions and possibilities. In this regard it does something not all together dissimilar from Foucault's historical analysis[57]: "[t]he historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a *present* [*Gegenwart*] which is not a transition [*Übergang*], but in which time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill [*Stillstand*]" (SW4: 396/ GS1.2: 702, my emphasis). It is the present that speaks for the past, the present which grasps the essence of the matter, as if its speaking were the proper name of *die Sache selbst*, a proper name which conjures up the promise of a condition beyond the communicate struggle, beyond play and its perpetual transitions (*Übergänge*).[58] This is why the angel of history is facing backwards (SW4: 392/ GS1.2: 697). That time comes to a halt in this manner is to say that positive dialectics, the fallen state of good and evil, of a perpetual either/or logic, is straightaway seen for what it is: a late manifestation of mythology as causality.[59]

With good reason, then, this stop or interruption of the world's *conceptual* self-understanding, comes, like mimetic development, with a passive and active element. It is active,

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[57] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 31.

[58] It is fascinating that from this conception of stopping dialectics we can locate the historical character of the imagination—undoubtedly connected to the mimetic faculty—in the midst of its critical transition. In his fragment "Imagination" or "*Phantasie*," which concerns the imaginative de-formation of figures (*phantasievolle Enststaltung der Gebilde*), Benjamin writes that, unlike the merely "destructive collapse of the empirical (*zerstörerischen Verfall der Empirie*)" the imagination or fantasy "immortalizes the downfall [*Untergang*] in an unending series of transitions [*Übergangen*]" SW1: 281/ GS6:115, translation modified). Here we can see an anticipation of Adorno's conception of artworks taking over or bettering the knowledge claims of discursive knowledge. Once the *Untergang* or secularization of the ritual stage has begun, the imagination cannot merely be resigned to play in a perpetual "*zwanglos*" transition; it, like experience taken as a whole, must relinquish something of the merely playful transition (*Übergang*) and take on the serious work of eliciting truth. In short, with the downfall of ancient mimesis, mimesis itself unites with philosophy's goal: speaking against myth, against the perpetual passage of what Benjamin calls "empty time."

[59] See the section in *Negative Dialectics* entitled "The Crisis of Causality," GS6: 263/ ND: 265.

because the moment of spirit or critical distance (*Spiel-Raum*)[60] opened up, is founded, in

Benjamin's words, on a type of construction. "Materialist historiography," he writes, "…is based

on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their

arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop [*plötzlich einhalt*] in a constellation

saturated with tensions [*Spannungen*], it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is

crystallized as a monad" (SW4: 396/GS1.2: 702-703). This constitutes the *Arcade Project*'s

conception of waking up from hell. Not unlike the previously illustrated synthesizing moment of

the phonetic tensions in language, dialectics at a standstill requires a spiritual moment that

configures or organizes; otherwise it would remain, like Sisyphus, completely in thrall to the

prescribed repetitions of the alleged possibilities of experience. To arrest the matter is thus to see

it for what it is, not as cognitive adequation, but as replete with gaps and fissures (*Sprünge*),

refracted. Just as a monad is at once utterly particular, but also a *gesture* to the infinite, so too

does this historical perspective sense, in the most minute detail, that which exceeds particularity.

And yet the active moment does not encompass the whole of this linguistic

comportment. Benjamin is careful to emphasize the equally important, passive side of mimesis.

He thus claims that, "[i]n drawing itself together in the moment—in the dialectical image—the

past becomes part of humanity's involuntary memory [*unwillkürliche Erinnerung*]" (SW4: 403/

GS1.3: 1233). The caesura of dialectics, the moment of recognition, is inconceivable without

embracing a more objective or universal version of Proust's mimetic experience. Devoid of

anticipation, it must be able to tap into the objective compulsion of the matter, following the

previously concealed correspondences. In fact, Benjamin gives us the impression that it is

nothing short of the ability to let go of mastery or abandon the desire to incessantly subsume and

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[60] In the late essay, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin implies a connection between the preservation of an auratic distance and the task of critique, by referencing Baudelaire's insistence on a "magic of distance [*Zauber der Ferne*]" that is involved in aesthetic experience (SW4: 341/ GS1.2: 650).

hierarchize the "findings" of the past, that is the condition for the possibility of authentic mimetic remembrance. In short, mimesis needs an impulsive element to secure its insight.

This clarification surely calls into question the narrative that has emerged in the past ten to fifteen years concerning Adorno and Benjamin's philosophical relationship. The story in effect claims that, in his arrogance and elitism, Adorno could not understand the refinement of Benjamin's undialectical perception. Can this really be an appropriate assessment, given what we have shown about the simultaneity of a constructive and passive moment in mimesis? In other words, can Benjamin's theory of distraction or entertainment (*Zerstreuung*) as the latest manifestation of mimesis, and the alleged critical space (*Spiel-Raum*) opened up with technological disenchantment be at once an adequate appraisal of the current age and a fruitful alternative to Adorno's theoretical shortcomings? Or is it rather the case that, despite the near total unanimity of commentators, Benjamin actually came to agree with Adorno's criticism?

My claim is just that. But even further than this point of agreement, I maintain that Benjamin actually detected something of this tension in his own theory. In the third version to the "Technology" essay, it is his depiction of concentration (*Sammlung*[61]), not distraction (*Zerstreuung*), that comes closer to the critical, historical consciousness associated with the mimetic moment of revolutionary possibility.

> Distraction and concentration [*Zerstreuung und Sammlung*] form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it. By contrast the distracted masses [apparently more susceptible to the new, critical play of mimesis that has shed the element of *Schein*] absorb the work of art into themselves. (SW4: 268/ GS1.2: 504)

Nothing could be further from a revolutionary mimetic comportment than this notion of entertainment, distraction, or amusement (*Zerstreuung*). The absorption *into oneself* is a

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[61] Benjamin's careful play on language is once again evident here. The use of *Sammlung* refers to the concept of configuration and concentration, but it also echoes with a type of gathering or gleaning of the phonetic tensions that have found their way into language.

preservation *of the self*, not the shattering of what, in other places, Benjamin knows to be a formalistic defense mechanism.

Surely, then, Adorno's claim that "in a communist society, work would be organized in such a way that human beings would no longer be so exhausted or so stupefied as to require such distraction," gets to the heart of the matter (CC: 130). A precision that grasps just how intricately linked the passive and active, expressive and constructive, moments of mimesis are, must ultimately relinquish the claim of the potential political insight involved in pure (bourgeois) passivity. In fact, the technological development epitomized in film, in contrast to the musicality of language, might do the exact opposite of what contemporary mimesis is elsewhere described as doing. This must be the grounds for Benjamin's eventual reversal. "The perpetual readiness of voluntary, discursive memory [*willentlichen, diskursiven Erinnerung*], encouraged by the technology of reproduction, *curtails* [*beschneidet*] *the space of play of fantasy* (*Spielraum der Phantasie*)" (SW4: 337/ GS1.2: 645, translation modified; my emphasis). Should we simply understand this reversal of the claim in the "Technology" as Benjamin submitting to the publication demands of The Institute for Social Research, or as him rather playing out the consequences built into his own thought?

Arguing the former would neglect everything we have elucidated about the dynamic of mimesis. The voluntary, rigid form of controlling discursivity, is, no doubt, opposite to the *mémoire involontaire* of mimesis. And film, especially in its early manifestations, seems, because of its representational character, the least likely medium to avoid this prescribed, non-spontaneous remembrance. Moreover, a distracted form of mimesis that, as Robert Hullot-Kentor describes it, remembers for you,[62] is thoroughly at odds with the constructive moment of

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[62] Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Right Listening and a New Type of Human Being" in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 193-209, 206.

freedom that takes hold of the sensations of experience. If the critical distance of the *Spielraum* really opens up amidst technology's inevitable closing of the auratic world, then it must, paradoxically, happen in and through a retrieval of the aura. In other texts by Benjamin we have seen the modern instantiation of mimesis imply precisely this. As Susan Buck Morse has observed, the aura must be maintained by transforming it.[63]

This characterization of the mimetic task does not mean, to repeat our previous claim, that we can nostalgically recuperate ancient experience. Doing so would resemble what Adorno and Horkheimer eventually call the "mimesis of mimesis" (GS3: 209/ DE: 152), i.e., the ideological mask of mediation parading about as if it were immediacy. It would appeal, that is to say, to a kind of primitivism, to "nature" and its so-called pure feeling, when in fact it would be nothing more than their mutilated remains.[64]

Avoiding this false immediacy, this terrifying exploitation of what remains all-too historical, and thereby heeding the dialectic of mimesis, thus means continuing to follow Benjamin and Adorno into their conception of the primacy of the musicality of mimesis. Perhaps more perspicuously than anywhere else, Benjamin's account of *Elective Affinities* draws together the whole of this musical, non-representational problematic. With it we more explicitly observe the fleeting character of an experience that captures the moment (*Augenblick*) of similarity in its *Untergang*. We also more explicitly observe the ineliminable connection between *Schein* and the expressionless. But, perhaps even more important than these phenomena, this early text lays the grounds for understanding how Adorno takes up the conception of *Schein* and *Spiel* wrapped up in mimesis as a *critical project*. As we turn toward it, we must, accordingly, ask whether

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[63] Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 87.
[64] See, especially, T.W. Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 288-317; Adorno, "Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens" in GS 14.

Benjamin is simply describing a situation that is applicable to the early Nineteenth Century, or whether he has not, more generally, pinpointed the critical development of the dynamic of mimesis.

V. Gesturing to the Critical Protest of Mimesis: Precursors to the Dialectic of Enlightenment

It is no accident that, in accordance with Benjamin's metaphysics of language, great music first emerges for humanity in the baroque era. Bach's brilliance, which cannot be grasped without appreciating his eloquent appropriation of polyphony (GS12: 88-89: PNM: 71-2), is synonymous with the emergence of *Trauer*. It is precisely when the monophony of the word, the single melodic line of spoken discourse, exemplary in Greek life, is no longer adequate to the sorrow resonating from fallen nature, no longer adequate to the excess of phonetic tensions sedimented in language, that music springs forth as a promise of redemption. Music must, in other words, like language, become, out of dedication to understanding the matter, increasingly polyphonic, increasingly aware that the constellation of nature's similarities cannot be contained or expressed in a reductionistic model. The image that therefore comes to mind upon hearing Benjamin's depiction of the mimetic moment of possibility is in part resistant to images (*Bilder*). If anything, it is more appropriate to think of musicology's inherently non-representational concept of dynamic contrast. Recall that Benjamin claims, "articulating the past historically means recognizing those elements of the past which *come together* [*zusammentritt*] in the constellation of a single moment [*Augenblick*]" (SW4: 403/ GS1.3: 1233, my emphasis). To come together in now-time (*Jetztzeit*), in the moment, mirrors a richly textural musical work. No musical phrase in itself means anything separate from how it will be stressed within the context of the whole. Remaining open, the *Sinnzusammenhang* could shift in accordance with the

particularity of each note's accent, but the second the actual articulation happens, the second the

flash of appearance steps forth, there is no escaping the *contrapuntal* force of meaning (*Sinn*).

Such a non-linear, multi-dimensional image could be the basis of Adorno's persistent illustration

of musical and experiential phenomena in terms of their similarity to a kaleidoscope.[65]

Most importantly for our analysis, this musical shift in mimetic comportment is

accompanied by what we have been describing as the *Untergang des Scheins*. The visual realm

and its shining become less predominant when the feeling of the inadequacy of language takes

over. No one moved by music would deny that it is meant to be listened to in the evening. Of

course Benjamin's reading of *Elective Affinities* describes this transformation, this heightened

sense for music, as it plays out at a particular historical hour—one not yet as disenchanted as our

own—but his depiction continuously gestures to the fluctuations of mimesis that Adorno

eventually came to concretize. It is clear, then, that the down-going (*Untergang*) of the magical

world[66] is actually paving the way for how the mimetic language of art, inextricably tied to

philosophy's task of overcoming mythology (SW1: 326/ GS1.1: 162),[67] comes to adopt the task

of revealing truth and embodying knowledge. With this trajectory in mind, i.e., by following out

Benjamin's conception of how language increasingly desires to release mimetic production from

its tie to myth, we can foster a sense of how mimesis is at once driven towards the *scheinlos*

presentation of the sublime, and, anticipating Adorno and Horkheimer, how it is fundamentally

bound up with the struggle of the dialectic of enlightenment.

Gesturing to this new appeal to truth, Benjamin writes,

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[65] See, for example, GS7:111/ AT: 197.

[66] Like with the *Trauerspiel*, one would be grossly mistaken to assume that Benjamin is exclusively talking about Ottilie's downfall in his analysis of *Elective Affinities*.

[67] "And where the presence of truth should be possible, it can be possible solely under the condition of the recognition of myth—that is, the recognition of its crushing indifference to truth. Therefore, in Greece genuine art and genuine philosophy—as distinct from their inauthentic stage, the theurgic—begin with the departure of myth, because art is not based on truth to any lesser extent than is philosophy, and philosophy is not based on truth to any greater extent than is art" (SW1: 326/ GS1.1: 162).

> [a]ffinity [*Neigung*], like the veiling of the image [*Verschleierung des Bildes*] through tears in music, thus summons forth in conciliation [*Aussöhnung*] the down-going of the semblance [*Untergang des Scheins*] through emotion [*Rührung*]. For emotion is precisely that transition [*Übergang*] in which the semblance—the semblance [*Schein*] of beauty as the semblance of reconciliation [*Versöhnung*]—once again dawns sweetest before its vanishing [*dämmert vor dem Vergehen*]. (SW1: 348/ GS1.1: 192, translation modified)

All of the components of our previous analysis are once again present. Aside from a fleetingness attending disenchantment, Benjamin defines emotion, or more literally this touching (*Rührung*), as a "lament [*Klage*] full of tears" (SW1: 349/GS1.1: 192). What summons it is an affinity, or an affection (*Neigung*) that almost sounds, by virtue of its resonance with *Wahlverwandtschaften* (elective affinities), like the multivalent constellation that contrapuntally comes together. Benjamin's use of the term *Rührung* is also telling, because to touch, to at last embrace, implies a stripping of the veil, and the veil is exactly what upholds the distance of aura and the beautiful *Schein*. In short, the epoch in which the "second technique [*Technik*]," i.e., the exhibition stage, incessantly desires to touch everything has commenced.

As is always the case with Benjamin, dialectical possibilities open up in this transformation that knows the distance of traditional beauty is coming to an end. More specifically, there is a stronger promise of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) precisely at the point when the possibility of a world unfettered from the destructive reign of illusion comes to the fore. As opposed to a time when semblance, because of its confidence in the life emanating from the world, was more "dazzling" and "triumphant" in its presentation (SW1: 349/ GS1.1: 193), "now the semblance [*Schein*] promises for the first time to retreat entirely, now for the first time longs to grow dim and become perfect" (SW1: 348/ GS1.1: 191). Benjamin suggests that the reason it does this, i.e., the reason the pangs migrating into language more pressingly want this perfection, this utopia we have aligned with name-giving, is that the block of expressivity propels a view, as if it were a magnetic force of sudden reversal (*Umschlag*), into the freedom

that could be. As with *Trauerspiel*, the organic world and life begin to lose their ruling power,

the magical cluster of similarities begin to fade, so that the shining presentation of harmony

looks all the more fabricated. This calls forth the mimetic transformation of sorrow as

consolation, or, in this case, the conciliatory emotion that finds eloquent language by virtue of

arresting the vanishing quiver (*Beben*) of semblance (SW1: 340/ GS1.1: 181).

    And yet, this consolation or conciliation (*Aussöhnung*) and the music-like meaning or

expression they have recourse to in their mimetic doubling, cannot by themselves succeed in

staving off illusion. For the latter process, whose emotion "is only the semblance of

reconciliation [*Versöhnung*]" (SW1: 349/ GS1.1: 192), remains, in part, beautiful. And "if beauty

is semblance-like [*scheinhaft*], so, too, is the reconciliation that it promises mythically in life and

death" (SW1: 342/ GS1.1: 184). Such a formulation, in fact, locates the paradox of all art. That

Schein could disappear and be captured in its vanishing, in its down-going (*Untergang*), implies

that reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) need not be the *mere* reconciliation summoned in the

neutralized sphere of artworks or language. As much as there is a conciliation or consolation for

one's *Trauer*, this emotive configuration of a lament also promises something beyond

consolation. It conjures up, despite the fallacious or ideological moment that accompanies it

because of its veiled presentation, "true reconciliation" (SW1: 342/ GS1.1: 184). Since the

beautiful can only spring from alienation, it is dialectically shackled to the false, and therefore,

built within its concept, is also the compulsion to be done with the beautiful and the veil that

preserves it. In this way, resembling the mimesis and history essays, beautiful expressivity

immanently demands an expressionless, sublime moment. To state it in a more metaphysical

tone, as opposed to being rationalized through the naturalization of tradition, the matter itself

demands reconciliation once the present is for the first time seen to be distinctly unreconciled.

It is not, consequently, the music-like appropriation of language itself that elicits this promise of real reconciliation, but the inter-play (*Zwischenspiel*) of music with silence. It is not simply the meaning established in the non-sensuous similarity between things and their sounds that fleetingly gestures to real fulfillment—redemption (*Erlösung*)—but rather the negativity of the expression. "If music encloses genuine mysteries," writes Benjamin, "this world of course remains a mute world [*stumme Welt*], from which music will never ring out. Yet to what is it dedicated if not redemption [*Erlösung*], to which it promises more than conciliation [*Aussöhnung*]?"(SW1: 355/ GS1.1: 201). That musicality can only gesture or promise signifies its negative, mimetic character. In this gesture it evokes that same critical element at play in Benjamin's other works, namely the mute or expressionless moment of a rupture that refuses to adapt to the course of the world. This is why, in the following crucial passage that, no doubt, gathers the guiding themes of Benjamin's whole corpus, we not only notice Benjamin attempt to conceptualize extreme particularity—the *Augenblick*—we see him do so by implying a mimesis that is beginning the historical sublation of *Schein*:

> Form, however, enchants [*verzaubert*] chaos momentarily [*auf einen Augenblick*] into the world. Therefore, no work of art may seem [*scheint*] unboundedly alive [*ungebannt lebendig*], without becoming mere semblance [*Schein*] and ceasing to be a work of art. The life undulating [*wogende Leben*] in it must appear [*erscheinen*] petrified and as if spellbound [*gebannt*] in a single moment [*Augenblick*]. That which in it has being [*Wesende*] is mere beauty, mere harmony [*Harmonie*], which floods through the chaos (and, in truth, through this only and not the world) but, in the flooding-through, seems [*scheint*] only to enliven [*zu beleben*] it. What arrests [*Einhalt gebietet*] the semblance [*Schein*], spellbinds [*bannt*] the movement [*Bewegung*], and interrupts [*ins Wort fällt*] the harmony is the expressionless [*das Ausdruckslose*]. This life [*Leben*] grounds the mystery; this petrification [*Erstarren*] grounds the content in the work. Just as interruption [*Unterbrechung*] by the commanding word [*gebietende Wort*] is able to bring out the truth from the evasions of a woman precisely at the point where it interrupts [*unterbricht*], the expressionless compels [*zwingt*] the trembling harmony [*zitternde Harmonie*] to stop [*einzuhalten*] and through its objection [*Einspruch*] immortalize [*verewigt*] its quivering [*Beben*]. In this immortalization the beautiful must vindicate itself, but now it appears [*scheint*] to be interrupted precisely in its vindication, and thus it has the eternity of its content precisely by the grace of that objection [*Einspruch*]. The expressionless [*Ausdruckslose*] is the critical violence [*kritische Gewalt*] which, while unable to separate semblance [*Schein*] from essence [*Wesen*] in art, prevents them from mingling. This violence [*Gewalt*] has the [expressionless] as a moral word [*moralisches Wort*]. In the expressionless, the sublime violence of the truth appears [*erscheint die erhabne Gewalt des Wahren*] as that which determines the language [*Sprache*] of the real world according to the laws of the moral world [*moralischen Welt*]. For it shatters [*zerschlägt*] whatever still survives as the

legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance [*schönen Schein*]: the false, errant totality—the absolute totality. Only the expressionless completes [*vollendet*] the work, by shattering into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol. (SW1: 340/ GS1.1:180-181, translation modified)

At this historical hour, *Schein* undergoes a kind of secularization that is perhaps best described as an implicit dialectic of enlightenment. As much as it appears that *Schein* will be eliminated by the compulsion of enlightenment to unveil (*enthüllen*) everything, this quivering life, what Kant calls the animating principle (*belebende Prinzip*) or powers swinging into motion (*in Schwung versetzt*) during their free play,[68] is partially preserved. Cold enlightenment does not, in short, have the last word. This explains why Benjamin appeals to the enchanting capacity of form; it reignites the magic that was seemingly lost (*entzaubern*). At the same time, in the dynamic of mimetic transformation, experience realizes how the fleeting arrest of the *Schein* or organicity of life, cannot be wholly vindicated, cannot justify the harmony that disavows a disharmonious world. Before Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly theorized it, Benjamin knew well that the shifts in the life emanating from all mimetic manifestations always threaten to be captivated in a kind of mythological spell (*Bann*). In others words, the more an appeal is made to that which is irretrievably lost, the more it comes to resemble mere *Schein*, mere illusion. It thereby abolishes its character as an artwork—an act of refusal—and regresses to mythological affirmation.

In the face of the decline of the aura, a successful mimetic variation, then, depends on language recognizing the potentially illusory character of this natural, quivering element. The capacity to take hold, as it were, of the (mimetic) excess or chaos bound to every form-giving process, is united with the expressionless moment. As we have seen in various ways, this implies temporarily bringing harmony to a standstill, interrupting it. But even further, Benjamin suggests

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[68] It goes beyond the scope of this project to examine fully the comparison between Benjamin and Adorno's conception life and that of Kant's. However, we can at least observe what appears to be an insistence by all three of them that one must understand it, and its correlate concept, spirit (*Geist*), as something that is related to concepts but not identical to them. See Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 313-314.

that it is precisely at this moment of interruption that language *speaks*. The use of the term *Ein-spruch* is noteworthy. It not only connotes an objection, it also brings to mind a kind of plea or protest. Once more, the lament is made eloquent by its refusal. It rings out, or, more literally, speaks out, not to be communicated (*mitgeteilt*), but as if to be heard by God.

This extreme seriousness, or "great emotion of shattering" (SW1: 349/ GS1.1: 192) thus guides the direction of the mimetic dynamic. That direction is towards the sublime. Tom Huhn has brought to light this issue of the trajectory of the beautiful and the sublime in Adorno's work,[69] but now we can see that it is likely rooted in Benjamin's theory of language. It is no coincidence that, just four years prior to the 1809 publication of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* stormed onto the stage, marking the first entrance of the sublime into the realm of art. "[T]his transition, this going over [*Übergang*], that is accomplished in the going under [*Untergang*] of semblance," not only indicates that all modern art will have to embrace the "shock [*Erschütterung*]" element of the sublime (SW1: 349/ GS1.1: 193), it also demonstrates that a dialectic of enlightenment is endemic to all mimetic productions. A new recognition of the truth that is built into artworks begins to grow: form must be overwhelmed, the veil stripped, because the (mimetic) excesses that always, in secret, undergirded the delicacy of the beautiful, are starting to puncture the lie.

The appeal to truth that this caesura or jolt unleashes can be understood, along these lines, as having two dominant features. In the first place, it belies the symbolic character of beauty and its claim to give us insight into the purposive, moral universe. Here Benjamin, no doubt, has Kant in mind. Whereas Kant is famously alleged to have tried to bridge the gap (*Kluft*) in his theoretical and practical philosophy by means of the third *Critique*'s description of

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[69] Tom Huhn, "Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic" in *The Semblance of Subjectivity*, 237-258, 237.

the symbolic relation we find between the experience of the beautiful and moral action,[70] Benjamin describes the inevitable fragmenting of the latter conception, because of its appeal to an untenable, "absolute" system. This is to say that, echoing Nietzsche, the true impulse behind positing the moral universe might well be cowardice and *ressentiment*[71] before an underlying chaos. The caesura thus calls a halt to the more originary violence that morality and its intentionality are.[72]

The second feature of this shift to mimetic truth-revealing relates to another type of violence. Benjamin claims that the interruption (*Unterbrechung*) of the alleged harmony of semblance is a kind of critical violence or force (*Gewalt*). Striking for its consistency, this critical violence is exactly the term that Benjamin employs in his famous *Kritik der Gewalt*. Is it not the case that the commentary has neglected to hear the resonances of this violent critique?[73] The genitive of *Gewalt* just as much implies the force of critique or critique's force as it admonishes against a violence run astray. This is why Benjamin employs the term *Gewalt* alongside the adjective "*kritische*" in more than one place. The expressionless caesura of the beautiful that disabuses the illusory side of *Schein*, is in fact thoroughly linked with the impossible, expressionless experience of divine justice. The problem is that the conceptual stepping into experience always manifests, shows, or intends something mythical; we cannot help but conceive the world lawfully, purposively. That which is other than this conceptualization, "the expiatory power of violence (*Gewalt*)," explains Benjamin, "is invisible

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[70] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §59.

[71] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage: 1989).

[72] If one of the consequences of the third *Critique* is that one cannot help but conceive of the world teleologically, then we can now understand Benjamin's partial resistance to Kant. As we will see in more detail below, the silent or mute speaks as that which stops this momentum of teleology or progress, however much it is merely a "reflective judgment" for Kant. See Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 378.

[73] For two important texts that take up Benjamin's critique of violence, but nonetheless, in my view, neglect to hear all of its nuances, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Jacque Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" in *Acts of Religion*, trans. Mary Quaintance (New York: Routlege, 2002), 228-298.

to men." (SW1: 252/ GS2.1: 203) As much as the ban on graven images or the ban on

transcendence lives on, our weak rudiment of divine justice must provide a kind of second-order,

immanent protest to the perpetuation of mythological law-giving:

> This very task of destruction [*Vernichtung*] poses again, ultimately the question of a pure
> immediate violence [*reinen unmittelbaren Gewalt*] that might be able to call a halt to mythic
> violence [*Gewalt*]…. If mythic violence is lawmaking [*rechtsetzend*], divine violence is law-
> destroying [*rechtsvernichtend*]; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly [*grenzenlos*]
> destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates.
> (SW1: 249/ GS2.1: 199)

Although Benjamin is speculating about the idea of God, we cannot avoid noticing the same

language of calling a halt to the unreconciled course of the world. If we grant that Benjamin is

correct about the weak messianic power within us, we must assume that he is also implying *our*

capacity to approximate the redemptive or expiatory rupture of mythology, the world beyond

good and evil. Just as the unintentional springs up in its relation to intention, this critical force

(*Gewalt*) points dialectically to the transcendence of myth in a relation to myth.

Does this transition to the sublime and the movement of enlightenment that

uncompromisingly refuses the mythical aspects of the beautiful, amount to the total destruction

of *Schein*? Once again, in this context, Benjamin's answer is no. A critical, magical distance

must still be forcefully opened up. In the modern world, mimesis does this with the assistance of

the expressionless, with that which momentarily exceeds the concept. But this departure from

plasticity, from the enduring, sacred object of the ritual era, and from the confidence of the visual

realm, does not mean that the emergence of new forms of beautiful *Schein* are impossible or

unnecessary. Again heralding Adorno, a new *Schein* could just as well realize its tension with the

play of music that promises a reconciliation, but cannot deliver it. Mimesis could, that is to say,

see its essential link to that critical spark of life, that spirit (*Geist*) which resists the deadened

world, and therefore be willing, when threatened, to embody whatever transformation is

necessary to live up to the abolition of all surrogate reconciliation. This is perhaps why, in the fragment from which the above passage on *Elective Affinities* is derived, Benjamin asserts that, "the semblance [*Schein*] in which the nothing [*das Nichts*][74] appears [*erscheint*], is the more forceful [*gewaltigere*] one, the authentic one. This is conceivable only in the visual realm" (SW1: 223/ GS1.3: 831, translation modified). The similarities between the nothing (*das Nichts*), the invisible-visible double-bind, the impossible, and the expressionless, are all unmistakable in this context. The *Schein* element of mimesis is eventually compelled to transform itself, or better, to sublate itself in accordance with this new principle of critical violence (*Gewalt*). This means its component parts are not simply cancelled, they are preserved as well. Mimesis increasingly shines by, paradoxically, not shining, and in so doing, becomes more enlightened, more critically forceful (*gewaltig*) in its approximation of absolute nothingness, utopia.[75] Let us, accordingly, draw this section to an end and begin our transition to the next chapter by once again recalling the letter from Adorno to Benjamin that was copied into the *Arcades Project*. This time, however, we will cite the brief lines that Benjamin added to Adorno's words, in the hope of letting the letter speak in a somewhat different light. Such an arrangement now begins to show how a critical, mimetic tempo calls us to read the latest needs stored up, yet always passing away, in the circulation of aesthetic language. Juxtaposed to everything we have learned in this chapter's analysis of the critical moment of interruption (*Unterbrechung*), we can also begin to glimpse just how much Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the mimetic movement of enlightenment and the death-drive built into it, takes up Benjamin's challenge to break with empty, historical time, while seizing the dialectical image of refusal:

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[74] The translator of the English version of this fragment has unfortunately missed the direct article in *das Nichts*. Benjamin must mean "the nothing," for otherwise *Nichts* would not be in the capitalized form of a noun.
[75] Compare the following fragment from *Central Park*: "Silence as aura [*Das Schweigen als Aura*]. Maeterlinck pushed the unfolding of the auratic to the point of absurdity" (SW4: 177/ GS1.2: 674).

'With the vitiation of their use value, the alienated things are hollowed out [*ausgehöhlt*] and, as ciphers,[76] they draw in meanings [*Bedeutungen*]. Subjectivity takes possession of them while it invests [*einlegt*] them with intentions of desire and fear [*Intentionen von Wunsch und Angst*]. And insofar as defunct things [*abgeschiednen Dinge*] stand in as images [*Bilder*] of subjective intentions, these latter present themselves as immemorial and eternal. Dialectical images are constellations between alienated things and incoming meaning, pausing [*innehaltend*] in the moment [*Augenblick*] of undifferentiatedness [*Indifferenz*] between death and meaning. While things in appearance [*Schein*] are awakened to what is newest, death transforms the meanings into what is most ancient.' With regard to these reflections, it should be kept in mind that, in the nineteenth century, the number of "hollowed-out" things increases at a tempo and on a scale that was previously unknown, for technical progress is continually withdrawing newly introduced objects from circulation. (AP 466 [N5, 2]/ GS5.1: 582, translation modified)

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[76] The concepts that Adorno was dealing with in this formulation also parallel Benjamin's early conception of nature-history in the *Trauerspiel*: "[w]hen […] history comes onto the scene, it does so as a cipher to be read. 'History' [*Geschichte*] is writ across the countenance of nature in the sign language of transience" (OTS: 177/ GS1.1: 353; Hullot-Kentor's translation).

Chapter 2: The Mimetic Struggle of the Dialectic of Enlightenment

Our analysis in Chapter One of the dynamic of mimesis, of the historical shifts and tensions between semblance and play, the dissolution and persistence of the magical, critical and auratic elements of mimesis, demonstrate what we have called Benjamin's implicit conception of Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment. On the one hand, the expressive flash of mimetic nonsensuous similarity is threatened with fragility, with potentially falling silent through technology's elimination of the historical lament, but, on the other hand, the central components of mimesis could just as well transform themselves, and harness what we have seen is the potentially demythologizing, rupturing capacity of a mimesis that has assuaged the technique of mastery. Benjamin has, in other words, laid the grounds for understanding Adorno and Horkheimer's narrative of the mimetic struggle of enlightenment to overcome myth. When the historical transformation towards a compulsion for truth becomes a more pronounced potentiality for mimetic comportment, when what takes hold is the need for a reconciliation that at last eliminates the remnants of illusion (*Schein*), this happens through nothing other than that essential process of mimetic doubling (*Verdoppelung*) into language and artworks. Such a potential metamorphosis of a mimesis that, with a newly acquired playful distance, does not need to simply remain in thrall to the anxiety and instrumentality of magical mastery, must be the root of Benjamin's claim that art is, "a perfecting [*vollenden*] mimesis." (SW3: 137/ GS7.2: 668). A certain historical instantiation of mimesis can apparently circumvent the fatalism of mere duplication, mere identical repetition, and present, as we have observed, an eloquent re-

translation of the matter's possibilities, "a suggested improvement [*Verbesserungsvorschlag*] on nature" (SW3: 137/ GS7.2: 667).

This implicit attempt to twist out of mythological regression helps to explain why we have been conceiving of mimesis as an idea, instead of a concept. There remains an openness to mimesis that not only perfects, completes, or brings to fruition, the phenomena before which it is originally confronted. In adopting a critical comportment, altering its relation to the play between nature-sounds (*Naturlauten*) and their linguistic or artistic objectification, mimesis also perfects itself. As we will see in the coming chapters on Adorno, this is akin to saying that mimesis could potentially sublate[1] itself, cancelling out, but also preserving those aspects of it that would make it live up to the promise of an enlightenment truly in service to the idea of peace. Aside from never fully appearing or stepping into experience without an alien counterpart that is inadequate to it—the concept—such a potentiality for mimesis implies a continual task, something that is not as yet completed; it therefore resonates with Kant's regulative ideas, in contrast to his depiction of transcendentally circumscribed possibilities.[2]

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[1] Considering that I am obviously attempting to employ a Kantian terminology in my use of the "idea" of mimesis, it might seem counterintuitive to observe it alongside the Hegelian concept of sublation (*Aufhebung*). I would like to suggest, however, that this apparent inconsistency is actually grounded in the often misguided connotations that have accompanied the term sublation in much of the discourse of Twentieth and Twenty First Century continental philosophy. Although Kant is arguably superior to Hegel in the sense that he recognizes the "block" that cancels the idealistic possibility of subsuming the whole of Being under subjective categories, the very recognition of the block, is a kind of movement of enlightenment. Indeed, it could be argued that Kant's conception of maturity is inseparable from a notion of sublation. To overcome one's self-incurred immaturity means to shed something of one's previous dogmatism, but it also means to play out and elevate, as it were, the very impulses of reason that set this dogmatism in motion. Adorno's question is not, therefore, a matter of emulating a sublation that does violence to its moments in service of the whole, it is rather a matter of whether we can conceive of a truly non-violent sublation. For more on Kant's idea of maturity see Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Kant: Political Writings*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54-60. For more on Adorno's conception of Kant's so-called "block" see Theodor Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 18; Adorno, *Kants "Kritik der reinen Vernunft"* in *Nachgelassenen Schriften*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag, 1995), 34.

[2] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, §§10-12. The degree to which Adorno nonetheless simultaneously resists Kant's notion of regulative ideas is parallel to Jacque Derrida's admonitions about the same issue. See Jacque Derrida and Jürgen Habermas, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides: A Dialogue with Jacque Derrida," in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85-136, 133-134. In this interview on 9/11 Derrida claims that he has

To further grasp this narrative of the idea of mimesis[3] in the hope of ultimately assessing the contemporary role it plays in the historico-philosophical criticism of artworks, nonetheless requires that we go beyond the rudiments that Benjamin's description leaves us. Although his description of the dynamic of mimesis arguably sets in motion much of the whole impulse behind Adorno's attempt to rescue a repressed nature, several questions remain unanswered unless we allow Adorno to fill in the, so to speak, gaps of this story. For example, although we know that modern disenchantment alters the play and semblance character of mimesis, while opening up a gap between image and sign, when left solely to Benjamin's analysis, we are forced to wonder why in fact such a disenchantment of language even becomes an historical issue in the first place. Said another way, with Benjamin alone, we can neither fully grasp how the historical need to close this gap is conditioned by a fundamental violence or repression *at work* against mimesis, nor can we fully conceive what mimesis has to do in order to avoid such disenchantment. Similarly, the reasons why the mediated character of modern mimesis ultimately takes precedence over the ancient comportment of immediate perception are not entirely clear. The narrative illustrating how and in what manner the critical elements of mimesis migrate or are banished into both language and artworks, needs a great deal of elaboration.

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certain "reservations" about Kant's regulative ideas, but that these reservations are not outright "objections." With statements like these we observe something like a deconstruction of Kant that nonetheless remains faithful to certain features of his thought. Derrida notes, for example, that it might be the case that Kant's regulative idea "remains in the order of the *possible*." His fear, then, is that even though it might take an infinite amount of time to actualize the freedom which is the *Zweck* of politics, certain versions of this striving situate freedom within the horizon of the foreseeable future. It may be exceedingly distant, but this goal reduces the impossible, the event, i.e., that which completely disrupts any horizon, any calculability, to realm of the possible. If Kant has indeed done this, then he has not, therefore, extricated himself from the metaphysics of teleology. In other words, Derrida is suggesting, somewhat like Adorno, that if we are to take up Kant's notion of regulative ideas, we must do so without relegating our efforts to some potential presencing.

[3] See Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 1990), 67. Jameson connects mimesis to the act of narration. His understanding thus appears to broach what I have been calling the dynamic of mimesis, but, as Robert Hullot-Kentor has pointed out in a different context, Jameson arguably only articulates this connection to narrative in a very vague manner. See Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Suggested Reading: Jameson on Adorno" in *Things Beyond Resemblances: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 220-233, 221.

Indeed, this elaboration is necessary if we are to avoid understanding the latest developments of mimesis as mere nominalist manifestations of the play of the signifier, and instead see them as that which bindingly[4] expresses a critical truth about the antagonisms or crises sedimented in language and still impinging on experience at the present hour. Exploring this narrative of the banishment of mimesis that is entwined with the struggle of the dialectic of enlightenment thus serves as a preliminary view into how, for Adorno too, the experiential grounds of mimesis drive the specific alterations in the mimetic comportment of artworks.

I. The Materialism of Mimesis and the Possibility of its Sublation

Considering that it brings into sharp relief both what mimesis could be, and what is nevertheless thwarted by the work of civilized repression, perhaps the best place to situate Adorno's elaboration of the dialectic of enlightenment immanent to mimesis is his famous statement about the link between truth and suffering in *Negative Dialectics*. In this oft-cited passage we cannot mistake the recapitulation of that Benjaminian theme about giving voice to the lament of nature. "The need to lend a voice to suffering [*Leiden beredt werden zu lassen*]," writes Adorno, "is [a] condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively mediated [*vermittelt*]" (GS6: 29/ ND: 17-18, translation modified). It is easy to see why passages such as this might give the false impression that Adorno is really just a moralist externally imposing his political view on all

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[4] For more on the binding character of expression in philosophy and presumably art as well, see GS6: 29/ ND: 18: "To philosophy, expression and stringency [*Ausdruck und Stringenz*] are not two dichotomous possibilities. They need each other; neither one can be without the other. Expression is relieved of its accidental character [*Zufälligkeit*] by thought, on which it toils as thought toils on expression. Only an expressed thought is succinct [*bündig*], rendered succinct through linguistic presentation [*sprachliche Darstellung*]; what is lazily said is poorly thought [*das lax Gesagte ist schlecht gedacht*]. Expression compels stringency in what it expresses (translation modified)."

issues. The common objection is, How can truth—hypostatized by scientism[5] as that which is entirely devoid of subjective mediation—have anything to do with something as lacking in neutrality as suffering?

Although this is one of Ashton's better translations, a closer reading of the German helps to disabuse such impressions. It shows how all linguistic and artistic reproductions are from the start caught up in the implicit drive for a truth that—because it hears the call of sorrow—promises to finally do away with the unnecessary antagonisms between subject and object. This drive is, to be sure, precisely what Benjamin delineated as the artwork's eventual desire for real reconciliation (*Versöhnung*), instead of its illusory surrogate. We can get a sense of how the promise of a real reconciliation between spirit and nature, subject and object, is at play here, because Adorno refers to a concept very similar to that same process of music-like transformation that Benjamin aligned with redemption (*Erlösung*): *Beredsamkeit*. More literally than Ashton has suggested, Adorno says that suffering has to *become eloquent* (*beredt*), it has to be allowed (*lassen*) to speak, if such a thing as truth is to exist. Some sort of perfecting (*vollendend*) mimesis has to occur, some process of taking up the constellation of phenomena, gleaning the smallest particularity that rings out from the unreconciled tension of the world. Were this not the case, the inevitable mimetic doubling of the lament would become mute, "torn away [*losgerissen*]" from objective spirit, and thus, like the culture industry, only ideologically feigning its expression (GS7: 286/ AT: 192).[6]

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[5] See Theodor W. Adorno, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Adorno, "Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie" in GS 8.

[6] Cf. Theodor Adorno, "Theses on the Language of Philosopher" in *Adorno and the Need in Thinking: New Critical Essays*, eds. Donald A. Burke et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 35-41, 39/ GS1: 370. Hereafter cited as TLP: "While philosophy has to turn itself towards the unmediated unity of language and truth – thought up to now only aesthetically – and must measure its truth dialectically against language, art wins the character of knowledge: its language is aesthetic, and only then harmonious, it is 'true': when its words are in accordance [*nach*] with the objective historical condition [*objektiven geschichtlichen Stande*]."

Far from being a moral infringement, then, hearing suffering is essential to truth, immanent to it, because it is entwined with "stereoscopically"[7] reading the preponderance of the object (*Vorrang des Objekts*) (GS6:185/ ND: 183).[8] A mimetic doubling that is not merely subsumptive, not merely bourgeois knowledge, but rather capable of becoming sympathetically immersed in the infinitesimal particularity of the object, is the only means of showing that the subject's domination over the matter is not the truth of the matter. Resembling Benjamin's conception of recuperating the unintentional name-giving process, as if calling the things by their right names, the side of mimesis that is seemingly most subjective, expression, elicits the truth that there is something beyond that subjectivity. It is as if the object, somatic suffering that the subject can never completely grasp, were itself speaking. Thus mimesis, the nonconceptual "moment of expression" which is "objectified in language" (GS6: 29/ ND: 18), is a thoroughly materialist faculty.[9] This is what Martin Jay means when he declares that mimesis "assimilates the [subject] to the [object] in such a way that the unposited, unintended object implicitly predominates, thwarting the imperialist gesture of subjective control and constitution that is the hallmark of philosophical idealism."[10] The lineage of the lament, what Adorno calls the shudder and cry of terror, could live on in the expressionless expression of mimesis, because, unlike the instrumental knowledge of civilization, mimesis is not consigned to lose sight of the continual

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[7] See Albrecht Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance and Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity," *Telos* 62 (1984-84), 89-115. Wellmer's use of this term, a guide for reading the, so to speak, multi-dimensional depth of Adorno's texts, is similar to how we have tried to conceive the affinity between the "translation" or "reading" of mimesis with a musicality that hears the phonetic tensions in the available material. The difference is, of course, the emphasis that the latter places on the auditory as opposed to the former's emphasis on the visual. See also Benjamin's quotation of Rudolf Borchardt in AP: 458 [N1,8]/ GS5.1: 571.

[8] For more on this notion of the preponderance of the object see Adorno's "On Subject and Object" in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 246/ GS10.2: 742. Hereafter cited as SO.

[9] For more on the materialist character of mimesis see Rosen, "Benjamin, Adorno, and the Decline of the Aura," 45-46.

[10] Martin Jay, "Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 32.

historical relation of tension (*Spannungsverhältnis*) between the material and the linguistic structure (GS1: 370/ TLP: 39).

It is, accordingly, only an idealist pretension, *Identitätsdenken* to the core, that believes there can ever be a clean split between subject and object. They are indeed non-identical to one another, but this does not mean that they are materially indifferent to each other. Mimesis, or what Weber-Nicholson has demonstrated is integrally related to Adorno's conception of "exact fantasy" (*exakte Phantasie*),[11] remembers this connection, because every objectification, every reproduction of sound on its way to a concept, is first based on the sensuous, non-identical doubling of nature's diffuse associations. This is why Adorno insists that, if it is not to negate itself, philosophy must embrace the mimetic moment in its presentation (GS6: 55/ ND: 45). It is also why art, as of yet the apogee of mimetic comportment, "preserves," in Adorno's words, "the unity of word and thing" (GS1: 370, TLP: 38). Contrary to Jay's claim that Adorno sheds the so-called astrological or mystical components of Benjamin's mimesis and substitutes them with a conception of how the "sedimentation" of the cluster of relations become linguistic objectification,[12] we can recall that Benjamin already identified language as the "canon" or "archive" of ancient mimetic comportment. Adorno is not claiming anything fundamentally different than Benjamin in this regard. The subjective intentions of language take on an ideological face, they become exploited, die out through convention, or lose the tension between expression and the expressed as they pass through the turn-over time (*Umschlagszeit*) of their

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[11] Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," 131/ GS1: 342. It is important to note that even though in this text Adorno is referring to the comportment of philosophical presentation, the mimesis of artworks is not entirely dissimilar to such a comportment. Regarding the similarities and differences between these two mimetic disciplines, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Adorno: The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language" in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky (New York: SUNY Press, 1997), 62-82. Hohendahl suggest that the exact fantasy of philosophy differs from that of art, but only as matter of degree; art apparently being, in a certain sense, less abstract, and therefore more immediately tied to the sensuous or imaginative moment.

[12] Jay, *Mimesis and Mimetology*, 33.

circuit, but the objective memory of their original relation to nature, the hopes of the past that are lodged within each word, have not yet been wholly expunged. Language could, in short, remember the object in spite of itself. The task is to unleash, or reconfigure this sedimented archive that resides in language as an objectification (GS1: 369/ TLP 38), even if this might ultimately require an alternate language—the language of artworks.

It is along these lines that we can clarify what Adorno means when he asserts that exact fantasy "tarries [*verbleibt*] strictly with the material which the sciences present to it, and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement [*kleinsten Zügen ihrer Anordnung über sie hinausgreift*]" (GS1: 341/ AP: 131, translation modified). Every objectification into a concept, despite siphoning out the qualitative, hardening it into something that can be controlled, carries the echo of its material, sensuous history. To tarry or stay (*verbleiben*) with the matter and gather the most minute of details is thus to hear the denied, objective tendencies of the matter, to glean the, as it were, vectors of a force that originally sprang forth in a lament, and that press down on the subject until it answers the promise of requiting that lament. The phonetic tensions that Benjamin so perspicuously addressed, and the musicality that mimetically pays tribute to them, is not therefore based on taking up the *accidental* resonance of the matter, it is rather based on the *objective* tremors or fractures in meaning formation itself. Such a volatility of meaning expresses, to this day, the object's struggle to burst out of the dominating grip of the subject. A transformed mimesis, which implies a transformed subject no longer repressing it, could register this sense of objectivity, could become empathetic, or better, erotically bound to that which is non-identical to it.[13]

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[13] For more on this notion of mimesis identifying with the non-identical see Karla L. Schultz, *Mimesis on the Move: Theodor W. Adorno's Concept of Imitation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

And yet, nothing of this movement of enlightenment that, in rescuing the natural moment in identification, might for the first time unite mimesis with rationality (GS7: 38/ AT: 20), is guaranteed. In a striking passage that is rarely discussed in the secondary literature,[14] Adorno situates the equal dialectical potential for a transformed, critical mimesis, or, in contrast, a regressive, mythological doubling that is taken over by the illusion (*Schein*) of knowledge.

> Knowledge is never able to drive out its mimetic moment, the resemblance [*Anähnelung*] of the subject to nature, which it wants to dominate and out of which knowledge itself springs. The similarity [*Ähnlichkeit*], 'equality,' of subject and object, of which Kant was familiar, is the moment of truth of that which is expressed in image- and sign theory in inverted form, that of doubling [*Verdopplung*]. That knowledge or truth is said to be an image of their object is a substitution [*Ersatz*] and consolation for the fact that similarity was irretrievably torn away from similarity. The image character of knowledge conceals as false semblance [*Schein*] that subject and object are no longer similar to each other—and that means nothing other than that they are alienated from one another. Only in the abandonment of all such semblance [*Schein*], in the idea of an imageless [*bilderloser*] truth, is the lost mimesis sublated [*aufgehoben*], not in the preservation [*Bewahrung*] of its rudiments. This *idea* lives in Husserl's desire for the "matter itself." (GS5: 148, my translation; my emphasis)

Once again the moment of truth that shines through, despite knowledge's inverted, ideological attempt at total mastery, is the non-identical similarity between subject and object. Knowledge or the work of concepts, actually originates in mimesis; the problem is that it either forgets this fact, or desperately wants to annihilate it. This is why it only consoles itself or makes a fetish of the doubled image or sign when it declares them to be the truth. Even though it is the case that, as we saw with Benjamin, a more primal similarity, non-sensuous similarity, has been "irretrievably" torn away from immediate experience, a "knowledge" divorced from this mimetic moment still believes itself adequate to the thing. This false adequation that represses the truth of the alienation of subject and object, is nothing other than *Schein*. In other words, *Schein* is illusory precisely when it alleges reconciliation has been achieved, even though, in reality, subject and

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[14] For an exception see Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 141.

object remain in crisis, in danger.[15] The idea of mimesis is resistant to this: it wants *true*

reconciliation.[16] For this reason it requires the sublation of the rudiments of mimesis. The infinite

task of ridding itself entirely of the illusory image has apparently been set in motion by the work

of civilization, yet, as long as the "back to" of Husserl's philosophical task remains the back to

of some "pure" intuition, it is bound to fail out of neglect for the moment of mediation. As was

the case in Chapter One, we need to assess what aspects of ancient mimesis are to be taken up,

instead of, like the reactionary ideal, hypostatized in their original form. We can best achieve this

through an explication of what we briefly saw in the Introduction is a mimetic taboo against a

primal empathy for nature. Grasping this narrative as it is illuminated in *Dialectic of*

Enlightenment, i.e., understanding the violence that works against mimesis and sets its

development in motion, is central to assessing how mimesis first attains critical comportment,

and how it might still be able to embody critical comportment today.

II. On the Shudder and the Ensuing Mimetic Taboo

The mimetic taboo that is, to repeat, so fundamental to understanding both the emergence

of critique as well the legacy of critique, can be most succinctly understood as the repressive

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[15] For more the link between mimesis and the moment of danger see Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 71.

[16] The German *Versöhnung* does not imply the prefix "re-" in the English reconciliation. The implication is that Adorno is not talking about a pristine beginning. He is rather concerned with the possibility for peace that is latent in the matter. There is thus truth and falsehood in all artistic presentation so long as domination triggers a negative image of itself, but there is also a particular doubt about whether there ever was something like a state beyond violence: "if anywhere, then it is in art that 'origin is the goal [*Ursprung ist das Ziel*].' That the experience of natural beauty [*Erfahrung des Naturschönen*], at least according to its subjective consciousness, remains on the side of the domination of nature [*diesseits der Naturbeherrschung sich hält*], as if the experience were at one with the immediate origin [*zum Ursprung unmittelbar*], marks out both the strength and the weakness [*Schwäche*] of the experience: its strength, because it recollects a condition without domination [*herrschaftslosen Zustands*], one that probably never existed; its weakness [*Schwäche*], because through this recollection it dissolves back [*zerfließt*] into the amorphousness out of which genius once arose and for the first time became conscious of the idea of freedom [*Idee von Freiheit*] that could be realized in a condition free from domination [*herrschaftslosen Zustand*]" (GS7: 104/ AT: 66, translation modified).

movement of enlightenment that desperately wages a battle against what Adorno and

Horkheimer call the cry of terror (*Ruf des Schreckens*), the shudder (*die Schauer* or

Erschütterung), and the lament (*Klage*). Unlike Benjamin, who does not entirely flesh out the

causes of this shriek of anxiety, Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly link it to a feeling of

powerlessness before the unruly chaos of internal and external nature. As Adorno eventually

expresses it, "the shudder [*Schauer*] is a reaction to the cryptically shut [*Verschlossenheit*],

which is a function of the element of indeterminacy [*Unbestimmten*]" (GS7: 38/ AT: 20). This

reverberating fear, inseparable from the threat of death, first arises because, in the midst of

indeterminacy, ancient man is not the master. According to this regulative narrative,[17] the

problem he is faced with is that bringing about determination requires forming a synthesizing

faculty, violently wrenching ancient humans from their immersion in the "ebb and flow of

surrounding nature" (GS3:205/ DOE: 148). This schematization of amorphous nature

inaugurates a movement of enlightenment. In a Freudian manner, the formation of the ego as a

protective barrier has begun.[18] Historicizing Kant yet again, the unity of apperception and the

interiority of time, which constitute experience, are won in an epic struggle against a pre-

subjective relation to space. But, tellingly, the resultant ego[19] is bought by sacrificing the

moment (*Augenblick*)—the possibility of fulfillment now—to the future (GS3: 66/ DOE: 40). As

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[17] I owe understanding the dialectic of enlightenment in these quasi-regulative terms to my colleague Dilek Huseyinzadegan.

[18] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 30.

[19] This empirical psychological reading of Kant is arguably a misreading of Kant's intent. The important point here, however, is that Adorno insists that Kant be read in a historical context. In several instances he claims, instead of reading Kant in terms of whether Kant's system forms a gapless unity, devoid of logical tensions or inconsistencies, we would do better to, for example, take notice of the remarkable manner in which Kant's philosophy is an index of historical experience. This grounds what Adorno means when he says that Kant's work represents the memory of the empirical subject, the side of the subject that cannot, despite its attempts, be effaced by the identitarian spell. See, for example, GS6: 63/ ND: 54. See also, Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 176; Adorno, *Kants "Kritik der reinen Vernunft,"* 268.

we will address more fully in Chapter Three, this sets in place the death drive's repetition of the cycle of guilt and atonement.

"What later came to be called subjectivity, freeing itself from the blind anxiety of the shudder," continues Adorno, "is at the same time the shudder's own development" (GS7: 489 AT: 331). This is to say that the shudder is so jarring, its cause so horrifying, that it propels a process that will do anything to repress that originary, but chaotic intimacy we have with internal and external nature. In that the eventual founding of determination is the result of a kind of classifying subsumption, a proto-bourgeois mastery already evidenced in Odysseus's actions as "cunning" (GS3: 66-67/ DOE: 39), we can say that humans have implicitly set themselves the task of taking back control of this natural heteronomy. In other words, the shudder is what impels humans to engage in a more rigidified act of mimetic doubling in the first place. "Myth is," as Adorno and Horkheimer succinctly express it, "already enlightenment" (GS3: 16/ DOE: XVIII). We might add, myth is already a step in the direction of tabooing an earlier absorption with nature, it is already a step in the direction of denying the point of undifferentiatedness (*Indifferenz*) between humans and nature. Thus the initial manifestation of mimetic doubling in the form of spiritualizing the matter as *mana*, is done, in part, to control it (GS3: 36-7/ DOE: 15). They are mimetic, but in so far as they remain "mere tautolog[ies] of terror itself" (GS3: 32/ DOE: 11), petrified reifications that affirm the fate of their predicament, instead of resisting it, they are also already on their way to fulfilling the secret goal of the mimetic taboo: completely silencing the expression of suffering.

In this respect, positing the gods atop Mount Olympus, although feeble and passive initially, is an implicit attempt to mimetically win back control of the dominance of nature over us. Resembling Benjamin's conception of the *Untergang* of semblance, in Adorno's view, art has

always been bound to this counter force, this striving for an autonomy or demythologization no

longer in thrall to the chaos of nature. Built into their own concept, artworks have always had,

from out of the masks and magic of prehistory, an appeal to the mastery and maturity

(seriousness) that would at last allay this terror and heteronomy of nature. Mimesis becomes art,

in opposition to that which is solely cultic or mythical, when it can, at least in part, play with

identity, play against compulsion.

If this narrative is correct, and art is indeed bound to a magical, auratic, and ritualistic

history; if it apparently only sheds this mythological heritage when mimetic doubling as art has,

in a more enlightened manner than cultic production, "passed through subjectivity"(GS7: 253/

AT: 169), or when "mimesis is driven to the point of self-consciousness" (GS7: 384/ AT: 259),

this does not in any way mean that its development is safeguarded against dialectical regression.

Nor does it mean that the preceding moments of magic, semblance and aura are altogether

devoid of a moment of truth. Bearing in mind that the original shudder is less pacified, less a

product of the taboo's successful bifurcation of the primordial intimacy of subject and object, we

notice that ancient mimesis is guided by an ambiguity containing both a moment of truth and

falsehood:

> The cry of terror [*Der Ruf des Schreckens*] called forth by the unfamiliar [*Ungewohnte*] becomes [the unfamiliar's] name. It fixes the transcendence of the unknown [*Unbekannten*] in relation to the known, permanently linking horror to holiness. The doubling [*Verdoppelung*] of nature into appearance and essence, effect and force, made possible by myth no less than by science, spring from human anxiety [*Angst*], the expression of which becomes its explanation. This does not mean that the soul is transposed into nature, as psychologism would have us believe; *mana*, the moving spirit, is not a projection but the echo of the real preponderance [*realen Übermacht*] of nature in the weak psyches of primitive people. (GS3: 31/ DOE: 10-12, translation modified)

Here we can already detect the germ-form, as it were, of what Adorno later calls the compulsion

of identity thinking (*Identitätsdenken*).[20] Although at this early stage the technology (*Technik*) of

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[20] Regarding the possibility of avoiding the "bad" compulsion that would, out of anxiety (*Angst*), ultimately efface the non-identical, Adorno writes, "in the rebuke that the thing is not identical with the concept lives the concept's

mastery[21] maintains something of the play, elective affinity, or "supple" (*schmiegsam*) difference involved in the process of identification (GS3: 26/ DOE: 7), we can nevertheless see that, when taken to the extreme, when mythical fear is radicalized as enlightenment (GS3: 32/ DE: 11), this reduction of nature to the subject could amount to the complete liquidation of difference. In the service of mastery, the concept—a later manifestation of alleged familiarity—could be on its way towards reducing the object, the unfamiliar and opaque, to its limited horizon. This "bad" mimesis, what Lacoue-Labarthe calls mimetology or imitation, as opposed to a mimesis that repeats in and through differences,[22] is the passivity and fatalism of a mythology that adapts itself to what is horrifying so as to cope with it. "Mimesis was replaced by objectifying imitation" (GS7: 243/ AT: 162), it became, out of increased fear, a hardened "adaptation to death [*Angleichung ans Tote*]" (GS3: 205/ DOE: 148).

Yet, to reiterate our previous point, as much as the mimetic taboo is tied to reification, it simultaneously lays the foundation for the possibility of a mimesis that rescues objectivity, truth, and suffering. What is implicit in the echo of nature recognized by so-called "primitive" mimetic comportment, ought to be made explicit. If mimesis does not become conscious of its relation to nature in this respect, does not hear the reverberation of the shudder in today's linguistic and artistic objectifications, it risks turning into its opposite. A civilized "progress" that has lost touch of its own end (*Zweck*), forgetting that there are portions of ancient experience that should, for the sake of real reconciliation, be preserved, is bound to unwittingly inflict violence on itself.

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longing [*Sehnsucht*] to become identical with the thing. This is how the consciousness of nonidentity [*das Bewußtsein der Nichtidentität*] contains identity. The supposition of identity is indeed the ideological moment of pure thought [*reinen Denken*], all the way down to formal logic; but hidden in it is also the truth moment of ideology [*Wahrheitsmoment von Ideologie*], the pledge [*Anweisung*] that there should be no contradiction, no antagonism" (GS6: 152-53/ ND: 149).

[21] Here Adorno and Horkheimer are clearly reading the Freud of *Totem and Taboo*. See Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 78.

[22] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. "Hölderlin and the Greeks," in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 231.

> The human being's mastery [*Herrschaft*] of itself, on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained, because the substance [*Substanz*] which is mastered, suppressed, and disintegrated by self-preservation is nothing other than the living entity [*Lebendige*], of which the achievements of self-preservation can only be defined as functions—in other words, self-preservation destroys the very thing which is to be preserved. (GS3: 73/ DOE: 43)

Mastery was from the beginning always for the sake of a better circumstance that sealed the fortitude of the subject. The experience established in the interiorization of time always swore to establish the dignity of a particularity not wholly captive to an unruly nature or coercive universal. Not seeing that the subject is itself part nature, however, mastery inadvertently quashes the vitality of that subject, its particularity and substance, victimizing what was supposed to be aimed at nature alone. Thus the mimetic taboo does not overcome the horror of a Hobbesian nature, it actually stretches too far in its domination, turns back upon itself, and creates a cultural second nature more horrible and destructive than the first. The true, autonomous subject promised, which could only be engendered through an actual, non-violent sublation[23] of nature, is by no means achieved: civilized self-preservation recreates the chaos of first nature.

As much as we have seen the fact that the mimetic taboo seeks to annihilate the shudder or the trace of suffering, more fully examining the specific characteristics of mimesis that it subdues will help us better grasp this story that unfolds in artworks or aesthetic language today. The subject that countermands nature, and thus temporarily believes itself invulnerable, is not only the product of the shudder, it is, again, the continued vehicle of the taboo against the mimetic remembrance of nature. Consequently, "[t]he self which learned about order and subordination through the subjugation of the world soon equated truth in general with classifying

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[23] In this regard, unlike many thinkers who summarily dismiss all sublation as violent, Adorno is arguably a good reader of Hegel. Hegel was in fact quite aware of the possibility of a violent sublation, and went to great lengths to avoid it. See, for example, Hegel, G.W.F. *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1969), 603.

thought, without whose fixed distinctions it cannot exist. Along with mimetic magic it tabooed the knowledge which really apprehends the object" (GS3: 30/ DOE: 10). Not only is a perversion of truth the consequence of the attempt of the mimetic taboo to wholly liquidate magic, the capacity to apprehend the object, materially coupled with giving voice to suffering, is sacrificed too. Just as Adorno criticizes Benjamin for his "simplification" in the "Technology" essay (GS7: 89/ AT: 56), it is the simplification, or more precisely, the reifying tendency, of civilized repression that forgets the dialectic of these magical constituents built into mimesis. As in the case of semblance and aura, historical transformation does not indicate that co-constitutive parts of a dialectical relation, namely myth and enlightenment, untruth and truth, become indifferent to one another, one side of the relation simply falling away as the other comes into prominence. Even though "[m]agic like science is concerned with ends [*Zwecke*],[…] it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object" (GS3: 26-27/ DOE: 7). Magic's appreciation for "the manifold affinities between existing things" thus affords it a moment of truth that ought to be upheld, instead of simply discarded in a parallel fashion to Benjamin's undialectical[24] dismissal of semblance and aura in the "Technology" essays. What exactly does this magical mimesis appeal to that makes it worthy of sublation?

In preserving the tension of the subject-object relation, magic has, as we have implied throughout, a more loving and playful relationship to nature. Against the Benjamin of the "Technology" essay and Freud's claim of the neurotic omnipotence of magical thinking,[25] Adorno and Horkheimer argue that this older form of mimetic identification was not as incessant

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[24] See Adorno, GS6: 30/ ND: 19: "Benjamin's defeatism about his own thought was conditioned by the undialectical positivity of which he carried a formally unchanged remnant from his theological phase into his materialistic phase." Passages like this are likely the basis of much of the narrative surrounding Adorno's alleged misunderstanding of Benjamin. While this particular assessment might not be entirely accurate, it not only runs counter to what we have elsewhere seen Adorno commend in the early Benjamin, it deflects a more pressing concern, namely the degree to which the better moments in Benjamin nevertheless manifest and in fact desire to be a precise (negative) dialectical thinking.

[25] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 85.

about its mastery. It is not until the ego is solidly formed that the reduction of the environment (*Umwelt*) to one's own projections can really take place. This requires the rise of industrial technology and a will to subsumption and categorization which, to repeat, has already founded a subject severed from his relation to the sensuous moment in identification.[26] Thus, contrary to the latter, the mimesis of the ancients was playful in the less calculating, less functional sense of the word. In being able to "lapse back into nature," or "lose oneself in one's surroundings," (GS3: 260/ DOE: 189) much the way Benjamin describes the child's imagination, this older mimesis could still engage with the "fluctuating connections [*fluktuierenden Zusammenhang*] with nature" (GS3: 69/ DOE: 41). This is why, when describing mimesis, instead of imitation (*Nachahmung*), Adorno prefers, as Martin Jay[27] has keenly observed, the verb *anschmiegen*: to snuggle up, nestle, or mold (GS5.205 /DOE: 149). The assimilative or sympathetic character of this identification therefore points to a situation that might be capable of avoiding that tendency of identity-thinking (*Identitätsdenken*) which reduces the object to the subject. Early magic is indeed "the bloody untruth" (GS3: 25/ DOE: 6), but we can still characterize it as being in part playful, that is, not merely guided by self-preservation and need, and thus, in an Schillerian manner,[28] promising peace and humanity.

Left unrestrained, however, and the mimetic taboo will abolish this purposeless moment in purposiveness, declaring everything down to art and leisure, the mere instrument of domination's ends. The distance that juts forward from the shock of the shudder or suffering (GS3: 87/ DOE: 54), is nothing other than the *Spielraum* we previously observed, i.e., subjectivity coming to

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[26] See GS6: 153/ ND: 150. Adorno's argument is that even the cold, controlling calculation of enlightenment thinking is constituted, in part, by the diffuse, non-representational, non-reductionistic resemblances that mimesis intuitively senses. To forget these differences or desperately try to ward off a recognition of them requires an increasing degree of alienation, which probably only arises with the rise of industrial capitalism.

[27] Jay, "Mimesis and Mimetology," 32.

[28] Schiller, "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man," 121.

know itself.[29] "Shudder," as Jay Bernstein articulates it, "is the generation of distance and angle

with respect to the other: fearful awe is the affective 'spacing' of the other as at a 'distance' from

us and as 'above' us."[30] The problem with the implicit identity thinking that results from the

mimetic taboo is that, although it also operates with a certain distance, it does so by increasingly

disavowing that such a distance even exists. In its false reconciliation the sensuous (*Sinn*) and the

qualitative are all but completely extinguished (GS3: 21-24 /DOE: 3-5).

Not surprisingly, then, Adorno later describes the lineage of mimesis in artworks as being

confronted with the crisis of meaning (*Krise des Sinns*).[31] Whereas a critical mimesis registers

the vibration between intuition and concept,[32] the play of meaning that oscillates between the

sensuous and the nonsensuous (GS7: 146/ AT: 95), identity thinking blinds itself to the truth,

already identified by Benjamin, that *Bedeutung* (meaning) both needs *Sinn* (sense) and is in crisis

with it.[33] This is the reason why Adorno claims that *Sinn* is idealistically driven out by

communication (*Mitteilung*), a late manifestation of the mimetic taboo. "[T]he more completely

language coincides with communication, the more words change from substantial carriers of

meaning [*substantiellen Bedeutungsträgern*] to signs devoid of qualities" (GS3: 187/ DOE: 133).

Once again, in Adorno's view the magical side of mimesis should not be wholly discarded. A

magic-like play in which "word and content were at once different from each other and

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[29] See Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 247-53, 250/ GS11.2: "It is in the lightheartedness of art that subjectivity first comes to know and become conscious of itself."

[30] Jay Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 223.

[31] See the section from *Aesthetic Theory* entitled "*Krise des Sinns*": GS7: 229-335/ AT 152-157.

[32] Recall the important quote from our Introduction: "Philosophy has perceived [*erblickt*] the chasm [*Abgrund*] opened by the separation [of sign (*Zeichen*) and image (*Bild*)] as the relation [*Verhältnis*] between intuition [*Anschauung*] and concept [*Begriff*] and repeatedly but vainly attempted to close it; indeed, philosophy is defined by that attempt" (GS3: 34-35/ DOE: 13, translation modified).

[33] To state it differently, a mimesis that acts for the sake of its idea is driven in the direction of negative comportment, for affirming the meaning of the present is to attribute a harmony to the empirical world that does not exist.

indissolubly linked" (GS3: 187/ DOE: 133) promises a potential mimesis that does not gloss over (*überspielen*) the qualitative details. Entirely eliminating the simultaneous affinity and difference of magic would actually come closer to the products of the culture industry than the fulfillment of actual enlightened maturity. The excess of intuition as it rubs against the concept in the moment of stepping into appearance ought to have recourse to a vestige of spontaneity, to the impulsive or natural side of the empirical self. But the culture industry signifies precisely the opposite circumstance. Instead of following the matter, following the syncopations that express the crisis-laden, shudder-reverberating lineage of the subject's domination, we enter into a situation marked by what Adorno and Horkheimer call the schematism of production (GS3: 145-146/ DOE: 98).

This conception is a reference to Kant's statement about the "hidden art in the depth of the human soul," whereby concepts and intuitions are synthesized, forming experience.[34] Adorno and Horkheimer's argument is that philosophy, i.e., critical theory, must embrace Horkheimer's assertion that, above all else, "the real social processes"[35] condition experience or shape intuitions. "That secret has now been unraveled," and that secret is the "schematism of production" (GS3: 146/ DOE: 98). Contrary to Heidegger's claim that the mystery of schematization is somehow grounded in the happening of Being,[36] material conditions such as the division of labor, commodity production, and wage-labor, are what mediate the formation of intuitions. As Hegel would have already recognized, Heidegger's conception remains an empty abstraction, devoid of content, and thus incapable of saying anything about the matter itself.

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[34] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* A140-42/ B180-82.

[35] Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 194.

[36] It is this abstraction from the material conditions that we should, following Adorno, be wary of. There are other readings of *Unheimlichkeit* that might, however, suggest overlapping narratives between Adorno and Heidegger, especially with regard to the instrumental rationality that ensues from *Angst*. See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 188.

Under this radicalized version of the mimetic taboo, the *Sinne*, again, the meanings that are simultaneously sensuous, simultaneously carrying a somatic and phonetic trace, become so completely "determined by the conceptual apparatus" that this trace is all but annulled (GS3: 103/ DOE: 64-65). The ruling principle of experience becomes "false mimesis" (GS4: 270/ MM: 238), or the "mimesis of mimesis" (GS3: 209/ DOE: 152), neither of which are actually an appreciation of the pure intuition or pure emotion that has somehow escaped the bounds of historical determination. As we observed before, the crux of this fallaciously schematizing mimesis is that, in accordance with the fetishism of commodities and the supposed right of inherited property,[37] something thoroughly mediated appears (*scheint*) as immediacy. A second order imitation of what was once immediate, but is now irretrievably lost, becomes so full of denial, asserts itself so rancorously, that it regresses, in the form of National Socialism or the culture industry, to the cultic stage from which it previously escaped. Unsurprisingly, this compulsion to exoticize the pure intuition that is lost springs from a desire for revenge over the mimetic repression of civilization. When the nestling (*Anschmiegung*) of mimesis to nature is converted entirely into "work" (GS5: 205/ DOE: 148), when play is entirely eliminated, a second immediacy comes to reign, but it is most certainly not Hegel's second immediacy of citizens at home in freedom.[38] Resembling, instead, Lukács' conception of a reification[39] in which humans become mere "specimens [*Exemplar*]" (GS6: 355/ ND: 362), impulses that momentarily escape

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[37] See, again, T.W. Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," 296/ GS14: 25.

[38] G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (New York: Cambridge, 1991), §147: "On the other hand, [ethical institutions] are not something *alien* to the subject. On the contrary, the subject bears *spiritual witness* to them as to *its own essence*, in which it has its *self-feeling* [*Selbstgefühl*] and lives as in its element which is not distinct from itself – a relationship which is immediate and more like identity than even [a relationship] of *faith* or *trust*" (translation modified).

[39] See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 64: "This second nature is not dumb, sensuous and yet senseless like the first: it is a complex of senses—meanings—which has become rigid and strange, and which no longer awakens interiority; it is a charnel-house of long-dead interiorities; this second nature could only be brought to life—if this were possible—by the metaphysical act of reawakening the souls which, in an early or ideal existence, created or preserved it…. Estrangement from nature (the first nature), the modern sentimental attitude to nature, is only a project of man's experience of his self-made environment as a prison instead of as a parental home."

the disciplinary apparatus look as if they, not their cultured counterparts, are the lie. "The transition from reflecting mimesis to controlling reflection completes [the ego's hardening (*Verhärtung*) against nature]" (GS3: 205/ DOE: 149).

Part of the reason why this story of mimetic manipulation is more compelling than, say, Heidegger's obscurantism or idealism's account of the formation of experience, is that Adorno and Horkheimer tie this violence against *Sinn* to a materialist conception of abstraction.[40] More precisely, it is the abstraction from difference under the rubric of quantitative similarity that becomes dominant in the supposedly enlightened transformation of mimesis (GS3: 29/ DOE: 9). Elaborating on Marx's conception, they locate the mimetic roots of domination that are ultimately expressed in the abstract identity of capital.[41] Just as the relations of production are maddeningly disproportionate to a historical level of technical development that could, if rationally instituted, achieve peace now, the antagonism of subject and object is materially rooted and persists through a circumstance that, in keeping with an incessant desire for mastery, unnecessarily reduces the whole of reality to a utility long since antiquated. In Marx's words,

> [t]his common element [of exchange values] cannot be a geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property of commodities. Such properties come into consideration only to the extent that they make the commodities useful, i.e. turn them into use-values. But clearly, the exchange relation of commodities is characterized precisely by its *abstraction* from their use-value. Within the exchange relation, one use-value is worth just as much as another, provided only that it is present in the appropriate quantity. (my emphasis)[42]

Although on the surface such an analysis seems innocuous, closer examination reveals a vicious transformation of mimesis. A move to the mendacious similarity of abstract labor-time takes over, and the type of magical mimesis that appealed to "specific substitution" (*spezifishe*

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[40] For more on the so-called "real abstraction" that is informed by both Adorno's reading of Marx and Kantian epistemology see Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J : Humanities Press, 1977).

[41] See, for example, Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, "The German Ideology" in *Collected Works* 5, 44/ *Werke* 3, 31. In this early context Marx and Engels speak of the "all-powerful and unassailable force [*allmächtige und unangreifbare Macht*]" attributed to nature by ancient humans.

[42] Marx, *Capital* 1, 127/ *Werke* 23, 51.

Vertretbarkeit), i.e., that avoids seeking outright "unity" (GS3: 25/ DOE 6) and is, above all else, "non-exchangeable" (GS3: 26/ DOE: 7), is replaced with a desperate attempt to find equivalence in what is, in truth, not equivalent. Control, not sympathy is its name; death, not *eros*. It is no accident that the abstraction from the qualitative, propelling the controlling technique of production and exchange, congeals, as it were, into the reified consciousness of those who, at bottom, remain agents of their function. Nor is it mere chance that when this utilitarian mentality gets radicalized, when the fetish—equivalence—becomes a fetish of itself (GS3: 33/ DOE 12), statistics become truth, its "probable" outcomes the supposed inevitable course of civilization's development.

And yet, all along, this interiorization of the external wound,[43] this adaptation to the forces of domination, for the simple reason that there appears to be no other way to survive, represents exactly what Marx knew well. Humans are so thoroughly historical that even their most natural side is subject to the manipulations of *Bildung*.[44] So long as institutions of domination persist, intuitions will be reflexively schematized in agreement with that which best serves the maintenance of the status quo. Is it any wonder, then, that so-called knowledge ultimately mirrors precisely this ideological domination? Or is the loss of the ability to recognize the "synaesthesia" of the matter, alongside the ban on knowledge ever resembling nature, a mere product of advancing truth (GS3: 34/ DOE: 13)? "The distance of subject from object, the

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[43] This reference to the internalization of the so-called bad totality or, we might say, this adaptation to the scar of the reality principle in the formation of the divided superego, frequently appears in Adorno's writings. He is, of course, drawing on Freud's conception of introjection. See James Strachey, ed. "Instincts and their Vicissitudes" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 136. It is also interesting in this context to note how Herbert Marcuse implicitly draws on the concept of introjection with his conception of the "performance principle." See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966). Lastly, Jacques Lacan's discussion of this central concept of psychoanalysis is helpful in understanding Adorno's conception of the modification of mimesis. See Jacques Alain-Miller, ed. *The Seminar of Jacque Lacan*, Book I (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 169: "I beg you not to be hasty in giving this term too definite a meaning. Let us say that it is used when something like a reversal takes place—what was outside becomes the inside, what was the father becomes the super-ego."

[44] See, for example, Marx, "Private Property and Communism," in *Collected Works* 3, 299-300/ *Werke* 1, 539-540.

presupposition of abstraction, is founded on the distance from things which the ruler attains by means of the ruled" (GS3: 29-30/ DOE: 9). Furthermore, "[a]bstraction, the instrument of enlightenment, stands in the same relationship to its objects as fate, whose concept it eradicates: as liquidation. Under the leveling rule of abstraction, which makes everything in nature repeatable, and of industry, for which abstraction prepared the way, the liberated finally themselves become the 'herd' [*Trupp*]" (GS3: 29/ DOE: 9). It is the repetition compulsion that dominates this form of regressive mimesis. Instead of genuinely attempting to understand that which is and will always remain inaccessible to it, namely nature, this damaged identification tries to install itself as the master. In fact, it is so frantic in its effort that, like a spell, it not only becomes convinced that its own projected repetitions are truth, but, through a discipline hammered home ceaselessly, calls alienation from the object—in reality a product of dispossession and the division of mental and physical labor—the inevitable fate of the world. If an instrumental means-ends relation becomes this inverted, if a perverted *quid pro quo*, production for the sake of production, takes over to this extent, it is not difficult to conceive why feeling,[45] the drives (*Trieben*) (GS3: 46/ DOE: 22), and the sensuous will be cast out along the way. In that they serve no purpose, or worse, might foster a *sense* (*Sinn*) that things could be otherwise, they must be banished.

III. The Death Drive Built into Mimesis: With and Against Subjectivity

Given our analysis heretofore, it might be most appropriate to define this striving after the mimetic idea as the pursuit of real enlightenment. Such a pursuit remains incredibly fragile, however, because in order to achieve it, in order for the real sublation of a mimesis fused with a

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[45] For more on the eradication of emotion see, for example: GS4: 136-37/ MM: 122-23.

critical element to take hold, the movement of enlightenment has to become conscious of its own struggle. This helps us grasp what Adorno and Horkheimer intend when they insists that, "by modestly confessing itself to be dominance [*Herrschaft*] and thus being taken back into nature, spirit [*Geist*] rids itself of the very claim to mastery which had enslaved it to nature" (GS3: 57/ DOE 31, translation modified). What Adorno elsewhere describes as the frantic wish to harden and thus make the fluid and moist hygienic (GS7: 176/ AT: 116), must be renounced, and succeeding or failing at this endeavor plays out on what he and Horkheimer call the historical stage of the "death-struggle [*Todeskampf*]" (GS3: 208/ DOE: 151).

This struggle also grounds their provocative claim that, "enlightenment is more than enlightenment, it is nature made audible [*vernehmbar*] in its alienation [*Entfremdung*]" (GS3: 57/ DOE: 31, translation modified). Despite the playful and supple components of early mimesis, it is indeed already on its way to hardening what was once a fundamental ambiguity (*Vieldeutigkeit*) (GS3: 22/ DOE: 47); it will thus fall short of truly hearing this call of suffering unless it transforms itself. The task of truly becoming enlightened, then, becoming conscious of a musicality in the manner Benjamin described, implies no longer cowering before the dialectic of life and death immanent to mimesis. The possibility of freedom and reconciliation emerge simultaneously with the possibility of music, both of which signify the potential critical recognition and transformation of the crisis endemic to mimetic identification, instead of the blind, one-to-one copying and inadvertent perpetuation of the shudder. As was the case with Benjamin's analysis of art, mimesis is always already driven, for the sake of this reconciliation, towards illusionless truth. Understanding this movement of real enlightenment, as opposed to a counterfeit that is doomed to devolve back into myth, therefore requires further elaborating the death drive of mimesis. The need for a metamorphosis that, in the formulation of *Aesthetic*

Theory, impels mimesis to "[e]ither...leave art behind or to transform its very concept," (GS7: 97/ AT: 61) cannot be grasped without further understanding this impulse built into mimesis.

The constellation of concepts that form Adorno's idea of mimesis should leave no doubt that Adorno was in fact thoroughly concerned with the role of the death drive in the comportment of mimesis. In each of his major works, mimesis is almost always discussed in close proximity and intricate configuration with terms such as repetition, play, imitation, fate, and death. Surprisingly enough, however, the recent increase in interest in Adorno's idea of mimesis has not fostered many attempts to unravel the implicit links between it and the death drive. Amongst the scarce literature that does address this essential aspect of mimesis, there is a tendency to focus too much on only one side of this dialectic between life and death.

For instance, Martin Jay rightly attempts to distinguish Adorno from some of the currents in Twentieth Century French philosophy that appear to avow the endless, repetitive rhythms of the death drive.[46] He suggests that Adorno's idea of mimesis cannot be separated from its ability to temporarily rupture, like we saw with Benjamin, the perpetuation of play. This aversion for the death drive's repetition compulsion, variously manifest as opposition to Stravinsky's so-called primal rhythms (GS12: 179/ PNM: 143), or to positivism's fetishism of the "sacrosanct" facts (GS3:45/ DOE: 21), is, to be sure, a consistent thread in Adorno's writings. Considering both this invective against the covert sanctioning of a mythological fatalism and Adorno's tireless critique of all reifying tendencies in experience, we can understand why one might get the impression that Adorno's idea of mimesis is solely at odds with the death drive. After all, eloquence (*Beredsamkeit*) can only speak as protest to convention, or in Adorno's terms, as an expression of resistance to its dialectical relation with stupidity (*Dummheit*) (GS3: 87/ DOE: 53). Such resistance places the productions of mimesis, like philosophy, in stark contrast to

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[46]Jay, "Mimesis and Mimetology,"43.

reification. Indeed, their essence appears to be nothing other than countering the false mastery of a *fatal* reification. Adorno's understanding of the death drive therefore seems to be very much in keeping with Freud's: Play until the play plays out, repeat until total mastery, total reification is lethally realized—this is apparently its brutal, disciplinary insignia.

Of course, for Freud such play also guides the death drive's conservative impulse to retreat back into inorganic nature.[47] To do away with life, hardening it to the point where even humans are treated as one thing amongst others, seems to be the triumph of the death drive. What is more, in Freud's view the death drive is a regressive and primitive impulse[48] that perhaps comes to the fore as a result of trauma. The same is the case for Adorno and Horkheimer, who describe humans regressing to a more primitive, even animalistic stage of imitation,[49] when civilization as second nature maintains the viciousness and trauma of first nature. Following the narrative of the reverberating lineage of the shudder, this regression of mimesis is part of what Adorno and Horkheimer mean when they claim that, "[t]he reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is itself mimesis: of death (*die ans Tote*)" (GS3: 76/ DOE: 44). Mimesis, that form of identification that precedes but also rouses cognition, contains the seed of its internal transformation into the imitation of death. When the world is reduced to the point of brutal self-preservation, the imitative or essential doubling process of sound and image is perverted into copying the very thing that afflicts it. Not adapting oneself to the prevailing domination, not growing accustomed to horror through the play of the repetition compulsion, is to risk total

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[47] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 43.

[48] Ibid., 11.

[49] For more on the regression to a kind of camouflaged imitation that, in Adorno's theory, is designed to stave off danger, see Michael Cahn, "Subversive Mimesis: T.W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique" in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach,* vol. 1 (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984), 27-64.

eradication. But, as with the logic of capital, the choice is not really a choice: so-called life is synonymous with death.

At the same time, Vladimir Safatle has demonstrated that this is not the whole story. Mimesis is nevertheless guided by the death drive to some degree. For its compulsion to become like nature, or become absorbed in it, is a compulsion to break through the stultifying formalism of subjectivity.[50] Such a selfless drive has to desire something akin to death, because strictly speaking, it seeks to do away with experience. The destructiveness of this behavior is not, therefore, something that ought to be entirely denied. To break with one's chains demands, perhaps before anything else, force (*Gewalt*). This helps to explain why in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno speaks at length of the "cruelty" of artworks (GS7: 80/ AT: 49-50), and in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* he and Horkheimer directly link a kind of criminality to the death-driven compulsion of mimesis.

> [Criminals] represented a tendency deeply inherent in living things [*Lebendigen*], the overcoming of which is the mark of all development: the tendency to lose oneself [*zu verlieren*] in one's surroundings instead of actively engaging with them, the inclination to let oneself go, to sink back [*zurückzusinken*] into nature. Freud called this the death drive, Caillois *le mimétisme* (GS3: 260/ DOE: 189, translation modified)[51]

Such *Versenkung* undoubtedly contains something laudable in Adorno's view. To throw oneself away in this manner is, indeed, part of the condition for rescuing an objectivity that, without the "false projection" that makes things resemble itself (GS3: 212/ DOE: 154), truly hears the lament. If Adorno, in Safatle's interpretation, "sees in the death drive the coordinates of reconciliation with nature," this is because "[the mimetic death drive] marks the dissolution of

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[50] Vladimir Safatle, "Mirrors Without Images: Mimesis and Recognition in Lacan and Adorno," *Radical Philosophy* 139 (2006), 9-19, 14. Safatle is one of the few commentators to have located the manner in which Adorno does not simply wish to spurn the death drive, but rather wants a progressive, nuanced form of it to guide mimetic comportment.

[51] Passages such as this should call into question Martin Jay's assertion that Adorno found Freud and Marcuse's conceptions of the death drive "objectionable." See Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 90.

the organizing power of the structure of socialization, which takes us to the rupture of the I as synthetic formation."[52] The process wherein the subject registers the suffering objectivity that shines through the, so to speak, cracks, presupposes an affinity with death, because only the latter, devoid of all phantasmatic comfort, can speak as if it were the expressionless in-itself, the true name of the matter.

How, then, can we reconcile these two seemingly contradictory positions concerning mimesis and the death drive? We could argue, with Josef Frücktal, that this signifies Adorno's ambivalence.[53] Similarly we could insist, with Frederic Jameson, that for Adorno mimesis is "a foundational concept never defined nor argued but always alluded to, by name, as though it had preexisted all the texts."[54] In either case, we would not be addressing the subtlety of Adorno's articulation of mimesis *as an idea*. That is to say, when we consider the transformative potential of mimesis, a narrative is, in fact, pieced together that is not simply obscure or ambivalent, but that quite distinctly illustrates the simultaneity of the mimetic struggle with *Thanatos* and *Eros*.

Neither of these descriptions, then, of the mimetic death drive is entirely satisfactory when left to itself. Adorno is clear that, experientially, i.e., when standing immediately or perceptually before nature, total absorption is a thing of the past. We need not be nostalgic about this fact, however. Something of ancient mimesis could still be taken up. This would require a sublated form of mimesis, i.e., a form that has passed through subjectivity, passed through the objectifying process. After all, "[s]pace", i.e., an absorption prior to the subject formation of the mimetic taboo, "is absolute alienation" (GS3: 205/ DOE: 148). The true heritage of the death

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[52] Safatle, "Mirrors Without Images," 14.
[53] Josef Früchtl, *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Wurzberg: Konigshausen & Neumann, 1986), 260.
[54] Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 64.

drive is, by implication, one that continues the ideal of immersion, of following the objective

tendencies of the matter, only now the strength of subjective mediation is on its side.

This brings us to a notion we have already seen prefigured in Benjamin's analysis of

mimesis. Despite lacking some of the explanatory detail present in Adorno's account, Benjamin

already articulated the dialectic between mimesis and rationality. He showed, that is, how

mimesis, if it is to live on in a later, modern stage, must do so through its relation to a

constructive or instrumental moment, must be both active and passive. Simply put, mimesis

conceived as an idea is far from what Habermas once called a pre-rational faculty.[55] On the

contrary, once again recalling the passage describing the process of modern mimesis, Benjamin

anticipates Adorno's repeated concern for grasping the dialectical tension of mimesis with its

other side:

> This, if you will, magical side of both language and writing does not, however, merely run
> parallel, without relation to the other, namely the semiotic side. Rather, everything mimetic in
> language is an intention with an established basis [*fundierte Intention*] which, as such [*überhaupt*],
> can only step into appearance [*in Erscheinung treten kann*] in connection with something alien,
> the semiotic or communicative element [*Mitteilenden*] of language. (GS2.1: 208/ SW2.2: 697,
> translation modified)

As opposed to merely positing our claim, it should now be clear, with the help of Adorno, that

the immediacy of ancient mimesis becomes something mediated in the above manner, because of

the mimetic taboo's formation of subjectivity. Once this occurs, we come to a situation where the

original fluidity of experience is objectified through the secondary, initially reflexive, act of

doubling. The bifurcation of the image and sign is in fact the result of this mimetic repression.

Or, to state it differently, that increasing distance between subject and object, modeled on

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[55] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, vol. 1, trans.
Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 390.

alienation, the division of labor, and impelled towards a nominalism utterly indifferent to the object,[56] only occurs because the drive for mastery is first set in motion.

Importantly, the upshot of this process is that the will to selfless unity with nature, as well as the formation of a subject that denies that compulsion, are two parts of the same struggle. To state it in a more psychoanalytic manner, the binding and dissolving aspects of mimesis, its *eros* and death, are not entirely separate from each other; rather they mutually condition one another each step of the way. To bind or employ the subordinating formalism of a universalizing subject, is to both harden and open up a new playfulness. Yet, similarly, to dissolve or destroy also implies, as Nietzsche might say, the unifying process of creativity.[57] As much as wrenching humans from this original intimacy is the product of unspeakable violence, it is also the condition of freedom.

This explains why, showing the importance of the link between the death drive and the dynamic of mimesis, Adorno, on the one hand, writes that, "[i]t is their death drive that permits the integration of the details. [The artwork's] tendency to dissociation and its tendency to unification are not, as its dynamic potential, radically opposed to each other" (GS7: 450/ AT 303, translation modified). And then, on the other hand, seemingly renouncing the death drive entirely, he writes that, "[a]esthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than

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[56] Adorno's claim here is that, following Marx, nominalism is guided by and emerges from an historical level of alienation that is removed from the social process of labor and therefore propelled to fetishize its understanding of the object. Like all bourgeois consciousness it loses touch of the quality of this object and consumes the exchange-value instead of the use-value, all the while maintaining the semblance of stability and "naturalness." What Adorno and Benjamin frequently refer to as the "loss of experience" might be described, alongside the inability to synthesize time, as a radical inability to understand or have a sensitivity for the object or its qualitative specificity: "Odysseus discovered in words what in fully developed bourgeois society is called formalism: their perennial authority to make binding judgments [*Verbindlichkeit*] is bought at the cost of distancing themselves from any particular content which fulfills them, so that they refer from a distance to all possible contents, both to nobody and to Odysseus himself. From the formalism of mythical names and statutes, which, indifferent [*gleichgültig*] like nature, seek to rule over [*gebieten wollen*] human beings and history, merges nominalism [*Nominalismus*], the prototype of bourgeois thinking" (GS3: 79/ DOE: 47, translation modified).

[57] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin , 1966), 59.

subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic

comportment joins *eros* and knowledge" (GS7: 490/ TOOA: 331). We will address the

consequence of the latter passage for contemporary mimetic comportment as we continue, but

for now we need to note that the movement of enlightenment in the form of art is indeed a

movement towards knowledge and truth. Such a movement implies Hegel's conception of the

reconciliation of spirit and nature,[58] subject and object, but not in the sense of the narcissistic

fantasy of the complete abolition of nature, or the complete reduction of nature to the subject.

Insofar as it might truly hear the voice of suffering, the sublime touch (*Berührung*) of the

shudder, mimesis would have to embody an empathy that has escaped knowledge heretofore.

Adorno's repeated admonition of how the hypostatization of two essential elements (GS3: 34/

DOE 13), or the forfeiting of the sublating character (*aufhebenden Charakter*) in thought (GS3:

13/ DOE: XVI), ultimately amounts to the destruction of truth, must be adhered to with regard to

the dialectic of the death and life drives as well. "[H]ypostasized life, in its blind separation from

its other moment becomes the latter, destructiveness and evil, insolence and braggadocio. To

hate destructiveness one must hate life as well: only death is an image [*Gleichnis*] of undistorted

[*nicht entstellten*] life." (GS4: 86/ MM: 78). The problem is not the death drive itself, but rather a

comportment that, in a rigid separation, neglects employing this drive in the name of a freedom

that truly strives after the mimetic idea of reconciliation.

The play between life and death must, in this regard, mirror the play between mimesis

and rationality. Both sides must be thought through to their furthest, mediated, consequence. To

desire this imageless (*bildlose*), undistorted (*nicht entstellten*) truth, already gestured to by Hegel

in his ridicule of picture-thinking, and his ideal of following the matter itself, implies moving in

the direction, foreshadowed by Benjamin, of a mimetic comportment that ruptures the subjective

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[58] Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 55.

intentions of myth. This is why it needs the death drive, for only the relationless silence of the latter can approximate the purity of utopia. Once again, the movement towards truth as the critical trajectory of the idea of mimesis is a movement towards the expressionless. Recalling Benjamin's appropriation of Adorno's letter about the *Arcades Project*, the *moment* (*Augenblick*) of rupture is the in-between of death and meaning, the caesura of the speculative[59] that conjures up "undifferentiatedness [*Indifferenz*]" (AP: 466 [N5,2]/ GS5.1: 582, translation modified). Crucial to our analysis, the violent or forceful critique that such an enlightened development implies, the interruption (*Unterbrechung*) to the delusion of subjective reason, is not simply Benjamin's characterization. It is, in fact, exactly how Adorno also describes the death struggle in a mimesis that, unlike its diffused version,[60] has not sold out its idea.

Adorno and Horkheimer thus represent mimetic absorption, no matter the stage of its development, as having a type of critical violence that promises reconciliation, i.e., true freedom, at last devoid of the hostility between nature and spirit. "[T]he violent magic [*gewalttätige Zauber*] which reminds [Odysseus's men] of an idealized primal history [*idealisierte Urgeschichte*] not only makes them animals but, like the idyll of the Lotus-eaters, brings about, however delusively, the semblance of reconciliation [*Schein der Versöhnung*]" (GS3: 89/ DOE 55, translation modified). It is not simply the case that magic is a protective barrier which regresses to an animal, or even amphibian-like imitation when in danger. Rather, magical mimesis also catches a glimpse of something like Benjamin's conception of the origin, the moment of fulfilled happiness. And it in fact achieves this through a kind of force, a *gewalttätig* relation to its environment. Yet, to act in the name of its implicit idea, to become a mimesis that, despite being deferred in an infinite task, wants to shed the moment of falsehood that regresses to

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[59] See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Caesura of the Speculative" in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, 208-35.

[60] Cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 42.

self-preservative imitation, requires the above described formation of subjectivity. The enlightened movement towards the recognition that illusory (*scheinhaft*) reconciliation ought to become real, empirical reconciliation, demands the twofold force of subjective freedom and, its objective counterpart, relinquishment to nature.

A subjectivity that is strong enough for this task, i.e., that senses the objective, impulsive moment impinging on its every conceptualization, and nonetheless listens without complete coercion, is therefore forceful in its own respect. Abiding by the logic of critique, that is, the steadfast refusal of all mythology, Adorno and Horkheimer explain that it is "[o]nly thought which does violence [*Gewalt*] to itself [that] is hard enough to shatter myths" (GS3: 20/ DOE: 2). That is to say, in order to avoid an originary mimetic comportment that, in a drive for oblivion, is violent in its own manner (GS3: 88/ DOE: 54), a solidly formed subject, employing a secondary, critical force (*Gewalt*), needs to be established. Without this subjective strength, the capacity to lose the self will remain tied to that self-preservative tendency that Benjamin called a "mimetic shock absorber" (SW4: 328/ GS1.2: 631). To state it differently, without the mediated moment, mimesis will be unable to twist out of the constellation of passive adaptation (*Angleichung*) to domination, the "constellation" that, above all else, "remains terror" (GS3: 205/ DOE: 149). The resoluteness of the subject could be used for an abandonment to the object that no longer relinquishes itself in a passivity that is completely blind.

This also helps to clarify why a transformed mimetic comportment, in which impulses and thoughts truly strive, as if after death, for the real reconciliation of subject and object, must take place, if at all, as a gesture of the possibility of freedom. Freedom could peer through the horror of a civilization that has lost its mind, because the mimetic moment constitutive of it, could insist on staying or tarrying with its condition, despite its sorrow (*Trauer*). Like the

working through (*Aufarbeitung*) of the work of mourning that Adorno elsewhere describes,[61] looking the sorrow in the face, taking it into oneself, as if it were the pharmakological double-edged sword that magically wounds and heals (GS7: 202/ AT: 134), implies transforming that sorrow and thus momentarily glimpsing the possibility of a mimesis truly united with rationality. The inability of civilization to wholly silence these "mimetic impulses," manifest as "the pattern of swarming crowds, the convulsive gestures of the tortured," is, accordingly, a propaedeutic to what truly following the mimetic index of experience could elicit: "in the death struggles of the creature, at the furthest extreme from freedom, freedom itself irresistibly [*unwiderstehlich*] shines [*scheint*] forth as the thwarted [*durchkreuzte*] destiny [*Bestimmung*] of the matter" (GS3: 208/ DOE: 151). If the world blatantly denies human potentiality every step of the way, then mimesis cannot merely run away from the reduction of experience to such a creaturely predicament. Although the latter passage does not refer specifically to works of art or language, it nonetheless helps to ground why a contemporary mimetic comportment that is responsive to the historical constellation of unfreedom, is compelled to embody Beckett's dictum of *Comment c'est*. An unwavering, tension-filled confrontation with the inhumanity of the present, not flight before *how it is,* stands as the precondition for beginning anew (*commencer*), the precondition for catching a glimpse of the potential reversal (*Umschalg*). The impulses of repetition are potentially on their way to the active appropriation entailed in genuine understanding, on their way, that is, to registering the sorrow of a frustrated (*durchkreuzte*) freedom. To follow them in their moment of greatest danger, to observe that, despite being dreadfully harmed, they convulse as a last vestige of life, a last attempt to break open a space between the suffering of what is and

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[61] T.W. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working through the Past" in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 3-19.

what could be, is already the implicit answer of mimetic critique. Its language is and remains that of refusal.

In embodying this remembrance of suffering, Adorno and Horkheimer do not imply, however, that freedom is somehow actualized in an already achieved sublation of mimesis. Taking up Beckett's dictum, that is, acting *with and against* objective spirit, renouncing all consoling entertainment, in the hope of truly beginning, cannot be attributed to having already ascended to the next stage of truth, a higher form of mimetic identification. Nor is it the actualized comportment of a mimesis operating in the midst of material conditions of freedom. In reality, the negativity of the experience of this new mimesis, can only *gesture towards the mimetic sublation to come*. As much as there is a positive moment[62] in artworks that shows the continual and perhaps more immediate link between the subject's and object's shudder or danger, in the midst of unfreedom, the subject and object remain antagonistic to each other. Mimetic comportment that strives after truth does not, therefore, actualize freedom, it simply points to its possibility by exposing a reconciliation that is supposedly already present. Or, as Adorno once similarly put it, the new at play in artworks, "is the longing for the new, not the new itself" (GS7: 55/ AT: 32).

Such a deferral that is forced to negatively gesture helps to make sense of why Adorno and Horkheimer describe this freedom as merely shining forth. In keeping with the above passages on the forceful capacity of magic and the thwarted determination (*Bestimmung*) of the matter, freedom only shines (*scheint*), because it remains, in part, illusory. Straight from Benjamin's *Goethe*, this is once again the paradox of artworks that follow the dynamic of critique built into mimesis from the start. They cannot have reconciliation, the ban on graven

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[62] For more on the positive moment in negative dialectics, see Yvonne Sherratt, *Adorno's Positive Dialectic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

images remains, and yet they must have it if they are to live up to their promise. To give up this drive for real reconciliation, what Menke has identified as the extreme "panic"[63] of Adorno's conception of artworks—their death drive—is to renounce the possibility of freedom that is first recognized in the wound of repressive unfreedom. In other words, Menke's claim that Adorno is hyperbolic about the necessity of a vehement refusal of the character of death in the modern world, is refuted by posing the question in terms of what would be lost without this serious or crisis-filled response. Not striving after the pure expression of the matter, unprecedentedly denied to humans approaching death in a meaningless (*Sinnlos*) world,[64] is to renounce a possibility that irresistibly (*Unwiderstehlichkeit*)[65] announces itself in each passing moment of the present unfreedom. It is to renounce or become indifferent to the idea of freedom that keeps gnawing, so to speak, at the ideological mask of the alleged harmony of the present. Along these lines, Hullot-Kentor has even suggested that not uncompromisingly insisting that sense return to a world that relentlessly refuses it, implies giving up on Adorno's conception of materialism, i.e., his demand to submit to the primacy of the object and hear the "true" shudder it induces.[66]

When Adorno, therefore, frequently uses rhetorical arrangements such as, 'it is no longer possible to do such and such,' or 'only such and such can be done in the face of despair,' he should not to be taken as literally as he often is.[67] He does not mean that no one will go on writing poetry the same way after Auschwitz, or no one will continue to write bad music, he is

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[63] Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art*, 219.
[64] For more on Adorno's view about the historical character of death see the section entitled "Dying Today" in GS6: 361-366/ ND: 368-373.
[65] The term *Unwiderstehlichkeit* appears frequently in *Äesthetische Theorie*. It is important for Adorno because it implies the force (*Gewalt*) of the moment (*Augenblick*) concentrated in the immanent articulation of the work. The inability to turn away, or more literally playing on the German, steal away (*sich fortstehlen*) from the shining of the works truth content is fundamental to understanding how, for Adorno, it is possible for that which has a moment of falsehood to nevertheless find language. This *Unwiderstehlichkeit* is also fundamental to avoiding a nominalism that would ascribe accidentality to the immanent features of the work. See GS7: 32, 37, 58, 84, 142, 187, 439.
[66] Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Right Listening and the New Type of Human Being," 208.
[67] See the section entitled, "Rhetoric" in GS6: 65-66/ ND: 55-7.

rather insisting that a mimetic comportment that truly strives after its idea of peace, is compelled

to avoid any activity that does not transform itself in the name of suffering. The truth, in short,

ought to speak, and it in fact does speak, under different historical constellations, at different

historical hours, with different resonances emanating from the tensions in the current state of

meaning (*Sinn*). The historical recognition of a stifled freedom and the accompanying lament

that can never be adequate to the *Trauer* of its condition, is one such example of an immanent

need propelling the alteration of mimesis.[68] When Adorno and Horkheimer, accordingly, state

the following about the impossible task of expressing the lament, they are not simply proposing

that a striving which is historically responsive to the precise historical tensions oscillating

between meaning and the expressionless should be deserted.

> [E]xpression [*Ausdruck*] is the painful echo of overwhelming power [*Übermacht*], violence
> [*Gewalt*], which finds utterance [*laut wird*] in lament [*Klage*]. It is always overdone, no matter
> how heartfelt it may be, for, as in each work of art, the whole world appears [*scheint*] to rest in
> every plaintive sound [*Klagelaut*]. Only activity [*Leistung*] is proportionate. It, and not mimesis,
> can bring an end to suffering. (GS5: 207/ DOE: 150, translation modified).

The transition from sound (*Laut*) to lament (*Klage*), grounded in Benjamin's analysis of the

musicality in *Trauerspiel*, is undeniable in this conception of expression (*Ausdruck*). That there

is something overdone about an expression that attempts to forcefully repeat or double the

violence of nature and thereby assuage it, is not a call to renounce the extreme seriousness of the

death drive's expression, it is rather a call to acknowledge just how bound up mimesis is with

semblance (*Schein*). Tersely put, "[a]rt is magic delivered from the lie of being truth" (GS4: 252/

MM: 222). If art as mimetic production can loosen itself from a brutally serious *Zweckmaßigkeit*,

as well as the attempt to magically control events, realizing that in actuality real political action

is the only proportionate response to suffering, then it not only achieves something of the

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[68] I use the language of need with specific purpose. Adorno's incessant critique of ideology might best be summed up as the attempt to unveil the true needs of the object and subject. This could account for his continual denunciation of Heidegger, who is alleged to profess and be aligned with a "false need." See GS6: 99-100/ ND: 92-93.

enlightened distance of the *Spielraum*, it also alters its very expressivity. Being delivered from the lie of truth, does not, however, mean that truth is no longer a constitutive element of mimesis, it rather means that the truth of mimesis has to recognize its interrelation with falsehood, so long as the world remains unreconciled. In an irrational society, what is not real shines forth with more truth than what is alleged to be real. But this exposed falsehood, what Lambert Zuidervaart has called Adorno's conception of the defetishization of the fetish,[69] cannot be comforted with any romanticized grandeur.

The shift implied in such a recognition, to be sure, signifies a disenchanting of mimesis, as well as a turn to a more melancholic comportment, but it does not indicate that mimesis becomes a kind of quietism, or worse, the mere consolation of the culture industry. Because it itself springs from the bad modes of production, because it is tethered to the ideological moment that, in an objectification, partly neutralizes and sells out the excess of suffering it attempts to lend voice to, its reconciliation can really only be the shining appearance of reconciliation. It can, in a word, recognize its own fetishistic production, but when it accomplishes this, it does not thereby abolish its fetish character.[70] *Despite and because* of its inability to entirely extricate itself from semblance, exposing such an unreconciled circumstance spurs the exact opposite of the palliative condition of entertainment (*Zerstreuung*).

We thus arrive at a series of questions as we make the transition into a closer examination of how aesthetic comportment takes up the lineage of the mimetic idea. The guiding thread of Adorno's aesthetic investigation insistently asks: What do artworks have to do in order to truly

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[69] Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 88.

[70] This is precisely Marx's point in the fetishism section from Marx, *Capital* 1, 167/ *Werke* 23, 88: "The belated scientific discovery that the products of labour, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labour expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind's development, but by no means banishes the semblance [*Schein*] of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labour."

become enlightened, to truly serve their idea without dialectical regression? If critique and rescue, i.e., the demythologization lodged within the concept of philosophy and art from the start, is still the task, what becomes of the comportment of art once it realizes the illusory (*scheinhaft*) element of its presentation, the fact that it can never be fully adequate to the lament (*Klage*)? What does it mean, similarly, for art to nevertheless attempt to make this lament auditory, instead of lingering with beautiful semblance (*Schein*), opting for the consolation of affirming harmony in the midst of overwhelming disharmony? Adorno's answer, as we will see, is that the constitutive elements of mimesis, play and semblance, cannot remain static in the face of this damaged state of affairs. When *Schein* is seen as *Schein*, eloquent yet in need of becoming real, and play observed as part of a disciplinary cycle, instead of that which genuinely embraces the distance of freedom (*Spielraum*) opened in suffering, the comportment of mimesis is forced to transform itself, as always, in the name of reconciliation.

IV. Language in General and the Mimetic Language of Artworks

Before we can move beyond the experiential grounds of mimesis and examine the altered character of play and semblance in the comportment of artworks—the task of Part Two of this work—we need to address the problem of distinguishing mimetic language in general from the mimetic language of artworks. In section one of this chapter we demonstrated the materialist disposition of mimesis. The doubling process, if it is to avoid an ideology that effaces the ever-present tension between subject and object, is an objectification and remembrance of the lament or shudder. Through the help of Benjamin's analysis we showed that this signifies the banished migration of these tensions from immediate perception into art and language. With Adorno's elaboration it became clear that this migration is in fact based on the formation of subjectivity

through the mimetic taboo. What was once immediate for experience becomes, in short, mediated. That this process, at least initially, happens unconsciously, helps to explain why the terminology of sedimentation and the archive or canon of language is employed by both thinkers to signify the continual trace of mimetic similarities. Such a mimetic narrative in which linguistic and artistic images or sounds register the at once more diffuse and more particular experiences that are now lost to immediate perception, points to the fact that the lament is not itself the nature-sound (*Naturlaut*) of suffering, but rather the repetition of what remains, in truth, inaccessible and non-identical to it. We can see, in other words, that the playful taking up of sorrow, the attempt to create a critical distance, happens through our mimetic (re)productions, be they art or language. Both of them speak (*Sprache finden*), become eloquent, when, as we have observed, they can subtly reconfigure the objective spirit within which they find themselves.

Yet, these doublings that paradoxically need to speak for the lament, but cannot speak for it, do not express themselves in an identical manner. "A philosophy that tried to imitate art, that would turn itself into a work of art," declares Adorno, "would be expunging itself" (GS6: 26/ ND: 15). Although language in general, i.e., the language of words and discourse, even of philosophy, is not consigned to a mastery that is hardened into *mere* logic and *mere* discursivity, its manner of speaking or becoming eloquent in an act of protest is not the same as the language of artworks that attempt this same task.[71]

The underlying reason why the language of discourse is different from the language of artworks is that, for Adorno, perhaps going even further than Benjamin, something of the empathy for particularity and difference is banished from even language as a result of the repression of the mimetic taboo. "Magic," no doubt tied to mimesis from the beginning, "still

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[71] Christoph Menke's discussion of Derrida and Adorno regarding the potential conflation of aesthetic negativity with nonaesthetic negativity is, in my view, the definitive text outlining what is at stake in this problematic about the differences in mimetic expression. See, for example, *The Sovereignty of Art*, 251.

retained differences whose traces have vanished even in linguistic forms" (GS3: 27/ DOE: 7).

Emphasizing the development slightly differently than Benjamin, the truth and material traces of

mimesis are not wholly accessible to a language that has lost grip of its original, selfless affinity

with nature. Once nonsensuous similarity has migrated or been banished from immediate

perception into a doubled repetition, the death-driven absorption that wants to glean the object

apparently loses something of the indispensible time element (*Zeitmoment*) involved in the truth-

revealing of mimesis. "Truth," writes Adorno, echoing his predecessor, "depends on tempo

[*Tempo*], the patience of lingering [*verweilens*] with the particular" (GS4: 84-84/ MM 77).

Although in his privileging of art, as opposed to language in general, Adorno is perhaps stronger

in his insistence about how mimesis becomes dangerously entwined with the communicative,

instrumental moment of identification, the problem for both thinkers is still that of determining

what should be done when, instead of being sublated into a new form, this instrumental side of

the mimetic dialectic becomes too dominant. Simply put, the problem is how best to become

attuned to the historical tempo, the "perilous [*gefährlich*], critical moment" that for Benjamin

founds the possibility of reading with and against the flow of things (AP: 463, [N3,1]/ GS5.1:

578). Finding a "haven" of mimetic comportment, which "distinguish[es] even the infinitesimal

[*Kleinste*], that which escapes the concept" (GS6: 55/ ND: 45) in the moment of its

recognizability, remains the essential task, only for Adorno it appears that this haven is more

readily available in the speed[72] and doubling involved in the language of the work of art.

Even though the language of philosophy can, again, embrace the mimetic moment of

cognition, and thereby resist a domination that wants to do away with mimesis entirely, its very

discursivity or classificatory behavior, which is to say, its very distance or abstraction from the

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[72] For a further discussion of the speed or tempo of aesthetic and nonaesthetic presentation, see Jeffrey T. Nealon, "Maxima Immoralia?: Speed and Slowness in Adorno" in *Rethinking the Frankfurt School* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 131-145.

object, means that it cannot entirely speak to the intimacy with the object that the mimesis of artworks does. To better understand this distinction it is helpful for us to briefly examine how Adorno, in his fragment on "Music and Language,"[73] describes the language of music in contrast to a discursive, judging language. Although Adorno is never fully explicit about his conception of the musicality (*Musikalisch*) involved in all artworks—the plastic arts included—certain statements about the centrality of music lend credence to reading this text as marking the fundamental differences between the mimesis of artworks and the mimesis of non-aesthetic language. For instance, Adorno claims that, "perhaps the strict and pure concept of art is applicable only to music"(GS4: 252/ MM: 223). Similarly, he is clear on many occasions that all artworks have a concrete temporality that, even if they are plastic, guides their internal logic or struggle with meaning. The grounds of music's privileged access[74] is thus not fundamentally at odds with the grounds of art's privileged access over discursive judgment. Just as philosophy offers a technicity (*Technik*) and needed precision of categorization that the more immediate mimesis of artworks cannot achieve, so too does the comportment of the work of art offer an alternative insight, inaccessible to philosophy. We do better, then, to conceive of art and philosophy as a fundamentally dialectical relation.

All of this is to say that the mimetic language of artworks does not use the same judging faculty that is employed by science or philosophy. Not captured in the English translation of this fragment, Adorno calls this their "non-judging" or "judgment-less" (*urteilslose*) language (GS

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[73] Theodor W. Adorno, "Music and Language: A Fragment" in Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 1998), 1-6. Hereafter cited as ML; Adorno, "Fragment über Musik und Sprache" in GS 16.2.

[74] Weber Nicholsen describes the difference between the literal similarity of language to music as it appears in Rilke, in contrast to that which Adorno, through the poetry of Rudolf Borchardt, describes as "language approach[ing] music." The main difference is that the musical character of language, or what we have called the musicality of mimesis, does not try to emulate melody and harmony, for example, but is rather guided by the paradoxical task of bringing the name and thing closer to one another. It is nonsensuous similarity, not literal, sensuous similarity that drives this musicality. See Nicholsen, "Language: its Murmuring, Its Darkness, and Its Silver Rib" in *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics*, 70.

16.2: 253/ ML: 4). In essence Adorno means that artworks enact something very similar to Kant's argument about art's purposiveness without purpose. Unlike determinate judgment, they perform a kind of synthesis, yet it is one that does not subsume, or draw a series of particulars under a universal. They resemble the work of determinate judgment which comes to full-fledged cognition, full-fledged subsumption, but they stop short of its outright determination. This is why Adorno declares that music, or, in our case, art in general, not only has idioms (GS16.2: 251 ML: 1), its "play" is also concerned with "statement, identity, similarity, contradiction, the whole and part" (NS1: 32/ BE: 11). It resembles logic, but is not identical to it. In actuality, the language of artworks is a mimesis of the language of things.

What does it really mean, then, for the musicality of artworks to avoid determinate judgment and resemble something closer to reflective judgment? Adorno implies that it means this particular *artistic* lineage of mimesis does not actually arrive at meaning (*Bedeutung*); in fact, for the sake of the object, it tries to altogether avoid meaning and its apparent ties to subjective projection. For Kant such a state of affairs results in the desire to argue or indeed feel certain—although without proof—that our aesthetic judgments are binding. Something about the work compels, we want to universalize its importance, but a determinate, that is to say, apodictic justification, escapes us.[75] If meaning were established, however, if clear intentions were to become evident, we could seemingly retrace the work's logic, and retroactively show its compelling force. In a word, we could *communicate* the precise reasons why we judge the work to be beautiful.

The language of music, and by extension artworks in general, is more objective than this subjective comportment. Contrary to the ordinary use of the term, namely an alleged

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[75] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §56.

mathematical certainty,[76] Adorno's sense of objectivity is allied with the opaque and incommunicable. Something is objective precisely because it is not communicated, not reduced to the feeble attempt of subjectivity to master it; it must, in this sense, be an approximation of the expressionless. Adorno thus maintains, in a moment of extreme proximity to Benjamin, that,

> [t]he language of music is quite different from the language of intentionality [*meinenden Sprache*]. It contains a theological dimension. What it has to say is simultaneously revealed and concealed. Its idea is the divine Name which has been given shape. It is demythologized prayer, rid of efficacious magic. It is the human attempt, doomed as ever, to name the Name, not to communicate meanings [*nicht Bedeutungen mitzuteilen*]. (GS16.2: 252/ ML: 2)[77]

While artworks are impelled to move in the direction of expressionless expression as the attempt to speak truth, it does not appear that philosophy or any other type of non-aesthetic discourse can, even if it had such a desire, be as successful at fulfilling this drive for utopia.[78] Tellingly, the constellation of phenomena at the heart of this account of music and art's distinctive language is bound to those central elements we have seen constituting the force of mimetic critique. Indeed, looking closer at Adorno's depiction of musicality, we notice a clear echo of Benjamin's conception of the moment of nonsensuous similarity flashing up. "Musicality [*Musikalisch*]," says Adorno, "means to innervate flashing intentions [*zu innervieren aufblitzenden Intentionen*], harnessing [*zu bändigen*] them, without letting them peter out [*sich zu verlieren*]." (GS16.2: 253/ ML: 3, my translation). This statement is centered on what we highlighted in section one of this chapter as the paradoxical attempt to express objectivity through subjectivity. To harness, tame,

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[76] Along these lines Adorno goes so far as to argue that in administered society the meanings of subjectivity and objectivity have been radically reversed. See GS4: 76-77/ MM: 69-70.

[77] In this respect Susan Buck-Morss is not entirely correct about Adorno's apparent critique of Benjamin's appeal to the theological Name. See Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 81n18-19. In a similar fashion this discussion of the name-giving process built into art's task should call into question Jay Bernstein's claim that Adorno sheds Benjamin's messianic tendencies. See Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 217. Also helpful here is Richard A. Lee's essay "The Negative History of the Moment of Possibility: Walter Benjamin and the Coming of the Messiah" in *Rethinking the Frankfurt School* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 145-152. Lee helps us grasp just how much these so-called theological remnants in Benjamin can and should be read in a secular manner.

[78] Again, the success or, as we have put it, privileged access of the artwork over other types of language does not mean that its "fulfillment" is fulfilled in the sense of being realized via practice in the empirical world. All art remains, in another sense, failure, incapable of realizing the aim of its impulse. Insofar as the experience that it conjures up is *Schein* and play, it cannot deliver on its utopian promise. See, for example, GS7: 205/ AT: 136: "Art is the ever broken promise of happiness."

or bind (*bändigen*) intentions is akin to bringing dialectics to a standstill. In the antagonism between the, as it were, intended, subjective vector, and the non-identical from which it springs, a critical subjectivity can momentarily glimpse the other to meaning and determination. A critical, musical mimesis can, in other words, call a halt to the mythological narrative of the subject, and, in a flash, gesture to a situation no longer plagued by the ontology of the wrong state of things (GS6: 22/ ND: 11).

This persistent appeal to a rupture, caesura, or the expressionless flash (*Blitz*) of critique endemic to mimesis might, of course, give the impression that there is a simple formula for successful expression undergirding Adorno and Benjamin's idea of mimesis. So long as the syncopation happens, so long as a shock shudders the anticipated intentions, success is apparently assured. That this is not the case, however, that it is, in reality, an empty abstraction, hypostatized from an immanent context, is a testament to precisely the point that Adorno makes about the difference of the mimetic language of artworks from that of nonaesthetic language. For, as Adorno, the student of Hegel frequently claims, it is only through the immanent articulation of the artwork's moments, that the artwork can speak, that it can truly be successful in its approximation of unintentional language. Form and content mediate each other, neither is indifferent to its other, and this signifies that expression and the expressionless, meaning and the meaningless, can only unfold in the specific, infinitesimally particular performance of the work itself.

Bringing to mind what we witnessed Benjamin describe as the *Sinnzusammenhang* internal to the mimetic moment of critique, the *coming to together* of the constellation, it is the very specific tension between the 'what' articulated in now-time (*Jetztzeit*) and the 'how' of its articulation that either expressively addresses the current, temporally in flux state of the matter,

or misses the mark. Adorno's musicological texts are clear on this point. In each of his analyses, it is because of the sensuous context within which the moment of sound is uttered, because of the phonetic tension articulated in specific configuration, that the historically shifting nexus of meaning, or more literally, the hanging together (*Zusammen-hang*) of meanings sedimented in the material, can potentially express a singular eloquence. There is a reason, to state it simply, why some artworks fall flat and why others speak. At bottom, that reason is history.

Along this line, Adorno goes to great lengths to describe with precision the recapitulation of the first movement in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the fragmentary passages in Mahler's form, the subtle turns of phrase in Beckett. That these works can speak as they unfold, i.e., that the moment (*Augenblick*) of recapitulation happens when it happens, in the specific manner that it happens, as result of the mediation of the whole pressing in on it, is precisely what escapes ordinary logic and thus nonaesthetic forms of mimesis. Moreover, this implies that the immersion of the death drive says more precisely when it avoids the outright apophansis of judging language.[79]

> [Music's] form of mediation and the mediation of intentional language unfold according to different laws: not in a system of mutually dependent meaning, but by their deadly [*tödlicher*] absorption into a nexus [*Zusammenhang*] which can alone redeem [*errettet*] the meanings it overrides in each individual movement [*Bewegung*]. With music intentions are broken and scattered out of their own force [*Kraft*] and reassembled in the configuration of the Name. (GS16.2: 255/ ML: 4-5, translation modified)

Insofar as uttering the Name—devoid of the struggle for communication—is the *telos* of mimesis, the latter must be constituted by, as we have observed on several occasions, a resolute striving after objectivity. Its utopian impulse wants this objectivity for the sake of the peace that would at last hear suffering and rescue the past. This is why, resembling our formulation of the

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[79] Cf. Adorno, NS1: 32/ BE: 11: "*Music is the logic of the judgment-less* [*urteilslosen*] *synthesis*. Beethoven should be tested against this, in the twofold sense that, on the one hand, such logic is demonstrated through his work; and, on the other, that the work is determined 'critically' as music's mimesis of judgment, and therefore of language. The meaning of the work with regard to the philosophy of history is understood in terms both of the ineluctability of this mimesis and of music's attempt to escape it – to revoke the logic which pronounces judgment."

idea of mimesis, Adorno elsewhere maintains that the utopia of music is inescapably entwined with Kant's idea of peace.[80]

But, to want this peace, the expression of which is, to repeat, "as if" the immediate (*unmittelbar*) Name of the matter itself (GS16.2: 255 / ML: 5), requires taking a step beyond the aesthetics of subjective reason.[81] An aesthetics like Kant's remains impeded by its emphasis on what amounts to the subjective movement at play in aesthetic experience. Not wholly dissimilar to Gadamer's criticism of Kant's subjectivism,[82] Adorno and Benjamin's idea of mimesis attempts to maintain the primacy of the object, the death of the author, so as to avoid regressing to an analysis where, in as much as "anything goes,"[83] locating the stringency and bindingness of the truth-content in a presentation is an endeavor tossed into the dustbin of history. Although always up for question because of the shifting meanings emanating from an unstable historical constellation, mimetic development would risk, if it completely lacked such objective criteria, selling out the possibility of true enlightenment, true critical expression as resistance to the unreconciled present. This accounts for why, once more nodding to the Benjamin of the *Trauerspiel*, Adorno claims that the successful immanent articulation of music, i.e., the objectification of mimesis as it processually unfolds, forcefully dissolves the playful or ambiguous moment wrapped up in its doubling.

> But is music really a judgment-less language [*urteilslose Sprache*]? Of its various intentions one
> of the most urgent appears [*scheint*] to be the assertion 'This is how it is,' the judging [*urteilende*],

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[80] T.W. Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle" in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 1998), 322.

[81] For more on the distinction between subjective and objective reason see Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 3-39.

[82] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1975), 37-52.

[83] See Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 47. Although Danto's general aesthetics is arguably less compelling given that he belies his complicity with "progress" and the seeming mitigation of historical tensions after the fall of communism, this argument about the end of the legitimacy of the modernist or avant-gardist appeal to truth also, more or less, comprises Peter Bürger's far more historically embedded argument against thinkers like Adorno in Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

even the magisterial confirmation of something that has not been explicitly stated. In the highest moments of great music, and they are often the most forceful [*gewalttätigsten*] moments – one instance is the beginning of the recapitulation in the first movement of the Ninth Symphony – this intention becomes eloquently unambiguous [*eindeutig beredt*] by virtue of the sheer power of the nexus [*Kraft des Zusammenhangs*]. (GS16.2: 253/ ML: 4)

It is the closeness to or nestling up with the meaningful nexus (*Sinnzusammenhang*) of objective spirit that affords mimesis the potential to halt, in a moment of forceful expression, the play that it first inaugurates. Even though it is the case that this musical mimesis is *scheinhaft*—doubled illusory play as a response to empirical reality—the moment of expression in which the aesthetic presentation, like a force field, draws one towards the contradictions of the present, as if to say, *tode ti*, 'this is how it is,' can still rescue something of a persuasive objectivity. The irresistibility (*Unwiderstehlichkeit*) of the moment (*Augenblick*) is what makes it distinctly eloquent (*beredt*). The changing, historical context of this constellational nexus indicates, however, that the manner of successfully speaking truth, is in flux. In itself the rupture carries no force. But the very particular, historically embedded rupture, which follows the dialectic of convention and expression, immerses itself in the minutest phonetic resonances, can, if but momentarily, signal the possibility of redemption. Compellingly speaking without saying it, judging without affirmative judgment, this mimesis gleans the changing texture of the historical context. What once seemed profound, triumphant, even beautiful, comes to ring hallow. Why this is the case, and how mimesis, without alleging a transhistorical conception of the expression of artworks, can nonetheless lay claim to an authoritative critique, requires further understanding how the essential components of mimesis, semblance and play, alter themselves in relation to history.

Part Two: The Banished Comportment of Mimesis in Art

Chapter 3: The Dynamic of Semblance

One of Benjamin's most important insights consists, to be sure, in his identification of the down-going (*Untergang*) of *Schein*. Something of the ritualistic stage of mimetic production that constituted its previous form undoubtedly gives way to the secularized reproductions of a new stage. One would indeed be hard pressed to claim, without a reactionary tendency underpinning one's argument, that the aura of both aesthetic and nonaesthetic mimetic comportment, whether as commodified entertainment, radically avant-gardist art, or even the experience of nature itself, has remained unchanged in the face of historical developments. Yet, as we suggested in Chapter One, and as it should now be ever more apparent given the explication of Chapter Two, the down-going of *Schein* does not imply the complete dissolution of *Schein* and its corollary concept, the veiled (*verhüllt*) experience of the beautiful. That is to say, parallel to the argument in Chapter One, the more dialectical or more historically attuned moments in Benjamin know that the rise of technical art does not merely signal the ascendance of play at the expense of the metamorphosis of semblance. Bearing this in mind, my claim is that if we read the *Untergang des Scheins* as preserving yet transforming something of *Schein* in what Adorno calls "the redemption [*Erlösung*] of *Schein*" (GS7: 164/ AT: 107), we can bring into sharper focus the actual dialectical shifts of the most progressive form of mimesis in art. The story that emerges, aware of the persistent echo of the shudder already expressed in Benjamin's *Goethe* and in his concept of the quivering (*zitternd*) life of dialectics at a standstill, is that, instead of the Brechtian

politicization[1] of artistic productions, the task of art is observed as the re-enchanting of an experience that has become all-too reified. To state it differently, what emerges is the dynamic shift in the concept of the beautiful itself—a shift that, as we will see, explodes the old, static conception of beauty as the shining appearance of the formally coherent (*stimmig*). We can begin to witness this transformation of mimesis that follows the enlightened movement towards critique, and that ultimately propels the transformation of the formal characteristics that successfully lend voice to mimesis, by turning back to Adorno's discussion with Benjamin concerning their conceptions of the aura.

I. Critique and Rescue of the Aura:
The Task of Re-enchanting Reified Experience

In order to first contextualize this important dialogue between Benjamin and Adorno with a view towards concretely understanding the banished comportment of mimesis in artworks, it is helpful to more closely address what we have implied is Adorno's attempt to fulfill the promise of Benjamin's idea of mimetic reconciliation (*Versöhnung*). In accordance with the fatal drive of mimesis, Adorno's articulation of the beautiful follows the same trajectory that, for the sake of

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[1] The degree to which Benjamin, at the time of the "Technology" essay, was leaning in this direction of the politicization of artworks is sensed in his contemporaneous essay on Brecht, *What is the Epic Theater? (II)*, SW4: 302-309/ GS2.2: 532-539; and his fragment "Theory of Distraction," SW3: 141-42/ GS7.2: 678-79. This emphasis on politicization also marks out an important distinction between Peter Bürger's and Adorno's respective conceptions of progressive Twentieth Century art. Whereas Bürger declares that Adorno's shortcoming is his inability to see the transition to the avant-garde as being grounded in a rebellion against art's social irrelevance (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 51), Adorno does not believe that such a utilitarian model of artworks captures the precision of their historically embedded, i.e., inner-aesthetic, shifts in comportment. Even if the Bürgerian explanation contains an element of truth, particularly in the indifference displayed by Duchamp's content, it nevertheless threatens to conflate, in Adorno's view, the performativity of the work's internal comportment with its *mere intentionality or motivation*. For more on the debate between Bürger and Adorno, see Zuidervaart's account in *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 240-247. One of the main issues neglected by even Zuidervaart's acute analysis is that the rebellion of artworks is still primarily explained by their rebellion against their autonomization from social reality. Once again, in Adorno's view this understanding itself threatens to become caught in the web of mythology: the "spell of praxis" that cannot escape the will to self-preservation or passive adaptation.

this reconciliation, is compelled to adapt itself by harnessing the aporetic presentation of

scheinlos Schein.

> [I]f the idea of beauty [*Idee des Schönen*] only presents itself [*sich darstellt*] in dispersed form among many works, each one nevertheless aims uncompromisingly to express the whole of beauty, claims it in its singularity [*Einzigkeit*] and can never admit its dispersal [*Aufteilung*] without annulling itself. Beauty, as single, true and *scheinlose*, liberated from individuation, presents [*darstellt*] itself not in the synthesis of all works, in the unity of the arts and of art, but only as the physical [*leibhaft*] and actual [*wirklich*]: in the downfall [*Untergang*] of art itself. This downfall [*Untergang*] is the goal of every work of art, in that it seeks to bring death to all others. That all art aims to end art, is another way of saying the same thing. It is this impulse to self-destruction [*Selbstvernichtungsdrang*] inherent in works of art, their innermost striving towards a *scheinlose* image of beauty [*Bild des Schönen*], that is constantly stirring up the aesthetic disputes that are purportedly so futile. (GS4: 83/ MM: 75, translation modified)

However much Hegel missed the thrust of his own point and prematurely pronounced the idealistic resolution to an unreconciled circumstance,[2] in this articulation of the idea of art, Adorno clearly follows the Hegelian insight that artworks "are consciousness of plight [*Nöten*]" (GS7: 35/ AT: 18). The mimetic production of artworks lives on because the suffering of the world persists. Insofar as they speak to suffering and are accordingly the voice that counters the "repressed nature" exacted by the mimetic taboo of civilization (GS7: 365/ AT: 246), their very premise is predicated on the desire to do away with the conditions that give rise to their need to speak. This constitutes the death struggle of all artworks against themselves and others. Not embodying an agonistic relation to other works is to deny art's *raison d'être*: to be so expressively forceful that the possibility of peace and the end of suffering becomes irresistible (*unwiderstehlich*) and incomparable. "Relative success is alien to art; the average is already the bad" (GS7: 280/ AT: 188). Thus every work must want to be, despite its impossibility, the utterly singular. Moreover, the *scheinlos* character of *Schein* is intertwined with this need for the down-going (*Untergang*) of art, because truly striving after the mimetic idea demands, as Adorno suggests, that peace become a living, physical (*leibhaft*) reality, devoid of the illusions that to

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[2] Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, 11.

this day uphold mythological irreconciliation. It demands, in other words, that the shining

presentation that can only as yet promise and gesture, fulfill itself and become an actuality for

experience itself, not just the neutralized sphere of art. Only this impulse to self-destruction[3]

(*Selbstvernichtungsdrang*) expresses the possibility of a world where the truth of *Schein* does not

have to be *Schein*, where Hegel's declaration of the end of art is not distorted in service to

domination. According to Adorno, mimetic presentation must radically shift once it begins to

become conscious of this struggle.

Yet the paradox immanent to art as mimetic duplication consists in the fact that artworks

are *a priori* unable to truly achieve what could also be expressed as their compulsion against a

nominalism that would efface the binding force or stringency of their objective expression. In

themselves fractured, marred with failure, even the most successful, historically responsive

works, remain partly false, partly veiled, in that they are bound to the guilt-ridden ideological

relations—the division of labor—that first makes their production possible. That they

nevertheless begin to yearn to absolve this Godotian walking in place helps us to grasp why the

difficulty of their task is described almost identically in the above passage about the *idea* of

beauty and the passage from the Husserl[4] study on the *idea* of the sublation of mimesis. The

desire for undistorted truth, veilless objectivity, or the imageless image—diametrically opposed

to all realism—intensifies with art's own self-recognition as being entangled in a struggle with

enlightenment. This helps to clarify what Adorno means when he repeatedly claims that the first

shriek of anxiety objectified in the form of the gods is already an attempt to gain distance from

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[3] While this conception of the critique and *agon* endemic to the *Selbstvernichtung* of mimetic artworks gives the impression of a "self-negation" that parallels the various stages of the march of freedom in Hegel's aesthetics, Adorno is likely playing on the writings of the early Marx and Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," both of which conceive critique as a process tied to a compulsion to destroy or annihilate (*vernichten*). See Karl Marx, *Werke* 1, 380: "Mit ihnen im Kampf ist die Kritik keine Leidenschaft des Kopfs, sie ist der Kopf der Leidenschaft. Sie ist kein anatomisches Messer, sie ist eine Waffe. Ihr Gegenstand ist ihr *Feind*, den sie nicht widerlegen, sondern *vernichten* will."

[4] See page 91 of this work above.

what plagues humanity from the outside, is already an attempt to mimetically "mollify" (*besänftigen*) terrifying nature as the condition of illusion (GS7: 83/ AT: 52). The productions of mimesis are therefore always already dialectically linked to their antithesis, archaic chaos, the burgeoning recognition of which is expressed in Kant's doctrine of the play of forces at work in subjectivity.

Let us not forget that this historical recognition that is awakened not only in aesthetic criticism, or philosophy such as Kant's, but also in the comportment of artworks themselves, implies that beauty—initially the fragile formalism representative of the desperate attempt to shut out the ugly—is impelled to break with its static conceptualization. "The force [*Kraft*] of such a dialectic [between the beautiful and what falls outside of it] transforms [*verwandelt sich*] the image of the beautiful into the movement of enlightenment as a whole [*Gesamtbewegung*]" (GS7: 83/ AT: 52, translation modified). Thus as much as one gets the impression that the transformations operative in the dissolution of aura and the disenchantment of experience, in short, the closing of the veil's distance—*Entkunstung*[5]—mark the destruction of the beautiful, the truth is that mimesis starts to sense its entwinement in something larger than that which would reduce its productions to the original concept of the beautiful. It becomes evident that the beautiful is part of the mimetic struggle of enlightenment, part of a constellation that, as we will see, cannot be separated from the sublime, the presentation of truth-content, and the attempt to

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[5] The German term employed by Adorno, *Entkunstung*—literally de-aestheticization or de-artifying—is important because it not only describes the bourgeois tendency to want to touch and possess everything, effectively eliminating the critical distance required for art, it also captures something of the truth of the movement of mimesis. It achieves the latter because the movement of mimesis is, as we will discuss in more detail below, a movement that increasingly becomes allied with the unveiling, de-distancing of the sublime, and that, consequently, makes critical art appear less and less like art in the traditional sense. As Adorno's expresses it, "[i]n his treatment of the theme of aura—a concept closely related to the concept of the appearance [*Erscheinung*] that by virtue of its internal unity points beyond itself—Benjamin showed that, beginning with Baudelaire, aura in the sense of 'atmosphere' [*Atmosphäre*] is taboo; already in Baudelaire the transcendence of the artistic appearance [*Erscheinung*] is at once effected and negated. From this perspective the deaestheticization [*Entkunstung*] of art is not only a stage of art's liquidation but also the direction of its development" (GS7: 123/ AT: 79).

truly live up to the maturity of its idea. Immanent to the beautiful is thus the transgression of its original barrier, the shattering of the symbol.[6]

This transformation of the beautiful mimetic production is especially apparent in the manner that Adorno takes up, critiques, and rescues Benjamin's conception of the aura. We have already discussed how for Benjamin auratic perception is first and foremost an experience of nature. Adorno follows here: "[the] auratic element has its model in nature" (GS7: 408 /AT: 274). This means that the cluster of unconscious and intersensory passageways at play in the nonsensuous similarity between us and nature, subject and object, are precisely what is threatened with the down-going (*Untergang*) or secularization of experience. The "unique" or singular (*einmalige*) distance that constitutes the nonexchangeable quality of the mountain range seems to be exactly what comprises its "here and now," the breath and air that emanates from its "atmosphere." As we have learned from the previous two chapters, this does not suggest, of course, that artworks, which are the "refuge [*Zuflucht*]" of mimetic comportment once the migration or banishment of mimesis transpires (GS7: 86/ AT: 53), insulate themselves from this historical *Untergang*; for insulation is certainly not what Adorno intends by his frequent appeal to the autonomy of art. It would be more accurate to say, instead, that artworks too grapple with the *Untergang*, only as a kind of second nature that reflects what has happened to the relationality of an inaccessible first nature.

Does this imply, then, that the aura and the beautiful bound up with it, are reducible to the "*hic et nunc*" or atmosphere of either the object of nature or the object of art? Adorno's reservation concerning Benjamin's undialectical moments, his too rigid dichotomization of the auratic and technical work (GS7: 56/ AT: 33), which potentially devolves into "copyrealism" (GS7: 89/ AT: 56), gives a definitive answer. The aura never was, nor will it ever be reducible to

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[6] Cf. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §59.

what is simply the case; as if the presented and its presentation could ever be identical to one another. The consequence of this non-identical relation to nature is that the cluster of the aura points beyond the barrier of identity thinking's autarkic, sovereign misrecognition. This is why whenever Adorno discusses Benjamin and the down-going of the aura that Benjamin identified in the modernism of Baudelaire, he does so alongside the correlate concept of natural beauty.

Indispensible to this concept of natural beauty, which, to be sure, also grounds art-beauty by virtue of the latter's migratory rescue of mimetic comportment, is Adorno's concept of "the more" (*das Mehr*) that shines forth in mimetic presentation. In Adorno's words, "[w]hat is beautiful in nature," and, by extension, art too, "is what appears [*erscheint*] to be more than what is literally there" (GS7: 111/ AT: 71). This concept is once again prefigured in the early and late Benjamin, as opposed to the Benjamin of the "Technology" essay. Just as we saw the *Sinnzusammenhang*, the constellational nexus, come together, not in the hermeneutical[7] establishment of meaning, but rather in that which speaks to the silence and speechlessness (*Sprachlosigkeit*) of nature, so too does Adorno imply that the constellation of nature or the constellation of the art-object speak by virtue of their subtle identity with the non-identical.

> The more cannot be adequately described by the psychological definition of a gestalt, according to which a whole is more than its parts. For the more is not simply the nexus [*Zusammenhang*] of elements, but an other [*ein Anderes*], mediated [*Vermitteltes*] through this nexus and yet divided from it. The artistic elements [*Momente*] suggest [*suggerieren*] through their nexus what escapes it. (GS7: AT: 79)

This excess to the prisonhouse of what Adorno also calls the subject's self-incurred "spell," demonstrates that, even though the artwork's dialectic of enlightenment makes it essentially the "secularization of transcendence" (GS7: 50/ AT: 29), it still has to act, however much by mere "suggestion" or mere mimetic gesture, in the name of transcendence. Modernism's critique of

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[7] Christoph Menke's discussion of the difference between Adorno and hermeneutics clarifies this point. Mimesis and the meaning implied in eventually coming to understanding are disharmonious with one another. See Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art*, 100.

atmosphere, of the organic, as well as that which would fallaciously uphold the "purity" and harmony of nature, as if such a thing still existed in a frighteningly administered world, does not stipulate that the artwork's desire for "fresh air" should be renounced (GS7: 100/ AT: 63). "Aura is not only—as Benjamin claimed—the here and now of the artwork," reiterates Adorno, "it is whatever goes beyond its factual givenness, its content; one cannot abolish it and still want art. Even demystified artworks are more than what is literally the case" (GS7: 73/ AT: 45).[8]

It should be evident that this grappling with the constellation or *Zusammenhang* of objective spirit, this exact imagination or critical mimesis of immersion, in contrast to the fantasy that is a flight from *Comment c'est*,[9] cannot be separated from the *Schein* element in mimesis undergoing historical change. With no small significance, Adorno configures one of his most decisive articulations of the *idea* of art alongside this notion of transcendence, *Schein* coming to consciousness, and mimesis once again lending voice to the muteness of nature.

> Nature is beautiful in that it appears [*scheint*] to say more than it is. To wrest [*entreißen*] this more [*dies Mehr*] from that more's contingency, to gain control of its semblance [*Schein*], to determine [*bestimmen*] it as semblance [*Schein*] as well as to negate it as unreal [*unwirklich*]: This is the idea [*Idee*] of art…. Artworks become artworks in the production of this more [*Mehr*]; they produce their own transcendence [*Transzendenz*], rather than being its site [*Schauplatz*], and thereby they once again become separated from transcendence [*Transzendenz*]. The actual place [*Ort*] of transcendence in artworks is the nexus of their elements [*Zusammenhang ihrer Momente*]. By straining toward, as well as adapting to, this nexus, they go beyond [*überschreiten*] the appearance [*Erscheinung*] that they are, though this transcendence [*Überschreiten*] may be unreal

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[8] This claim about demystified artworks should help to contextualize Adorno's critique of Benjamin in the famous letter on the "Technology" essay. For example, in order to counter the ease with which Benjamin at the time sided with the utilitarian function of art that apparently results from the dissolution of the aura and semblance, Adorno polemically declares, "Schoenberg's music is emphatically *not* auratic" (CC: 131). Similar to the above quote, his point is not to say that this completely disqualifies the possibility of the aura resurfacing, transformed and upheld in the very negation, it is rather an attempt to convince Benjamin that the aura is just that dialectical. The consequence of this dialectic is that, because of its "naïve realism," the seemingly advanced movement toward revolutionary politics embodied in art is just as much bordering on reversing into its opposite. In short, the critical capacity of artworks—once exemplarily displayed in Schoenberg's music—resists this push for political action or direct exhibition, while simultaneously bearing the guilt of its inaction.

[9] For more on the distinction between a critical mimesis and the traditional concept of fantasy, compare respectively the flight that is implied in the following two descriptions of an antiquated fantasy and an exact imagination of immersion: "This abstractness [of modern art] has nothing in common with the formal character of the aesthetic norms such as Kant's. On the contrary it is a provocation, it challenges the illusion [*Illusion*] that life [*Leben*] goes on, and at the same time is a means for that aesthetic distancing [*Mittel jener ästhetischen Distanzierung*] that traditional fantasy no longer achieves" (GS7: 40/ AT: 22); "Artworks say what is more than the existing, and they do this exclusively by making a constellation of how it is, '*Comment c'est*'" (GS7: 199/ AT: 133).

[*unwirklich*]. Only in the achievement [*Vollzug*] of this transcendence, not foremost and indeed probably never through meanings [*Bedeutungen*], are artworks spiritual [*Geistiges*]. Their transcendence [*Transzendenz*] is their eloquence [*Sprechendes*], their script [*Schrift*], but it is a script without meaning or, more precisely, as script with broken or veiled [*zugehängt*] meaning. (GS7: 122/AT: 78, translation modified)

Here we come full circle regarding the redemption of semblance. It is telling that the *Transcendenz* of the work of art cannot be separated from its *Überschreiten*, literally its over-stepping. In that it is not real reconciliation, real transcendence of the unreconciled world, the lament that is gathered and that points beyond itself, is not the whole truth. As "expression […]," it cannot extricate itself from that fact that it is, "*a priori* imitation [*Nachmachung*]" (GS7: 178/ AT: 117). But at the same time, the movement of mimesis can become aware of the compulsion towards the *scheinlos* as the answer to an historical need, it can, as Adorno puts it, determine and negate precisely what is contingent about this excess that aggravates the seemingly (*scheinbar*) gapless unity: that it arises in and through an historical nexus that could be otherwise. Thus the idea of art, undoubtedly tied to the idea of mimesis, must be a kind of regulative striving after the negation of the illusory moments in its presentation. It must negate, that is, the unreality (*Unwirklichkeit*) of what it displays and, following an insight that Kant was already familiar with, present nature *as if* it were not created by subjectivity or spirit at all.[10] This accounts for why, in Adorno's formulation, the paradox of art is centered on the question of "how […] making [can] bring into appearance [*erscheinen lassen*] what is not the result of making; how […] what according to its own concept is not true [can] nevertheless be true" (GS7: 164/ AT: 107). Likewise, it helps us to conceive of why Adorno insists that it is not nature that artworks

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[10] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 307. It is fascinating to consider that Kant made this insight, doubtless with a sensibility for natural beauty, even though, in almost every respect, artworks of the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries came nowhere near embodying this ideal of unintentional presentation (*Darstellung*). Indeed, the great art that was emerging in this period was the strongest affirmation of subjectivity the bourgeois era would offer—the sublime in its original form. For more on Kant's seemingly prescient modernism, see Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in *The Collected Essays and Criticisms: Modernism with a Vengeance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85-94.

imitate, but rather "natural beauty in itself [*das Naturschöne an sich*]" (GS7: 113/AT: 72, translation modified). With their secularization artworks become aware that they are not the in-itself, that they are indeed something made. Thus punished, as it were, for the sin of being semblance and play, they can only aim to make nature's "muteness eloquent [*zum Sprechen zu bringen*] " (GS7: 121/ AT: 78), not become nature's voice itself. Precisely this firm denial of mendacity is the force of their critique.

Furthermore, that they are not the in-itself and ought not delude themselves with contending that they can capture the pure object, or pure, *unmediated* expression, grounds this rescue of the aura as the manifestation of mimetic transformation. It reveals that speaking for repressed nature remains the product of a partly veiled or covered over (*zugehängte*) presentation. We enter into a radical shift in mimetic comportment, then, because the weight of an historically catastrophic, contrapurposive context impels artworks to abandon the embodiment of what Adorno describes as their guilt over not recognizing the guilt of semblance (GS7: 240/ AT: 160). To speak and thus become, as he indicates above, an act of *non-dominating* spirit, i.e., an act that still generates a certain critical—though different—type of distance from what is merely the case, requires that something of Benjamin's conception of the moving spirit, the auratic breath, spring back up amidst even the most reified or hardened relations.

It is not for nothing that, in a parallel manner, Benjamin describes the musical drive for redemption in terms that echo the etymological root of the aura. Such a rescue literally signifies the breath one might blow into an instrument to bring it to sound (*Ton*). Speaking or becoming eloquent, lending voice (*ertönen lassen*) to nature's betrayal, is a kind of rescue of the life that lives precisely because it wants to escape the shackles of forced subservience. Anything else would undermine the concept of life: "as a mere stimulus [*Reiz*], [it] no longer stimulates." (GS4:

270/ MM: 238). Yet this remnant of life is, importantly, not guided by the old dichotomization of spirit (*Geist*) and nature, the former conceived as what somehow animates without empirical substrate. Bearing in mind that this critical reformulation of the concept of spirit is, rather, attuned to the nonsensuous similarity at play prior to the outright subject-object split, we can understand why Adorno quotes the following letter from his correspondence with Benjamin in *Aesthetic Theory*:

> My concept of objective and at the same time highly political style and writing is this: to focus on what is denied to the word; only where this sphere of the wordless discloses itself with unutterably pure force can a magical spark spring between word and dynamic act, unifying them. Only the intensive aiming of words toward the nucleus of the innermost muteness can be effective. (GS7: 304/ AT: 205)

What is not quoted from this letter is Benjamin's mention of the alleged "un-*mediated*" aspect of this magic that, as we saw concerning the "History" essay, animates the mimetic microcosm of the moment of revolutionary possibility.[11] We can see why Adorno would argue that this tendency at once runs counter to Benjamin's critical impulse, and is likely a "remnant from his theological phase" (GS6: 30/ ND: 19), but is also a promise of something more. A better dialectical sensitivity for the dynamic of mimesis would, insofar as it tries to salvage the particular, follow Benjamin in terms of the rescue of magic as that which is bound up with the "denial," dissonance, or interruption in the linguistic intentionality. Yet it would also have to do so by trying to think mediation to its furthest consequence, i.e., as having an inextricable moment of subjectivity—one that nonetheless avoids reducing the objective, universal constellation to that subjectivity. Thus Adorno draws attention to the paradoxical tension in Benjamin's

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[11] The extended passage prior to what Adorno quotes reads as follows: "I can understand writing as such as poetic, prophetic, objective in terms of its effect, but in any case only as magical, that is as un-*mediated* [*un*-mittel-*bar*] Every salutary effect, indeed every effect not inherently devastating, that any writing may have resides in its (the word's, language's) mystery. In however many forms language may prove to be effective, it will not be so through the transmission of content, but rather through the purest disclosure of its dignity and its nature" (Benjamin, *The Correspondences of Walter Benjamin*, 80; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 1, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henre Lonitz (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), 326.

description as threatening to regress to a Wittgensteinian positivism (GS7: 304/ AT: 205).

Positivism and mysticism have their unmistakable link in false immediacy. At the same time, this

very tension of mediation, often called the aporia of mimesis and construction by Adorno (GS7:

176/ AT: 115), is registered in artworks, in particular those that follow out the dynamic of

mimesis striving after its idea of reconciliation. "In art, universals are strongest where art most

closely approaches language," writes Adorno,

> that is, when something speaks [*etwas sagt*], that, by speaking, goes beyond [*übersteigt*] the here
> and now. Art succeeds at such transcendence [*Transzendenz*], however, only by virtue of its
> tendency toward radical particularization [*Besonderung*]; that is, only in that it says nothing but
> what it says by virtue of its own elaboration, through its immanent process. The moment that in art
> resembles language [*sprachähnliche Moment*] is its mimetic element; it only becomes universally
> eloquent [*beredt*] in the specific stirring [*spezifischen Regung*], by its opposition to the universal.
> The paradox that art says it and at the same time does not say it, is because the mimetic element by
> which it says it, the opaque and particular, at the same time resists speaking. (GS7: 305/ AT: 205,
> translation modified)

We have seen in many variations that mimesis is, in Adorno's words, "an attitude (*Stellung*)

toward reality this side [*diesseits*] of the fixed antithesis [*Gegenübersetzung*] of subject and

object" (GS7: 169/ AT: 110, translation modified). But this does not signify that mimetic

impulses can or should want to steer clear of being objectified into a type of language. That they

are formed, that they are and are not the mimesis of immediate experience,[12] in short, that they

are doubled with the help of technique and a constructive subjectivity, points once more to the

mediated character of this attempt to speak or become eloquent. Such "resemblance to language"

does not mean, therefore, that mimetic comportment literally copies the syntactical structure of,

say, a preface, warrant, and conclusion—far from it. It rather means that the mimetic element

captures something closer to what we have observed Benjamin and Adorno describe as the

language of things: their *Sprachcharakter*. Now we can add that this mute, unintentional

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[12] Adorno tersely expresses this double bind of mimetic objectification as follows: "The spirit of artworks is their objectified mimetic comportment: it is opposed to mimesis and at the same time the form that mimesis takes in art" GS7: 424/ AT 285, translation modified).

language, is entwined with speaking to an otherwise, to the *Schein* of transcendence that the aura always promised. In the most extreme concentration of particularity, something universal, unconditional, shines forth.

The fact that something truly universal, indeed truly registering the *objective* tensions in the historical present, negatively comes to the fore by way of the opaque, veiled or particular, suggests that the rescue of the concept of spirit (*Geist*) cannot be thought, let alone enacted artistically, save through the recognition of something that is natural in it. This is why Adorno makes reference to the specific *Regung*, the stirring or emotion, in the same context that he attempts to salvage a spirit (*Geist*) that, despite everything, still promises freedom. Spirit, once thought to be that which rises above such a *Regung*, is now exclusively present, as if by "second reflection,"[13] when, through an "immanent process," it humbly recognizes its inseparability from the natural moment. What creates the *Speilraum*, the spirit of distancing that is not just play, as Benjamin once claimed, but also a mimetic response to the seriousness of suffering, and thus promises a true elevation as yet only feigned, is that comportment which reveals the historical truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) of the presentation. The truth-content that propels the beautiful beyond itself, is, in other words, not just what is presented, the content; on the contrary, it is what, in the moment, defiantly says No to the ideology of the present's harmony, at once the "beyond [*Jenseits*] [of] the *Schein* of what appears [*Erscheinenden*]" (GS7: 424/ AT: 284), and that which accords with a "potential freedom" (GS7: 291/ AT 195). Against Hegel, who,

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[13] For more on this concept of "second reflection" (*zweite Reflexion*), see GS10.2: 742/ SO: 246 and GS6: 54/ ND: 44. Adorno's use of this concept implies that thinking comes to parallel the humbling process of mimesis and relinquishes its arrogant claim to absolutism. It is often translated as "a" second reflection, but Adorno does not use the indefinite article. He is rather implying something far more universal to which critical thought as a whole is capable of ascending, much like Kant's momentous Copernican turn. Thus, once more refusing to give up on the capacity of thinking to embrace a sublation that is less violent and can sense its own blindspots, he claims, "[s]ubject in its self-positing [*Selbstsetzung*] is semblance [*Schein*] and at the same time something historically exceedingly real. It contains the potential for the sublation of its own domination [*Aufhebung seiner eigenen Herrschaft*]" (GS10.2: 755/ SO: 256).

according to Adorno, missed the true sublation (*Aufhebung*) of nature, the natural element must

be preserved, not wholly liquidated in the phantasm of absolute spirit (GS7: 118/ AT: 76).

II. Secularized Magic and the Life that does not Live: Resisting the Spell of the Beautiful

In the hope of avoiding the reduction of this critique of mimesis as refusal to a

contentless abstraction, we need to further ask what this natural moment really consists of, and

how taking hold of it corresponds with an historically specific, mimetic sensitivity. Already

implied in Chapter Two and the previous reference to Benjamin's early theory of language, a

kind of secularized recapitulation of magic is indispensible to the mimetic trace of this natural

element. As much as art, as enlightenment, is "allergic" to magic because of its root in delusional

efficaciousness, it is also dependent on it for its survival (GS7: 86/ AT: 54). Unlike the

commodified entertainment of the culture industry, which obeys the logic of the *Verdinglichung*

of all that exists into mere means, art is impelled to enchant, to cause "wonder [*Staunen*]" (GS7:

191/ AT: 126), by virtue of its unwillingness to participate in the "bad" universal of perpetual

praxis and self-preservation.

> Art is animated [*bewegt*] by the fact that its enchantment [*Zauber*], a vestige of its magical
> [*magischen*] phase, is constantly repudiated as unmediated sensuous [*unmittelbare sinnliche*] by
> the progressive disenchantment of the world, yet without its ever being possible finally to
> obliterate [*ausradiert*] this magical element. Only in it is art's mimetic character preserved, and its
> truth is the critique [*kraft der Kritik*] that, by its sheer existence, it levels at a rationality that has
> become absolute. Emancipated from its claim to reality, magic [*Zauber*] is itself part of
> enlightenment: its *Schein* disenchants [*entzaubert*] the disenchanted [*entzauberte*] world. This is
> the dialectical ether in which art today takes place. The renunciation of any claim to truth by the
> preserved [*bewahrten*] magical element marks out the terrain of aesthetic *Schein* and aesthetic
> truth (GS7: 92-93/ AT: 58, translation modified).

The conflict and aporia of this contemporary stage of mimesis consists in being impelled to seek

the disenchantment of what is still enchanted by the omnipresence of the "phenomenal

appearance" of the commodity, what Marx already called the "false semblance [*Schein*]." [14] Only

in such disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) does it, paradoxically, enchant (*verzaubert*). Or, to state

it differently, only in committing itself to an inconsolable refusal of all so-called reality—in truth

the afterimage of social relations of production [15]—does it actually animate (*bewegt*) or quicken [16]

what has been ruthlessly hardened and mechanized in historical development. Insofar as it moves

(*bewegt*), it apparently has a chance of igniting "objective expression," which "the sensorium

was perhaps once conscious of in the world and which now subsists only in formations

(*Gebilde*)" (GS7: 171/ AT: 112, translation modified). Even though it is the case that the original

instantiation of magic's sensuous immediacy is contradicted by the civilization that ruthlessly

stamps it out, this does not entail that something of the magic spark, the "life-element"

(*Lebenselement*) that finds recourse amidst the "*Unwillkürlichen*" (GS7: 174/ AT: 114), does not

survive, preserved in the metamorphosis of mimesis.

Understandably, this new, particularly modern, attempt to capture objective, mediated

expression, is described in the same context as mimetic *Vollzug* (GS7: 171, AT: 112), i.e.,

mimetic consummation, fulfillment or achievement—the precise term that was previously

employed in Adorno's description of the successful gesture of transcendence. Both depictions

locate the potential transformation of mimesis, in which its *Schein* is no longer simply illusion,

but also, "art's methexis in truth" (GS7: 166/ AT: 108). As much, then, as Adorno is concerned,

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[14] Marx, *Capital* 1, 187/ *Werke* 23, 107.

[15] Jay Bernstein clarifies what Adorno means when he refers to the "empirical reality" that artworks oppose. It never signifies the in-itself, but rather the false appearance that omnipresent commodification fosters. It thus connotes something that is simultaneously empirical and not empirical, for even the *Schein* of the commodified world is, of course, grounded in the empirical social processes. See Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 205.

[16] The resonance with Kant's description of the sublime is difficult to escape here. The very term that Kant uses to describe the mind "moving" in the representation of the sublime is *Bewegung*. It is also significant to mention that the movement of enlightenment expressed in the banishment or migration of a mimesis that attempts to embrace the sublimity of the shudder is prefigured in Kant's depiction as well. See *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 258: "The mind feels itself moved [*bewegt*] in the representation of the sublime in nature, while in the aesthetic judgment on the beautiful in nature it is in calm contemplation. This movement [*Bewegung*] (especially in its inception) may be compared to a shudder [*Erschütterung*], i.e., to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object" (translation modified).

following Benjamin, about any claims of progress, he maintains that the developments in mimetic productions can neither dispense with the concept of progress nor affirm it definitively (GS7: 310/ AT: 209). If this problem of thinking progress without selling it out to domination's ideological terms of "progress" were not inscribed in art's task, then there would be no way of conceiving a divergence from the passive lineage which suppresses the vestige of life, instead of harnessing its potential. What Adorno also defines as the potential for mimetic "modification" must be (GS7: 172/ AT: 113), accordingly, guided by the progressive attempt to unveil the excess that gives rise to the veil of the beautiful in the first place. In short, it has to take hold of the shudder that we have observed is the condition of the movement of enlightenment and the continual reminder that the reconciliation between nature and spirit is not yet.

Turning our attention, then, to an investigation of how this shudder is actively incorporated into the comportment of mimesis helps to further elucidate both where mimesis stands presently, and what it tries to elicit as a possibility for experience by taking hold of the present constellation. To be more specific, it lays the grounds for the expansion of the concept of the beautiful into a critical movement that can no longer be separated from the concept of the sublime.

We observed in Chapter Two that the primordial shudder is, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, what first inaugurates the movement of enlightenment. The shudder is not, however, simply what jolts prehistoric man from his original unity with nature. It is also what sets in motion the formation of a subjectivity that is potentially indistinguishable from the mastery of formalism and abstraction, forsaking nonsensuous similarity in favor of the "equivalence" of socially necessary labor time. What we have only implied heretofore is that this attempt to assuage natural terror immanent to mimesis is thoroughly tied to the first productions

of the beautiful. In Adorno's terms, "beauty is not the platonically pure beginning but rather something that originated in the renunciation [*Absage*] of what was once feared." (GS7: 77/ AT: 47). What exactly is the fear that is renounced? To repeat our previous observation, it is the "fear of the overpowering, wholeness and undifferentiatedness [*Ungeschiedenen*] of nature" (GS7: 82/ AT: 51). Thus the history of the beautiful, thoroughly bound up with this formalization and abstraction, attempts to erect itself through nothing other than the act of driving out the qualitatively unmasterable. This does not mean, however, that it wholly fails to achieve something positive. The progress of civilization is, to be sure, always accompanied by regression, but the reverse, at least in terms of possibility, is also the case. Central to understanding the dynamic of the beautiful as the index of the dynamic of mimesis, this formalization of mimesis shows us that the beautiful, which, to state it differently, abjects[17] the ugly, is to a certain degree, despite its repression, initially successful at mitigating the spell that rules over experience. That is, it succeeds to some extent at combating the mythology that unwittingly perpetuates terror as fate.

From yet another angle, then, we can see that the concept of the beautiful cannot remain static. For this original accomplishment of combating the spell by taking hold of the play moment in identity—the "smallest transition [*kleinster Übergang*]" distinguishing it from cultic production (GS7: 83/ AT: 52)—no longer combats the spell with the same success. "Beauty is the spell over the spell, and the spell [*Bann*] passes itself [*vererbt sich*] on to the beautiful" (GS7: 77/ AT: 47, translation modified). In spite of the battle it wages, when left to its original

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[17] For more on the relationship between the abject and the beautiful and sublime see Julia Kristeva, *The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 13; Tina Chanter, *The Picture of Abjection: Film, Fetish, and the Nature of Difference* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008). In addition, the interconnection between Adorno, mimesis, and feminist psychoanalysis is delineated in Elaine P. Miller, "Negativity, Iconoclasm, Mimesis: Kristeva and Benjamin on Political Art," Idealistic *Studies* 38 (2008): 55-74; Lastly, an excellent collection of essays on Adorno and his relation to feminism can be found in Renée Heberle, ed. *Feminist Interpretations of Adorno* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2006).

comportment, the formalism of the beautiful fails to realize that the shudder can really only truly

be assuaged by remembering it, not repressing it. If it can only manage the feeble attempt of the

latter, it will be doomed to vengefully deflect its rage onto the empirical world as the

manifestation of a mimesis repressing all subject-object intimacy.[18] In short, it will, like a

disease, inherit (*vererbt sich*) the spell, instead of transcending it, as its first productions fraily

(*schwach*) promised. Thus the initial form of the mimetic act of protest (*Einspruch*) comes to

undermine itself, comes to undermine its immanent end.

This dialectical reversal helps us to grasp why Adorno declares that, "[t]he anamnesis of

freedom in natural beauty deceives because it seeks freedom in the old unfreedom. Natural

beauty is myth transposed into the imagination and thus, perhaps, requited" (GS7: 104/ AT: 66).

Everything rests on the "perhaps" (*vielleicht*) of this passage. With it we can once again recall

the "fragility" of the dynamic of mimesis as it enters into a mediated, historical relation. Subject

formation, with its synthesis of the manifold that passes through the imaginative faculty, could,

with a playfully free relation to its sensuous impressions, become active for the first time, and

thus promise to do away with myth as the passive perpetuation of terror. But it could just as well

lose grip of the objective constellation, devolve into "empty play" (GS7: 283/ AT: 190), and thus

fail at the task of opening up a critical distance via critical force (*Gewalt*). It could, that is to say,

fall short by refusing to admit of its relation to the sublime shudder that would unhinge the

disavowal of its animality. In the face of an historical devastation propagated by arrogance, the

blinding self-certainty of closing itself off to this natural element not only comes to look all the

more desperate, but, "gnawing" at the *appearance* of harmony each step of the way, it ultimately

reverses into its opposite and becomes the ugly (GS7: 77/ AT: 47). Hence Adorno argues that the

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[18] Cf. Max Horkheimer conception of the "revolt of nature" that results from this violence against mimesis in Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, "The Revolt of Nature," 63-87.

greatest fear is that the shudder would no longer be felt (GS7: 124/AT: 80). A beauty that does not radicalize itself and go beyond its "own tendency" (GS7: 83/ AT: 51), threatens to be aligned with this shudder-repressing violence of domination, however much it may have once glimmered. Since it essentially affirms the present condition, it serves as a tool, indeed the medicinal "shot in the arm" of "tired businesspeople,"[19] and thus a symbol of the perpetuation of self-preservation, instead of the possibility of a world beyond the exploitation of surplus labor-time.

For a mimesis that is immersed in the historical details, it is nearly impossible to miss this phantasm of formal beauty. In fact, the very act of recognizing the illusoriness of the beautiful is a stirring, second order reminder that the shudder has not as yet been pacified. Hence the shudder is originally, to repeat, "a reaction to the cryptically shut," but, after the mythological shudder causes the historical bifurcation of subject and object, the shudder also becomes, "a mimetic comportment reacting mimetically to abstractness." (GS7: 38/ AT: 20). In this respect, the contemporary stage of mimesis serves both as a reminder that abstractness, the instrument subsuming difference under sameness, has not actually mastered what it set out to master, and that the subject and object still exist in a non-identical relation of tension. Subjects ought to be utterly convulsed out of themselves, so to speak, shocked by the overwhelming irrationality of a tautological condition that reduces the potential feast day to a supplication for crumbs. In view of the nightmarish success of administered society, mimesis responds, it follows its own impulse, altering itself so as to conjure up the quivering life whose recognition is the sole avenue to unlocking the shackles of the identitarian spell. Another way of saying this is that contemporary mimesis is compelled to take something of this false abstractness into itself. It becomes, as we have already seen, the mimesis of the hardened and alienated, in order to expose the abstractness

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[19] Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted," 248.

that will not allow of anything other than hardness and alienation. If abstractness, as alienation, is the tool perpetuating sameness—domination—then perhaps the most progressive mimetic response to it is manifest in those great moments in modern art such as Beckett's or Alban Berg's refusal to present any pivotal or decisive action.[20] That *nothing happens* and yet the force of the nexus contracts into moments of anticipation repeatedly frustrated, speaks negatively to the absurdity of *how it is*. The 'will it ever happen'[21] is a shudder against an abstraction that demonically says no. The anticipation of anticipation is all that remains in this microcosm of the dead, meaningless world. Yet monotony calls out monotony and, like the flickering note that escapes the web of the whole, shudders one into awakening from hell.

This, of course, once again places us before a recognition of the critical transformation of mimesis, in contrast to its static instantiation as formal, symmetrical beauty, or still worse, its hypostatized version exploited by National Socialism or the culture industry. As we will address more fully in Chapter Four, but can begin to illustrate now, this insistence that the continual reverberation of a subject-object tension be heard, is a shift, echoing the earlier analysis of Benjamin, towards the demand for the sublime. In the first half of what is perhaps the most decisive depiction of the dynamic of mimesis that Adorno offers, we not only notice how the need for a modified mimesis is centered, first and foremost, on the historical predicament of experience, we also see that this modification, ostensibly opposed to bourgeois paranoia, is internally compelled to alter itself, lest it regress into its opposite.

> The world, which is objectively losing its openness [*Offenheit*], no longer has need of a spirit [*eines Geistes*] that is defined by its openness [*Offenen*]; indeed it can scarcely put up [*ertragen*] with the traces of that spirit. With regard to its subjective side, the contemporary loss of experience [*Erfahrungsverlust*] may largely coincide with the bitter repression of mimesis [*Verdrängung der Mimesis*] that takes the place of its metamorphosis [*Verwandlung*]. What in

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[20] Cf. GS6: 368 / ND: 375. Adorno also discusses this notion of "idle waiting" that registers the poverty of metaphysical experience in the context of Beckett's conclusion to *Godot* (GS7: 52/ AT: 30).

[21] Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-garde" in The Continental Aesthetics Reader, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 453-464, 453.

various sectors of German ideology is still called an artistic sensibility [*musisch*] is just this repression of mimesis raised to a principle, and devolves into artistic insensibility [*und geht über ins Amusische*]. Aesthetic comportment [*Ästhetisches Verhalten*], however, is neither immediately [*unmittelbar*] mimesis nor its repression but rather the process that mimesis gives birth to [*entbindet*] and in which, modified [*modifiziert sich*], mimesis is preserved. This process transpires equally in the relation of the individual to art as in the historical macrocosm; it congeals [*geronnen*] in the immanent movement of each and every artwork, in its tensions [*Spannungen*] and in their possible resolution [*Ausgleich*]. (GS7: 489-490/ AT: 331, translation modified)

The interconnection between a redeemed, non-dominating spirit and the openness described in the first lines of this passage can now be more fully understood. The manner that we have described mimesis has always implied this openness and spirit, because, unlike bourgeois subjectivity, which desires to make everything similar to itself, mimesis attempts to lose itself, so to speak, in an immersion with that which is other to it. It is, in fact, openness *par excellence*, for it lets go of the self-preservative inclination and embraces the unmasterability of what is non-identical to itself, in contrast to cowering or closing itself off to the enigma (*Rätsel*).[22] When Adorno, therefore, mentions the loss of experience (*Erfahrungsverlust*), the reason he suggests it is caused by an unrelenting repression of mimesis is that the impulse most proper to mimesis drives it to maintain this task of, as it were, peering through the economy of the Same. Arguably nowhere better than in *Minima Moralia* does Adorno describe this decay of experience. The whole text might be described as an effort to illustrate the melancholic (*traurig*) betrayal involved in an historical experience that no longer strives after the good life.[23] To the degree that culture is a kind of second-nature mimetic reflection of first nature, it too should promise the beyond of terror that we have witnessed is constitutive of the aura. Previously inscribed in culture, i.e., the mimetic productions of the past, Adorno describes this loss of a sense that an

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[22] See the section entitled "Enigmaticalness, Truth Content, Metaphysics (*Rätselcharakter, Wahrheitsgehalt, Metaphysik*)" in *Aesthetic Theory* (GS7: 179/ AT: 118).

[23] In the dedication to *Minima Moralia* Adorno declares, "[t]he melancholy [*traurige*] science from which I make this offering to my friend relates to a region that from time immemorial was regarded as the true [*eigentliche*] field of philosophy, but which, since the latter's conversion into method, has lapsed into intellectual neglect, sententious whimsy [*Willkür*] and finally oblivion: the teaching of the good life [*richtigen Leben*]" (GS4: 13/ MM:15); See also Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

otherwise is possible, that happiness and freedom might one day be realized, as the weakening

of a humanness that results from "omnipresent" (*Allgegenwart*) commodification (GS4: 165/

MM: 146). This is not to say that humanness is hypostatized as that which is already present,

ripped from the "convoluted time [*verschränkte Zeit*],"[24] from the openness that, like Janus or

like Proust, could meaningfully interweave past, present and future together. Following Marx, in

Adorno's view the "human is not yet"; both the words and the nature they represent are

mimetically doubled into the "movement of humaneness," into eloquent language, and, having

passed through the imagination, cannot be essentialized (GS7: 178/ AT: 117). Mimetic

production, like natural beauty, also promises the "more," beyond, or "rift [*Bruch*]" (GS4:165/

MM: 146) between what is and what could be, but, with the increasing mechanization of life, this

promise is increasingly betrayed or closed. The "sense of freedom" is fading.[25] Although

mimesis could be transformed (*verwandelt*) into that which recognizes the spiritual, constructive

or subjective moment in its struggle with enlightenment, the totalizing mastery of domination

succeeds at drawing even mimetic imagination into its vortex.

The philistine is perhaps more aware than the initiate of this experience that parallels the

beautiful no longer shining. Contrary to the self-righteous praise of artistic sensibility bestowed

by cultural conservatism, the former mocks the seriousness with which the operatic singer sings

a washed-up aria of Bizet's. What might once have conjured up, as Nietzsche observed, all the

health and vigor of the "southern," warm-weather feeling of happiness,[26] now looks almost

ridiculous, conventional. Such conservative "sensibility" (*musisch*), equally manifest in pop

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[24] See Shierry Weber Nicholsen's analysis of convoluted time, *Exact Imagination*, 168-173.
[25] T.W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, trans. Rodney Livingston (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2006), 7; Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit* in *Nachgelassenen Schriften*, vol. 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag, 2001),13-14.
[26] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 158.

music's pre-digested, anti-mimetic or formulaic patterns, reverses into its opposite: insensibility (*Amusische*). To what do both of these instantiations, equally scars of the present, "torn halves of an integral freedom" (CC: 130),[27] become insensible, or, more generally, what do they prematurely stifle? The answer is once again the modification of mimesis.

Sensing that the normativity immanent to mimetic behavior from the start does not need to be relinquished, the most progressive form of aesthetic mimetic comportment is compelled to speak against this frustrated movement of nonaesthetic[28] mimesis, i.e., experience. This explains why in the above passage Adorno maintains that mimetic comportment is "neither immediately (*unmittelbar*) mimesis nor its repression but rather the process that mimesis gives birth to (*entbindet*) and in which, modified (*modifiziert sich*), mimesis is preserved." As we have repeatedly witnessed, mimesis sets in motion the work of cognition, technical subjectivity,[29] even the abstraction that seems diametrically opposed to it. But this does not mean that these developments are heteronomous to mimesis, or that they need only be in the service of domination. In the successful artistic presentation, once the mimetic impulses are objectified, or,

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[27] It is important to acknowledge that the reference to a composer like Bizet does not exactly cohere to the distinction that Adorno is trying to make in this famous letter. There, his main argument is that, as we will see in the Conclusion, autonomous works also bear an impurity of articulation that is normally only attributed to commodified works. Both sides spring from the wrong world. Hence understanding this claim about what could be called the *Trauer* of autonomy in the context of a work—say, *Carmen*—that was once autonomously generated, but has now become incorporated into the staleness of mass production, all the more starkly concentrates the urgency of finding language through the free flow of mimetic imagination.

[28] I am drawing on Christoph Menke's distinction between aesthetic and nonaesthetic experience. As with Menke, the argument is not that there is a strict separation between these spheres, rather, this is merely a conceptual distinction that highlights the problem of autonomy. Said another way, it is not as if mundane experience, philosophy, or rationality are devoid of a mimetic or aesthetic moment, it is simply that the trajectory of enlightenment conceived in instrumental terms has forgotten this mimetic or aesthetic moment, such that there are now only certain areas where the latter is permitted to speak in banishment. See Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art*, 3-27.

[29] Along these lines of the essential link between mimesis and technology, Salvador Desideri concludes his essay, "The Mimetic Bond," 120, with this highly provacative, anti-Heideggarian statement: "Even in the memory of its origin, the essence of technology is confimred as something technological." Contrast this to Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 4.

as Adorno also describes it, "sublimated"[30] into form (GS7: 489/ AT: 331), it becomes clear that

what is represented *is and is not mimesis*. It is mimesis because in order to eloquently capture

these impulses in a fleeting, trembling image, the artwork had to first listen to the objectivity

whose unreconciled state is sensed in the mimesis immediately vibrating in the subject-object

relation. "What is essentially mimetic awaits [*erwartet*] mimetic comportment" (GS7: 190/ AT:

125). That is to say, the artistic production had to first follow the matter itself, the compulsion of

the object, it had to listen to where immediate mimetic experience perhaps wanted to go of its

own accord. Yet, because of the necessity of stepping into appearance (*in Erscheinung zu treten*),

the presentation is also not wholly mimetic in this immediate sense. Because it becomes, in part,

the form that neutralizes and transforms this immediacy, mimesis is always already spiritualized.

A mimesis that, with the help of spirit, assuages domination (GS7: 202/ AT: 134), is thus the

preservation or sublation of mimesis, in contrast to its all too common repression. *Despite and*

because of its objectification, something of the more immediate relation to nature can be

preserved, or shine through the dialectics called to a halt in form. Insofar as the artistic

comportment no longer represses, it is propelled towards the shudder, whether in individual or

historical terms.

In keeping with the above logic, as Adorno continues this thread from "Theories on the

Origin of Art," he proceeds to link mimesis directly to what is excessive to the subjective spell,

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[30] Compare this use of sublimation to Joel Whitebook's claim in "Weighty Objects: On Adorno's Kant-Freud Interpretation" in *Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, 51-78. In my estimation, Whitebook's central claim, namely that the missing term in Adorno's corpus is sublimation, is off the mark. Adorno does not neglect sublimation, he rather tries to think beyond it by understanding it as an essential "moment," but not the, as it were, catch-all term that would signify genuine enlightenment. The confusion might rest on the fact that when Adorno rehabilitates the concept of spirit (*Geist*), he often implies something like a type of sublimation. But as I have tried to depict above, spirit or sublimation, form in the broadest sense, does not encapsulate the whole of the artwork, let alone experience. Tom Huhn seems to better grasp Adorno's insistence on a oscillation between sublimation and that which exceeds it, when, in the same collection of essays, he remarks that because of an appeal to the dialectic of mimesis and the artwork as objectification, "Adorno's thinking might be described as the attempt to hold thoughts without mastering or being subsumed by them" ("Introduction: Thoughts Beside Themselves," 17). Such a thinking is one that needs sublimation, but does not attribute such a dominant role to it; that needs objectification via rationality but not at the expense of the *a priori* mimetic moment in that rationality.

while simultaneously showing its progressive attempt to gesture to the possibility of

reconciliation as transcendence. Thus mimesis does not merely await (*erwartet*) mimetic

comportment, it anticipates (*erwartet*) the mimetic comportment to come:

> Ultimately, aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder [*zu erschauern*], as if goose bumps [*Gänsehaut*] were the first aesthetic image [*Bild*]. What later came to be called subjectivity, freeing itself from the blind anxiety of the shudder [*blinden Angst des Schauers*], is at the same time the shudder's own development [*Entfaltung*]; life [*Leben*] in the subject is nothing but what shudders it, the reaction [*Reaktion*] to the total spell [*Bann*] that transcends the spell. Consciousness without shudder [*Schauer*] is reified consciousness [*verdinglichte*]. That shudder in which subjectivity stirs [*sich regt*] without yet being subjectivity is the act of being touched by the other [*Anderen Angerührtsein*]. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to [*bildet sich an*] that other rather than subordinating it [*sich untertan zu machen*]. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins [*vermählt*] eros and knowledge [*Erkenntnis*]. (GS7: 489-490/ AT: 331)

Taking into account the fact that Adorno insists on an objective aesthetics, we can understand

why this capacity to shudder, contrasted to reified consciousness, is not exclusively or even

primarily a description of the receptivity of the viewer. As the site of the doubling of historical

unrest, an *as if* subjectivity yet to come, it is rather the work itself that shudders, regardless of

whether anyone would listen. The centrality of goose bumps is important to grasping the

dynamic of mimesis because, as something that happens to one's skin (*Haut*), they remind us

that it is the body that stirs, that has life (*Leben*), not the disembodied illusion of pure spirit. An

animal too could shudder. Yet, unlike the animal, and in contrast to the beautiful that itself

becomes the inherited spell, the life that is roused in aesthetic comportment promises to

transcend the spell that kills life. This is why subjectivity comes to nothing if it cannot recognize

the object in it, if it misses the fact that it is not the self-identical subject it once thought itself to

be.

What is more, the fact that this mimesis is a specific reaction (*Reaktion*) highlights the

historical character of its comportment. If the spell did not reign over reality, if totality did not

delude itself to the point of viciously liquidating virtually every trace of particularity, then

mimesis could presumably comport itself differently. Adorno even admits that perhaps the "vertical dimension," i.e., harmony, could one day return to music (GS7: 61/ AT: 37). We are far from this state of affairs, however. As the above passage hints, having the resolve to let go of subjectivity *through* subjective strength is dependent on what Adorno calls "the mimesis of myth" (GS7: 80/ AT: 50). That is to say, mimetically doubling the mythical moment prior to the reign of subjectivity in experience, when, like the first bars of the Ninth Symphony,[31] subjectivity has only just begun to stir, not only calls forth the ancient shudder, it also spurs the shudder that lives today. "Artworks bear expression," writes Adorno in a similar context, "not where they communicate the subject, but rather where they reverberate with the protohistory [*Urgeschichte*] of subjectivity…. This is the affinity of the artwork to the subject and it endures because this protohistory survives in the subject and recommences in every moment of history" (GS7: 171/ AT: 113). To avoid communicating the subject, expressing something opaque, prior to-, or beyond that subject, is the same process as the act of being touched by the other. Adorno's language is, as always, not accidental. This act of being touched by the other (*Angerührtsein*) employs the German verb *anrühren*. We know, in other words, that we are speaking of the sublime unveiling, because following the trajectory of *Entkunstung*, the subject is now, with the assistance of a transformed mimesis, touched by objectivity, instead of simply holding that object of nature at a unique distance. This also grounds why Adorno is very careful to distinguish between the alleged identity "of" the non-identical from the identity "with" the non-identical (GS7: 202/ AT: 134).[32] The latter signifies the assimilation to or nestling up (*anschmiegen*) with

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[31] Cf. GS7: 163/ AT 107: "the paradox of the *tour de force* in Beethoven's work could be presented: that out of nothing something develops [*daß aus nichts etwas wird*], the aesthetically incarnate test [*ästhetisch-leibhafte Probe*] of the first steps of Hegel's logic."

[32] See Andrew Bowie, "Adorno, Heidegger, and the Meaning of Music in Against the Heidegger" in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, 248-278, 263. In light of our analysis, Bowie appears to be wrong when he claims that Adorno's "suspicion [about the schematism reducing difference to the sameness or convention of the culture industry] results from a tendency to conflate different senses of identity." The manner in which mimesis is a type of

this other, in contrast to the subsumption or mastery of it. To claim an identification *of* the non-identical, as if such a thing were possible, would be to maintain the illusion of control that at this stage still defines knowledge as hostile to peace.[33] Letting go of such a pretension, acknowledging the essential relationship between subject and object is not only what would transform or sublate mimesis, it would alter knowledge itself, uniting it for the first time with *eros*. Adorno's question is thus, just as we asked at the end of Chapter Two, what becomes of aesthetic comportment once it recognizes this more fundamentally sublime relation to nature?

III. Concrete Developments of Semblance in Music: The Bond Between Semblance and Play

One way to further pinpoint the tenor of an altered mimesis that increasingly recognizes its relation *with* the non-identical and the sublime is to describe what it is not. Grounded in the fear of death ultimately manifest as the inability to relinquish private property, the at once Egyptian and bourgeois desire for immortality must be anathema to a mimesis that is critically concerned with the antagonisms of the present (GS7: 48/ AT: 28). This is why Adorno frequently chides any conception of the pantheon of artworks (GS4: 83/ MM: 75). As if these antagonisms, their historical language (*Sprache*), would be the same in a different historical climate. As if artworks, especially today, should wish to express themselves merely for the sake of their own lasting expression. This also might be a point of divergence between Adorno and the post-

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identification, but one that nonethless avoids the *as*-structure of direct apophansis, shows that Adorno was, on the contrary, quite clear about the different modes of identity.

[33] This unwillingness to drop the desire for peace arguably marks a point of major difference between Adorno and the conception of power proffered by Foucault. See Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 50-51. See, also, Foucault's account of his relationship to the Frankfurt School in Foucault, *Foucault Live: Collected Interview, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 253.

structuralist appeal to a seemingly infinite iteration.[34] By virtue of their resistance to univocal meaning, works of art are, of course, true as indexes of enigmaticalness, non-judging judgments, but this does not mean that the particularity with which they become absorbed would speak, or would even want to speak, in a reconciled situation. Beckett's works are exemplary precisely because they do not want to exist. Mutilated experience gives rise to them, and every phrase they utter says: one day I should fall silent. The furious moment in *Endgame* when Hamm self-reflexively acknowledges the absurdity of the story—"will this never finish?"[35]—is perhaps the most arresting example of this.[36]

Another way of stating the same thing is to ask whether the will to perpetual iteration, arguably at work in the triumphalism of artworks and philosophy from the Greeks to late Romanticism, and perhaps still present in certain avant-gardist and poststructuralist tendencies, takes seriously Beckett's claim that artworks are a "desecration of silence" (GS7: 203/ AT 134). If we follow this concern for the desecration of silence, this imposition of semblance on that which is mute and not the product of subjective domination, then we can more acutely illustrate the, so to speak, dynamic curve of a mimesis undergoing an immanent decline in its element of *Schein*.

Although it is the case that in history music has on occasion lagged behind the most advanced consciousness of the dissolution of *Schein* (GS7: 13/ AT: 3), because of its link to questions concerning harmony, coherence (*Stimmigkeit*) and silence, understanding the historical development of music is especially helpful in illustrating how this mimetic modification of

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[34] For more on Adorno's relationship to poststructuralism, see Peter Dews, *The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Philosophy* (New York: Verso, 1995), 19-38.

[35] Samuel Beckett, *Endgame & Act Without Words* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 23.

[36] Cf. T.W Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, 241-275.

Schein unfolds. The following explication of the dynamic of mimesis will therefore proceed with particular attention paid to musical phenomena.

Along these musical lines, Gregg Horowitz has shown himself to be one of the more discerning readers of Adorno's work. Differing from much of the secondary literature, he gleans Adorno's conception of the interconnection between works of the past and the present in a manner that addresses the weight of a metaphysical experience that can no longer comfort itself with the claim of the world's positive meaning.[37] He does not neglect Adorno's view that, so long as the contradictions of industrial society persist or, in fact, become even more stark, metaphysical experience lends "the aesthetic concept of the modern its peculiar invariance" (GS7: 57/ AT: 34). Paralleling our position about the essential link between the mimesis of experience and its task of doubling itself in the aesthetic realm, Horowitz sites Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* as a model of critical response.[38] He rightly suggests that it captures the compulsion to unveil the historical and experiential truth driving Leverkühn or Schoenberg's[39] need to speak against the betrayal of Beethoven's promise. Gauging the truth content of a work of literature like *Faustus*, as opposed to a sociological historicism that identifies its mere content, is thus fundamentally linked to the, so to speak, mimetic measure or "seismographic record of traumatic shock [*seismographische Aufzeichnung traumatischer Schocks*]" (GS12: 47/ PNM:

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[37] With respect to finding meaning in a radically disenchanted, catastrophic world, and the consequence that this has on experience, Adorno writes the following in *Metaphysics: Concept and Problem*, 104; Adorno, *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, 162: "In face of the experiences we have had, not only through Auschwitz but through the introduction of torture as a permanent institution and through the atomic bomb – all these things form a kind of coherence, a hellish unity – in face of these experiences the assertion that what is has meaning, and the affirmative character which has been attributed to metaphysics almost without exception, become a mockery; and in the face of the victims it becomes downright immoral."

[38] Horowitz, "Art History and Autonomy," 282.

[39] Andrian Leverkühn, the protagonist of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, is acknowledge by the author to be based on Arthur Schoenberg. See Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Andrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Vintage Books, 1948).

37)[40] that would take seriously the objectifications gathered in the linguistic development of music (GS7: 193/ AT: 127). To state it differently, answering the question of why Beethoven can no longer wholly speak to our condition gives a striking answer to what is transpiring historically in mimesis.

If Adorno is right, the answer to this question must be grasped by addressing how the formal developments of artworks are, in actuality, "sedimented content" (GS7: 217/ AT: 144), that is, reflections upon their own mimetic reflection, upon their own formations. As our explication of the banished migration of mimesis has suggested, the very process that pushes form to loosen its coercion, to critique semblance and play as remainders of convention— collective compulsion—must be grasped not as something extraneous to history, but as emerging within it, yet not reducible to it. However destined for failure by virtue of its own impossible logic, mimesis is driven to become autonomously immersed in the present, ever-changing, objective constellation.

In view of this self-reflective drive for autonomy explicit for art as soon as experience is recognized as no longer being immediately mimetic, Adorno's question becomes in effect, like Leverkühn's, how can artworks in general, and music in particular, still have the audacity to utter their first phrase? "The contemporary problem faced by all artworks," indeed with far more pressure and guilt than tragic or baroque experience could feel, "[is] how to begin and how to close" (GS7: 156/ AT: 102). Given its entanglement or complicity with domination, does not the initial gesture, the breaking of the silence, as well as the climactic finale, look all the more preposterous? If works do not bear the weight of the betrayal of humanity's possible celebration, if they do not bear the "shame of still having air to breathe, in hell" (GS4: 29/ MM: 28), do they

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[40] Adorno often uses this metaphor of a seismograph. It is a fitting play on the significance of the role of the shudder for him. Mimesis is the seismograph that registers or records (*aufzeichnet*) the tension of historical antagonisms. See also, e.g.: GS7: 193/AT: 127.

not embody flight from the mimesis of objective spirit and thereby become consolation, instead

of critique? The force of Leverkühn's "it is not to be," his vow to "take back" the Ninth

Symphony[41] is not, in this respect, an extraneous prescription that springs from mere

idiosyncratic taste. The objective sorrow of nature's lament grounds its impulse. "For the sake of

happiness, happiness [*Glück*] is renounced [*abgesagt*]" (GS7: 26/ AT: 13). In Adorno's view, the

tensions stored up in the artistic material itself demand this denial of positive fulfillment, this

negative shift in expression for the sake of expression. Just as the latter therefore finds recourse

in the expressionless, in that which today is forced to virtually jolt one to a remembrance of the

silence that the politics of speed,[42] the insane rhythm of advanced capitalism, obliterates in its

incessant march forward, so too is the presentation that once shined forth in celebratory

affirmation compelled to become "radically darkened" art (GS7: 35/ AT: 19).

Such a constellation comprised of both a radical refusal to turn away from the mutilation

of the present as well as a reflection on what is perhaps the greatest expression of chromatic

beauty humanity has ever offered—the Ninth Symphony—clarifies why, on the one hand,

Adorno planned to subtitle his work on Beethoven *The Philosophy of Music*, and, on the other

hand, was never able to complete this book of such ambitious aims. For it is certainly the case

that Beethoven's music on the whole captures an unequally broad range of historical truth

unfolding immanently, indeed, as if everything in Western Music revolves around him.[43] But it

is also the case, in Adorno's own words, that "[o]ne can no longer compose like Beethoven"

(NS1: 231 /BE: 160). Examining Adorno's work on this subject thus serves as a particularly

instructive site for grasping a tension that, according to him, is endemic to the mimetic, agonistic

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[41] Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 478.

[42] Cf. Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006).

[43] See NS1: 36/ BE: 14: "Beethoven's music is Hegelian philosophy: but at the same time it is truer than that philosophy." And in NS1: 31/ BE: 10: "In a similar sense to that in which there is only Hegelian philosophy, in the history of western music there is only Beethoven."

struggle of enlightenment itself. It shows at once the death driven desire for outright

reconciliation, but also the dire need to transform the comportment that would best elicit this

possibility of reconciliation.

In keeping with this internal struggle, what, as we will more fully see in the Conclusion,

amounts to mimesis trying to become identical with itself, imitate itself (GS7: 169/ AT: 111),

Adorno claims that Beethoven detected this tension within his own technical development. It was

not only Mahler, and, after him, the Second Vienna School, who played out the tensions of the

historical struggle with harmony and *Schein*. The migratory process itself, the movement of

mimesis passing into form, pushed Beethoven beyond the original constraint of his production.

This counters the banal, non-philosophical, and often far too psychological narrative that

typically accompanies discussions of Beethoven's work. Beethoven certainly marks, as we

alluded to previously, the entrance of the sublime into music. He, to be sure, also illustrates a

mediation of universal and particular in ways unachieved by his predecessors, signifying the

emergence of a stronger subjectivity, instead of one that passively incorporates the formal and

contingent conventions of, for instance, the Sonata Form. This strength could account for why

bourgeois understanding often stops short of grasping Beethoven in any manner other than his

epic and most romantic phase of composition. But neither this particular reduction, nor those

qualities that make him the great composer of *subjective* freedom, capture Beethoven entirely.

As Adorno puts it, "Beethoven's music does not merely contain 'Romantic elements,' as

music historians maintain, but has the whole of Romanticism and its critique within itself" (NS1:

61/ BE: 26). We could add, in a similar fashion, that Beethoven contains the critique of tragedy

and the heroism usually associated with him. The implication is that his own internal dynamic is

a movement beyond subjectivity, towards the possibility of *objective* freedom. Below we will

take into consideration a few musical examples to illustrate better what we are arguing is a consummate example of the truth of the movement of mimesis. Mirroring our previous analysis, we will see that the development built into Beethoven also moves in the direction of the rescue of natural beauty.

The manner in which this claim of Beethoven's sublation of bourgeois subjectivity is not simply an external imposition by philosophy can be observed through a closer look at the development of the relationship between the play and semblance elements in his music. In this analysis we cannot, despite Benjamin's claim, conceive of play as simply standing over and against *Schein*. In a sense, Beethoven represents the apotheosis of play, of imaginative distance that achieves a kind of lighthearted elevation from the world. "Play: in Beethoven this means that even in its remotest products the memory of the human survives; that in this most central sense all reification is not quite serious, but is *Schein*, after which its spell can be broken and it can at last be called back to the world of the living [*Lebendige*]." (NS1:149/ BE: 99, translation modified). This critical distance—with good reason tied to humanity and life—is arguably most present in moments like the Adagio from *Op. 127 for String Quartet*. The level of disinterest is riveting in this movement precisely because, in contrast to the play of most commodified works, whose moments are atomized, indifferent towards one another and forced into a prescribed roundedness, Beethoven's play maintains a unique tension in the articulation of whole and part. To be more specific, amidst one of the greatest expressions of melancholy in all of the literature, a slow, ambivalently languishing introduction and exposition abruptly shifts to a moment of play, a moment of buoyant dance, that is forceful precisely because it is conscious of the preceding moment it negates: the seriousness of despair. That the apotheosis of dance could unfold, of all places, in a slow movement is astounding. Unlike almost every instance of

traditional dance, whose repetitive discipline—in truth a kind of "a turning in circles," a substitution of the future tense for the past perfect (GS12: 179/ PNM: 143)—serves to reinforce subjectivity rather than seeing beyond it, this late style movement gives the impression of dance as real joy; for like the weightlessness signaled in the violins that hover gently over the lower register, something has been overcome: "joy […] is austere: *res severa verum gaudium*" (GS3: 163/ DOE: 112). This is why Adorno insists that, "the antagonist of the character of hope in Beethoven is that of absolute seriousness, when music seems to throw off the last vestige of play" (NS1:261/ BE: 185). Similar to the previous passage about escaping from reification, the heart of Beethoven's critical play consists of not letting the forces of despair win. Its refusal is an embrace of that Schillerian conception of play as the striving after humanity. The feeling of a hope-not-lost comes to the fore precisely because there is no denial of the gravity of its possible failure in each passing moment. In a word, it is only through the internal tension of the dialectic of play and seriousness that Beethoven achieves his expressivity.

And yet, achieving this playful sense of distance from reification, incomparably evident in the flute theme from the development of the Ninth Symphony's first movement, is bought at the price of maintaining something of the illusion of unity. That is to say, despite Beethoven's own immanent critique of play and semblance, he does not wholly renounce an overall purposive trajectory, a meaningful totality. An inkling of the compulsion of the matter that would drive music beyond Beethoven is felt, then, when reflecting what it means to live in a world where it is reification, i.e., complete and total seriousness, not hope, that has triumphed over mimetic experience. As if, in the face of an exponentially increasing population, the specter of billions dead in the coming environmental, energy, and water crises, coupled with an economic model

that expects three percent compound growth[44] eternally, and yet cannot disentangle itself from a narrative that preposterously alleges the meager effort of financial regulation as the sole means of defraying the destructive logic of capital—as if, in the face of all this, there were anything left to dance about. If, for the sake of evoking the reconciliation that is still immanently possible for experience, mimesis is compelled to become the mimesis of the objective constellation, then it must come to view even the tensions that constitute Beethoven's mimesis as anachronistic. Resembling Adorno's depiction of what has happened to experience in the face of Auschwitz and the atomic bomb,[45] the mimesis of our world can no longer even admit of the fleeting affirmation that Beethoven's play summons forth; to do so would threaten to become that same fatalist adaptation (*Angleichung*) to ideology that, having lost grip of an objective touchstone, comforts itself with the notion that all is yet well. It would simply not be the mimesis of the present.

With this sense of what cannot be described as anything but the treachery bound to present experience, the importance of the German term for coherence, *Stimmigkeit*, becomes particularly heightened. Indeed, Adorno deemed it so important that he dedicated an entire section of *Aesthetic Theory* to it.[46] While *Stimmigkeit* certainly means coherence, as Hullot-Kentor translates it, its root, *Stimmig*, also connotes a relation of harmony. Even further than this, *eine Stimme* in German is a voice, so to have multiple voices, *Stimmen*, implies a kind of coming together or interplay of various notes. The apparent coherence of whole and part, articulated with a distinct beginning and end, and thus microcosmically mirroring life and death, not only implies a kind of feigned unity of the process, it suggests a feigned harmonic whole that *feels right* (*das*

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[44] See David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crisis of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010),130.

[45] Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problem*, 104; Adorno, *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, 162.

[46] See GS7/AT: "Coherence, Meaning (*Stimmigkeit und Sinn*)."

stimmt). In other words, just as for Adorno, amidst unprecedented alienation and an impending feeling of doom constitutive of contemporary experience,[47] the historical character of metaphysical experience no longer allows for an authentic relationship towards death (GS6: 361-66/ ND: 368-72), an alleged harmonious and purposively lived life, so too is the mimesis which confronts and binds itself to its historical condition, compelled to move away from harmony as unity.

This compulsion is, to be sure, a movement of mimesis becoming enlightened and critical. At the same time, however, it is a sorrowful movement, for, incapable of anticipating a way out, it only comes to recognize its illusion in the midst of the disillusioning experience of modernity. Thus stripped of any trumped up dignity, there is, to repeat a theme from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a humbleness to the dynamic of mimesis. It is only humility that can come to recognize Adorno's claim that "utmost integration is utmost *Schein*." (GS7: 73/ AT: 45) In Adorno's view, then, mimesis increasingly senses that its own subjective side is a violent projection, the instrument of domination, not liberation. The clear consequence of such disillusion is that it cannot take itself as seriously as it once did. And such acknowledgement is made, before anyone else, in the specific comportment of Beethoven's own development.

On more than one occasion Adorno, in fact, describes Beethoven's music in the same context as Beckett, two seemingly drastically opposed figures. Suggesting that Beethoven registers an implicit modernism, the situation that would become the "grimacing clowns, childish and bloody" of Beckett's works (GS7: 370/ AT: 250), i.e., a transformed jest reflecting the

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[47] In a remarkable account of the simultaneity of truth and falsehood constitutive of a contemporary metaphysical experience that wants to both destroy and resist the world, Adorno writes, "The desire for the existing culture to be swept away and an absolutely new start to be made has been very strong in Germany since the catastrophe. And I believe that the question of the position of metaphysics today has much to do with this desire – in that there has been a belief that, if only the debris of this culture could be finally cleared away, access could be gained to the original truth to which metaphysics points and which, according to this view, has been merely concealed by culture" (Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, 127; Adorno, *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, 199).

infantilism of omnipresent seriousness, is already perceived in Beethoven's late incorporation of

humor. "The element of humor in Beethoven's last works," writes Adorno, no doubt thinking of

moments like the *pizzicato* conclusion to the *schwer gefaßte Entschluß Quartett*, or the

incomparable *Diabelli Variations*, "can probably be equated with his discovery of the

inadequacy of mediation [*Vermittlung*], the truly critical moment [*eigentlich kritische Moment*]"

(NS1:37/ BE: 14-15, translation modified). Mediation's inadequacy is not a call to give up on

mediation, it is rather a call to enact a mediation shed of its previous coercion; to mediate not for

the sake of the synthesizing act of subjective unity, harmony, but for the sake of the *critical*

recognition of the moment when unity falters. Once again the transformation of mimesis,

particularly its play element, is based on living up to the promise of the critique immanent to it.

Recapitulating the ancient Talmudic insight, late Beethoven proclaims: when all is said and

done, the critique of myth is the work of the comedian; it is the jester who brings redemption.[48]

When we follow out all the tensions in Beethoven, we thus notice that play does not

simply remain the previous resistance to reification as purposive hope, it is also on its way

towards a less delusional hope that transforms itself by virtue of its critique of fallacious

harmony. "[I]n this process of musical demythologization, in the abandonment of the semblance

of harmony [*Schein der Harmonie*], there is an expression of hope" (NS1: 273/ BE: 193,

translation modified). This playful humor is therefore pushed to negate all arbitrary

ornamentation, all subjectively imposed convention. As is apparent to anyone familiar with

Beethoven's late style, this manifests itself as "a structural loosening [*Lockerung*]" of the

transparent or easily identifiable "theme" (NS1: 135/ BE: 89). Another way of saying the same

thing is that because the form instigated by the mimetic impulse is now more acutely listening to

the objective moment built into it, it becomes more attentive to the possibility of subjectivity

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[48] Talmud Bavli, Tractate, Ta'anit, Daf 22a.

disappearing into the process. At a point that might be described as music becoming more Kantian than Kant himself,[49] mimesis enters a situation in which it is "as if these works [of Beethoven's late style] had not been composed" (NS1: 223/ BE: 154). Still play, since it is after all *just art*, this critical transformation once more conjures up a sense of hope, only now it is a hope distinguished by being less and less bound to the comportment of flight.

In view of such a, so to speak, maturation process, we are impelled to ask the following. Is what happens in Schoenberg or the modernism of Twentieth Century Music, just a new development, a mere "next step" that emerges simply because it had not yet been attempted? Similarly put, is Leverkühn's plea to take back Beethoven for the sake of Beethoven, a movement of artistic presentation becoming critical, one that bindingly points to the *need* to no longer fake its passions (*Leidenschaften*) (GS12: 44/ PNM: 35), or is it simply something extraneously imposed, the product of an autonomy conceived as mere *Willkür*, arbitrariness? Adorno, of course, sides with the former explanation. The "dissociation of organic unity" (NS1: 228/ BE: 158), the "abbreviations" (NS1:135/ BE: 89), or the flickering notes that escape the totality and that syncopate the prescribed desire for the tonic to return (GS7: 123/ AT: 79), are all the mark of a mimesis that finds everything short of real peace intolerable. That Beethoven's "critical genius" could no longer tolerate "the idea of totality as something already achieved" (NS1: 36/ BE: 14), points to the developments of Twentieth Century music like those of Schoenberg's, in which Adorno's famous dictum that "the whole is the false" (GS4: 55/ MM: 50) became all the more evident for experience.

Much of this necessity (*Nötigung*), or this compulsion that drives the musical character of mimesis to change, is explicitly identified in Adorno's more musicological passages.

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[49] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §45: "the purposiveness in the products of beautiful art, although it is certainly intentional [*absichtlich*], must nevertheless not seem [*scheinen*] intentional; i.e., beautiful art must be regarded as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art."

Significantly, it is precisely when music takes seriously the above mentioned Kantian ideal, that it can first begin to rescue exactly what we have seen the mimetic taboo expunges, namely the particular, or in music, the texture, tonality or color of the articulation. Late Beethoven clearly represents the first, as it were, unleashing of tonality, but what he could only hint at, given that his world still preserved something of a non-administered "spontaneity" (GS7: 307/ AT: 206), plays out in Twentieth Century music. Bringing together much of our analysis of the dynamic of mimesis, in yet another depiction of a mimesis whose exact imagination is now more fully immersed in objective spirit, Adorno declares that,

> [t]he pure expression [*reine Ausdruck*] of artworks, freed from every thing-like interference [*dinghaft Störenden*], even from everything so-called natural, converges with nature, just as in Webern's most authentic works the pure tone, to which they are reduced by the strength of subjective sensibility, *reverses* [*umschlägt*] [*dialectically*] *into a nature-sound* [*Naturlaut*]: certainly that of an eloquent [*beredten*] nature, its language [*Sprache*], not the portrayal [*Abbild*] of a part of nature [*eines Stücks von ihr*]. The subjective elaboration of art as a nonconceptual language [*nichtbegrifflichen Sprache*] is the only figure, at the contemporary stage of rationality [*im Stande von Rationalität*], in which something like the language of creation [*Schöpfung*] shines forth [*widerscheint*], with the paradox that what shines forth is blocked [*mit der Verstelltheit des Widerscheinenden*]. Art attempts to imitate an expression that would not be interpolated human intention. The latter is exclusively art's vehicle. (GS7: 121/ AT: 78, translation modified; my emphasis)

Part of the underlying argument of this passage rests on the fact that Adorno is implying the difference between the identification of mimesis and the identification of discursive thinking. To have shaken off this thing-like identification places mimesis in opposition to the concept, since the latter continues to operate with the hard and fast separation of subject and object. As a result of its separation, from the perspective of discursive thinking, the thing is a thing only so long as it is part of a process of becoming concretely determined, instrumentally circumscribed or subsumed; indeed it first comes to be a thing, a "something," as Adorno discusses it in *Negative Dialectics*, by virtue of implicitly pointing to the specificity always already implied in all conceptual identification (GS6: 44/ ND: 34). Mimesis, however, as a different type of identification, a non-judging judgment, does not, at least in its contemporary stage, need to arrive

at this determinate something. It is rather the moment in-between, the prior-to of outright determination. Thus, returning once more to the passage concerning mimetic *Vollzug*, consummation, we observe Adorno describe the expression with which mimesis is clearly bound as the "antithesis of expressing something" (GS7: 171/ AT: 112). Webern is successful because he refuses to depict any "piece" (*Stück*) of nature, that is, a specific "something" that could be chalked up or easily determined as, say, the imitated bird song of a flute. Webern resists full-fledged identification, representational mimesis, and this is fundamental to the eloquence or *Sprachcharakter* of his presentation.

If, then, as we have continually implied, mimesis becomes critical and is in fact still critical in the so-called postmodern world, thereby avoiding, as Jay Bernstein rightly claims, art's second death,[50] this argument about the essential relationship between the mimesis of the present being a mimesis of the non-organic requires further elaboration. To state it more simply, we need to ask why Webern serves as a guide to successful mimetic productions. However much altered by the present constellation, what he appeals to seems to point to something that still speaks to us, for he neither spurns what we have repeatedly described as the necessary moment of subjective strength, nor abandons the attempt to rescue, in an immersion with that which is least organic—the hardened and alienated—particularity. That is to say, we need to ask what it is about a critical mimesis that exclusively instigates the above mentioned reversal (*Umschlag*) of the mere tone, devoid of outright determination, into that which speaks as natural, eloquent beauty.

It could be argued that Hullot-Kentor has imported too much into his translation of this reversal (*Umschlag*) when he calls it a "dialectical" reversal. Adorno does not use the adjective *dialektisch* in the above passage. But perhaps he has touched on Adorno's point in his

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[50] Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 5.

overemphasis. Everything we have seen about the transformation of mimesis does in fact indicate a dialectical turn-around, a shock of unqualified, critical force. Amidst unfreedom, disenchantment—a situation where life no longer lives—the concepts that are dialectically precluded by the latter experience, suddenly flash forth. So if we are correct that mimesis is still critical through nothing other than its immersion in the contemporary resonance of the matter, then something about tarrying with this resonance, the specific manner in which the formal presentation of "similarity and contrast, static and dynamic, exposition, transition, development, identity, and return" speak or are articulated (GS7: 238/AT: 159), should still be the means of conjuring the moment of magic, life, freedom and aura. Driving mimesis to the extreme, to its outermost consequence (*äußerste Konsequenz*),[51] this comportment could, indeed, summon precisely that which Benjamin called the *Naturlauten* that are transformed via the eloquent language of music.

Thus this moment of singular expression, of a natural beauty that today emerges from following that which, on the face of it, seems diametrically opposed to nature, not only approximates, as always, the unintentional name giving process, creation (*Schöpfung*), it is guided by the attempt to realize its idea. If contemporary mimesis is still critical, then it would seem to have to be aligned with this task of unfettering the particular for the sake of a real reconciliation with the universal. Looking at some of the developments of Twentieth and Twenty First Century Music, we see that this is precisely what occurs. Although it is a grossly reductive statement that neglects to account for all the threads that have recently come to light, for our purpose of providing a few cogent examples, we can note that after the developments of the Second Vienna School, several of the various schools of music, be they Spectral Music, Computer Music, or New Complexity, demonstrate a special concentration on what has come to

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[51] Recall Adorno's famous quote on dialectics discussed in the Introduction, page 9 above.

be called micro-tonal music. That is, a general tendency pervades recent Western Music in which there is a heightened appreciation for the intervals of tone that are less than the equally spaced system of the semitone. In particular I would like to briefly focus on the work of György Ligeti, for he not only embodies this particular sensitivity for tonality, as if letting tonality move of its own accord, with only the subtlest shifts in incremental texture accounting for the works trajectory—so-called micropolyphony—he does so in the midst of what is undoubtedly a mimesis of the horrifying.

It cannot be merely incidental that Ligeti titled one of his greatest works *Atmosphères*. One might assume with such a title that there is something organic about this work, something that imitates, in a bad mimesis, the *Schein* of natural purposiveness and harmony. But this is far from the case. In fact, in this work the constituents of music that most readily conjure up the false likeness to purposive nature, namely, melody, harmony, and rhythm, are more or less pushed to the background, if not completely deserted. "Sound mass" is its ruling principle, such that even in the calm moments of the introduction, form is overwhelmed by a kind of sublime kaleidoscope, a gathering of multivalent, excessive timbre, all of which stretch the boundary between music and noise, sound and chaos, without nonetheless abandoning the task of eloquent formation. After a series of, so to speak, pulsating rises in intensity that delicately descend back to the calm from which they emerged, the music abruptly turns into the chaos of horns violently colliding with trumpets and trombones. In one of the greatest moments of music in the post-Schoenbergian era, without in the least offering a visual indicator, it is as if the music were suddenly enmeshed within a traffic jam grown hostile. One cannot escape the feeling of suffocation, and yet, like with Webern, the least natural moment reverses (*umschlagen*), shocks, into its opposite. Why is it that music can speak like this? Or better, why is it that music is

compelled to speak like this, taking hold of our frightening predicament, instead of evading it, if it is to speak at all? Is it not because this music is the mimesis of the present, which is to say, paradoxically, the mimesis of what is negatively other than the present? The *as if* silence that comes to the fore immediately after the extreme strife of this work finally relents—pure silence, nature in itself, being an impossibility—is the silence that eloquently speaks the unintentional name of natural beauty. Once again, it is only within a specific historical context (*Zusammenhang*) that something outside of that context negatively announces itself.

We are thus left with the question of whether this is just an anachronistic continuation of the "heroic phase" of modernism. In order to answer this question, i.e., assess how in fact the current stage of mimesis is compelled to comport itself so that it can remain critical, we need to more fully address the other side of mimesis, namely play; for this element of mimesis is no doubt pivotal in the discourse surrounding the emergence of the postmodern or the supposed transition from modernism. And certainly a thinker who once asserted that the avant-garde "now has some[thing] of the comic quality of aged youth" (GS7: 44/ AT: 24-25) about it, was conscious of the potential for another transformation waiting on the horizon for artworks just before his death.

Chapter 4: The Dynamic of Play

The analysis of the previous chapter attempted to further concretize how the dynamic of mimesis is propelled, with the help of a new awareness of the repressed shudder, to a more critical, more enlightened, even more knowledge-laden comportment. The implication of this increased awareness, namely that a progressive mimesis moves towards a sublime modernism that, in part, repudiates the spell of formal beauty, came to light by, in fact, departing from some of Benjamin's claims. To be more specific, although we never abandoned the notion that "interfolded" within mimesis "slumber" play and semblance (SW3: 127 GS7.1: 368), we began to follow Adorno's insistence that these elements of mimesis should not be thought as mere polar opposites. The degree to which they are, on the contrary, entwined with one another was especially evident in our discussion of the technical developments in Beethoven's music. Indeed, we observed that play can become, in many respects, part of the attempt "to absolve [*zu entsühnen*]" the guilt of art's *Schein* (GS7: 64/ AT: 39). These developments, i.e., the mimesis that pushed form to alter itself, thus assisted in demonstrating just how much play can, on the one hand, foster the maintenance of false *Schein* as a dislodged and thus ideological affirmation of the harmony of existence, but can also, on the other hand, trigger the dissolution of the element of *Schein* by pointing out the moment of humor central to a mimesis in the process of humbling the compulsion of identity thinking (*Identitätsdenken*).

Having begun to show this somewhat different Adornian route to understanding the dynamic idea of mimesis, we are now in a better position to truly understand the specificity within which the sublime emerges for artworks. We can, furthermore, better understand what

aspects of the play element threaten to uphold this ideological, disciplinary adaptation, as well as what aspects promise to break away from the lineage of mythology and, instead, join the movement of critical art. In explicating the play of mimesis in this contrasting way, i.e., as containing the potential for both critique and ideology, in what follows we will demonstrate how play begins to embrace the decline of tragedy and traditional comedy in the emergence of the modern farce. As we implied in the previous chapter, this trajectory is linked to the critical developments in the play element of Beethoven, as well as the rise of humor as a resistance to the desecration of silence or the false appearance of reconciliation. This chapter will thus start to reveal that the movement of modern mimesis has two overarching consequences. On the one hand, art is increasingly driven towards an autonomy that follows out its own mimetic tensions, and, on the other hand, the sublime can no longer be conceived, like our conception of the beautiful, as a static, ahistorical concept. It is only after such considerations that we will finally be able to draw conclusions about how an Adornian aesthetics relates to questions such as those posed in the last chapter about how the postmodern condition supposedly repudiates modernism.

I. The Ambivalence of Play and the Critical Emergence of the Sublime in Artworks

To begin our further examination of the critical transformation of the play element in mimesis, let us follow the strategy employed in Chapter Three of addressing Adorno's dialogue with Benjamin. As was previously the case in our discussion of the aura, the dialogue between these thinkers is especially helpful for understanding how Adorno tries to critique and rescue

Benjamin's idea of mimesis. If nothing else, it marks one of Adorno's most direct considerations of play.[1]

Despite the disagreements between both thinkers, disagreements that we have tried to show are not as stark as many have alleged, there can be no denying the fact that both Benjamin and Adorno believe something of the idealist aesthetics of the *schöner Schein* has, so to speak, dimmed in the age of art's technical reproduction. The difference between them, or at least between Adorno and the Benjamin of 1935, does not concern whether this process of dimming occurs,[2] but rather, as we previously noted, what this process means for the role of the play element. The opposition in views is clear in Adorno's own words:

> The rebellion against *Schein* did not, however, take place in favor of play [*Spiel*], as Benjamin supposed, though there is no mistaking the playful quality [*Spielcharakter*] of the permutations, for instance, that have replaced fictional developments. The crisis of semblance may engulf [*hineinreißen*] play as well, for the harmlessness [*Harmlosigkeit*] of play deserves the same fate as does harmony [*Harmonie*], which originates in *Schein*. Art that seeks to redeem itself from semblance through play becomes sport [*läuft über zum Sport*]. (GS7: 154/ AT: 100)

It is telling that in this instance Adorno is, of course, critiquing Benjamin's position in the "Technology" essay, yet he is doing so without claiming that the play element is itself necessarily consigned to complete dissolution. He does not deny the possibility that the disjointed permutations of modern art, the loosening of cohesive themes, unified developments, could signify a mimesis that is critically responsive in a playful manner. His concern is rather with the specific character of play's relation to the down-going (*Untergang*) of *Schein*; that is, with the question of whether play takes seriously the same will to destruction

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[1] It is important to bear in mind that at stake in this analysis is not simply the clarification of a series of opaque philosophical concepts, but rather understanding whether Adorno's dynamic of mimesis offers a more robust example of a critical resistance to domination than many of continental philosophy's alternatives. As we have implied throughout, perhaps unlike Gadamer's and Derrida's more explicit conceptions of play as such, Adorno's theorization of a play that is linked to mimesis gives us criteria for determining the success of the latest artistic productions as they *specifically* relate to the present material conditions. See Jacque Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Social Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[2] More could be said about how this dimming is the basis of Adorno's conception of "radically darkened [*radikal verdunkelte*] art." See, for example, GS7: 35/ AT 19, GS7: 66/AT 40.

(*Selbstvernichtungsdrang*), the same desire to negate the conditions of its existence within "false society" (GS4: 50/ MM: 45) that we saw was central to taking hold of and resisting the illusion of traditional beauty. This is why Adorno maintains that it deserves the same fate as *Schein*: both are in danger of becoming ensnared in an ideological apparatus that disavows the gravity of the present, so long as they refuse to work against the sense of innocence or harmlessness that their original tendency deceptively provokes. The possibility that in the face of the end of the tenability of harmonic presentation, play could attribute too much critical capacity to itself, therefore, weighs down, so to speak, on its development. If it conceives of itself as the sole avenue of relating to the world's disenchantment, Adorno argues that play actually becomes something closer to sport than the political efficaciousness Benjamin once ascribed to it.

What does Adorno mean by this regression to sport? As we have continually implied, he means that there is always a potential for the play element to descend to a disciplinary social function. In this respect, he is both with and against Freud.[3] More specifically, Adorno is attempting to theorize the point where, in keeping with the repetition compulsion,[4] the play that is constitutive of identity in particular and our experience with nature in general, descends to an adaptation (*Angleichung*) to the dominate socialization, instead of the imaginative distance from it. Thus, in an administered society, sport seems like innocuous fun, or the appropriate conditioning of habits, i.e., sublimation. But the brutal repetition and the empty prize that awaits all sport, often coupled with the sacrifice to the "team," which today undoubtedly mirrors the corporate bureaucracy structure, is—to say nothing of the proclivity for nationalism—training

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[3] Adorno was also clearly influenced by other seminal texts from the late thirties on the sociology of play and mimesis. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1949); Roger Caillois, *Le mythe et l'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

[4] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 41. Freud maintains that the play of the repetition is at once "demonic," but also the condition for the possibility of sublimation or the binding of desire in accord with the "normal" socialization of the reality principle.

for and adaptation to a social hierarchy in which no real fulfillment is possible, and complete

acceptance of this condition must be, at all costs, hammered home.

> The element of repetition [*Wiederholungsmoment*] in play is the afterimage of unfree labor
> [*Nachbild unfreier Arbeit*], just as sports—the dominant extra-aesthetic [*außerkünstlerisch*] form
> of play—is reminiscent of practical activities and continually fulfills the function of habituating
> [*zu gewöhnen*] people to the demands of praxis, above all by the reactive transformation of
> physical displeasure into secondary pleasure, without their noticing that the contraband
> [*Kontrebande*] of praxis has slipped into it. (GS7: 471/ AT: 318)

Just as in advanced capitalism the fetish becomes the thing consumed, losing all sense of the real

ends or needs—use-value—built into the production process, the play of sport ruthlessly

demands the acceptance of a prize that, as anyone who participates in sport knows, is inevitably

disappointed by its premises.[5] In keeping with Freud's insight that, in his game (*Spiel*), the child

is more prone to repeat the disappointment of loss than the gratification of return,[6] the truth of

this seemingly harmless play is that it is secretly aligned with something far more destructive

than initially appears.

Adorno's claim about this regression to sport, this bad instantiation of the death drive,

that is a possibility not just for human behavior, but for the comportment of artworks themselves,

is not, then, simply a matter of understanding the way artworks fail at responding to the

disenchanted world. In other words, the claim about a potential regression that destructively

accords with domination is not just centered on the threat of an "empty play" that has lost touch

with the resonances and openness of the objective constellation. It is equally a matter of how

artworks can remain critical and thus attempt to stay true to that essential aspect endemic to their

idea from the start. Along these lines, Adorno suggests that Benjamin does not so much miss the

mark in his conception of the constituents of mimesis, but rather falls short, so to speak, in his

attempt to think through what it would mean for mimesis to truly embody a *critical* play. Even

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[5] Cf. Bill Martin, *Ethical Marxism* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008), 8-9.
[6] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 14.

though it is the case that with the decline of *Schein*, the presentation of mimesis can no longer

light up without betraying its hidden, disavowed moment, can no longer operate with the same

distance as it did in the pre-exhibition epoch, the task of opening up a different kind of distance

through a transformed play is nevertheless still built into the dynamic of mimesis. Adorno thus

maintains that,

> [t]he failure of Benjamin's grandly conceived theory of reproduction remains that its bipolar
> [*bipolaren*] categories do not permit [*nicht gestatten*] of distinguishing [*zu unterscheiden*] between
> a conception of art that is de-ideologized [*entideologisierten*] to its core and the misuse of
> aesthetic rationality for mass exploitation and mass domination [*Mißbrauch ästhetischer
> Rationalität für Massenausbeutung und Massenbeherrschung*], a possibility he hardly touches
> upon. (GS7: 90/ AT: 56, translation modified)

Part of the basis of this assertion rests on a parallel argument that Adorno makes elsewhere,

namely that making the beautiful or any category of aesthetics *the sole* or dominant category

threatens to neglect the other, equally important aspects of the multidimensional comportment of

artworks. For instance, only focusing on the beautiful risks overlooking the development of the

sublime, the presentation of truth content, the ugly, the historicity of artworks, their construction

and technicity (GS7: 81-82/ AT: 50-51). More particular to the above criticism, Adorno implies

that Benjamin's narrow focus causes a failure to illustrate how play, allegedly the more

prominent element of the bipolar relation during the exhibition stage of art, can actually

distinguish itself by escaping from or assuaging the ideology[7] that always boarders on collective

exploitation. Benjamin's theory misses something precisely because he is not careful enough to

depict how the dynamics of play and semblance always already aim at critically severing

themselves, de-ideologizing themselves, from the logic of the status quo. The type and manner of

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[7] This ability or attempt to, as it were, rub ideology against the grain, could locate a difference between Adorno's
ideology critique and that of Louis Althusser's. Insofar as the latter contends that there is no escaping from ideology,
indeed, that ideology is the very substance of experience and "has no history," Adorno perhaps represents a
contrasting view that attempts to think, however destined for failure, beyond ideology, beyond a subjectivity that is
subjected. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideology State Apparatus (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin
and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 116.

presentation of the play that emerges in the face of the down-going must be of central importance

to the success or failure of this resistance to ideology, but Benjamin does not seem to offer such

specificity.[8]

Although it perhaps furthers the exaggerated narrative that alleges Adorno's arrogance

towards Benjamin,[9] the claim about this blind spot in Benjamin's theory indicates that Adorno's

criticism is fundamentally based on the attempt to follow Benjamin's better impulses. It is an

attempt to more fully probe into what it would truly mean for play to not simply become part of

the *Schein* that, as a secret perpetuation or "afterimage of praxis," reduces experience to the

tautology of what is already the case. This is why Adorno claims that if play is to truly transform

itself, it is compelled to do so in accordance with the very thing that inspired Benjamin's theory

of the technical artwork in the first place. That is, it must still be guided by the question

concerning "that which moves into the distant [*fernrückende*] and is critical of the ideological

surfaces of existence [*die ideologische Oberfläche des Daseins*]" (GS7: 89/ AT: 56, translation

modified). To state it simply, the *moment* (*Augenblick*) of the *Spielraum* can only open up in a

particular way, in response to the particular historical situation within which it finds itself. Aside

from the fact that it is empirically disproven by many of the developments in Twentieth Century

Art, to signal merely, as Benjamin does, that play becomes prominent, is too vague and abstract

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[8] An exception to this apparent lack of any specificity concerning play other than that which problematically shows the plight of workers representationally, might be found in Benjamin's understanding of surrealism and in his more general consideration of montage as it appears outside of the "Technology" essay. This general theory is intimately related to the concept of an interruption (*Unterbrechung*), which we have seen is crucial to Benjamin's understanding of critique. See SW2.1: 207-218 / GS 2.1: 295-310; SW2.1: 301/ GS3: 232; SW2.2: 584-85/ GS2: 775; SW2.2: 778/ GS2: 697-698. It should also be noted that, given the nearly omnipresent realism that commodified films have embodied in the last seventy years, Adorno's criticism of film as not really harnessing a critical play, seems to be quite justified. See, also, CC: 131: "When I spent a day in the studios of Neubabelsberg a couple of years ago, what impressed me most of all was how little montage and all the advanced techniques you emphasize were actually used; rather, it seems as though reality is always constructed with an infantile attachment to the mimetic and then 'photographed.'"

[9] It is likely passages like the following that give rise to the allegation of arrogance: "I feel that our theoretical disagreement is not really a discord between us, and that my own task is to hold your arm steady until the Brechtian sun has finally sunk beneath its exotic waters. And I hope you will understand my criticisms in this spirit" (CC: 132).

of a characterization. If mimetic play does not embody a very specific countervailing tendency to the ideology that all too vulgarly contends, for example, that life is still beautiful, then the work treads closer and closer to upholding those very ideological surfaces that the idea of mimesis immanently resists. In a word, it risks descending to the very barbarism that effaces the break or rift (*Bruch*) opened up by authentic (*authentische*)[10] cultural production.

How, in fact, Benjamin's theory, taken by itself, thus fails to demonstrate the specific character of play that could bind itself to critique, can be summed up as its failure to wholly explain just how much play is at once an indispensible moment in mimesis, but also something that, on account of art's compulsion towards knowledge, towards real reconciliation (*Versöhnung*), wants to do away with the frightening predicament of simultaneously contributing to neutralization and ideology. Mirroring the fragility or danger of mimesis in general, a careful depiction of how play also risks reversing dialectically into its opposite, is needed. In an extended fragment rarely discussed in the secondary literature because of its appearance in the "Paralopomena" of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno arguably offers just such a precise and careful depiction of the movement and ambivalence of play. With it we can begin to grasp how this specificity of play altering itself is tied to the insight that Benjamin already knew well: that the developments in art are pushed to the sublime, to the repudiation of the putative harmony between the imagination and the understanding.

> In the concept of art, play is the element by which art immediately [*unmittelbar*] raises itself [*sich erhebt*] above the immediacy [*Unmittelbarkeit*] of praxis and its purposes [*Zwecke*]. Yet it is at the same time oriented toward the past, toward childhood, if not animality [*Tierheit*]. In play, art—through its renunciation of purposive rationality [*Absage an die Zweckrationalität*]—at the same time regresses to something behind this purposive rationality [*hinter diese*]. The historical need [*Nötigung*] for art to mature works [*arbeitet*] in opposition to its play character [*Spielcharakter*], though it does not cast it off altogether; any pure [*pure*] recourse to playful forms [*Spielformen*], on the other hand, inevitably stands in the service of restorative or archaizing social tendencies.

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[10] For more on Adorno's intentional use of *Authentizität* as opposed to the Heideggarian *Eigentlichkeit*, see Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski & Frederic Will (New York: Routledge, 2003).

> Playful forms are without exception forms of repetition [*Wiederholung*]. Where they are employed affirmatively [*positiv*] they are joined with the repetition compulsion [*Wiederholungszwang*], to which they adapt [*sich adaptieren*] and which they sanction as normative [*Norm*]. In blunt opposition to Schillerian ideology, art allies itself with unfreedom [*Unfreiheit*] in the specific character of play [*Spielcharakter*]. Thereby art incorporates an element antagonistic to it [*Kunstfeindliches*]; the most recent deastheticization [*Entkunstung*] of art covertly exploits the moment of play [*Spielmoment*] at the cost of all others. When Schiller celebrates the play drive [*Spieltrieb*] as the authentically human [*eigentlich Humane*] because it is free of purpose [*Zweckfreiheit*], he, being the loyal bourgeois he was, interpreted the opposite of freedom as freedom in accord with the philosophy of his age. The relationship of play to *praxis* is more complex than Schiller's *Aesthetic Education* makes it appear. Whereas all art sublimates practical elements, play in art—by its neutralization of *praxis*—becomes bound up specifically with its spell, the compulsion [*Nötigung*] toward the ever-same, and, in psychological dependence on the death drive, interprets obedience as happiness. (GS7: 469-470/ AT: 317, translation modified)

For reasons we have already stated regarding the rebuke of sport, Adorno appears to be, more often than not, very much at odds with the play of artworks. And yet, we might say that he is far too Kantian to simply dismiss it because of this dangerous link. Play is, after all, an indispensible moment in opening up that very distance or elevation (*Erhebung*) whose closing or elimination would signify consenting to eternal *praxis* or eternal self-preservation as the inescapable condition of second nature.[11] That is to say, following Kant's insight, play remains vital to recognizing freedom as demanding a purposeless (*zwecklos*) moment in purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*), i.e., a break from that which is merely functional or instrumental rationality; eliminate it entirely and one suffers the unnecessary perpetuation of the law of labor, the triumph of means-ends rationality that becomes so incessant, so frantic, it actually forgets the ends (*Zwecke*) after which it was originally striving. This accounts for why Adorno declares that, in spite of its regression to the irrational, to childhood, or even to something like animal imitation, the critical, enlightened movement of art does not succeed at casting off play entirely.

At the same time, the movement of mimetic maturity works (*arbeitet*) against play, because enlightenment is perhaps nothing other than the attempt to avert the mythology that

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[11] This concept of second nature is related to another important concept for Adorno, namely nature-history (*Naturgeschichte*). See Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," Telos 60 (1984): 111-124/ GS1: 345-65. One should take account of the fact that the German does not imply an adjectival modification of "history" (*Geschichte*), rather it employs a unified noun.

sanctions, with the help of the play of the repetition compulsion, the perpetuation of what *only*

appears as a fatalistic law of nature. Thus play, especially if its comportment remains static,

assists in this fatalistic illusion. With and against Benjamin's conceptualization, the implication

of this struggle against play is, therefore, that the development of the play element in mimesis is

tied up with and runs parallel to the development of the *Schein* element. Instead of simply

affirming the seeming lightheartedness of play, praising its traditional forms in bourgeois and

Schillerian fashion as the field of leisure[12] compartmentalized and thus standing over and against

work, play is impelled, just like *Schein*, to negate what amounts to its pacified social

demarcation. It cannot, in short, be satisfied with its modern independence from the ethical,

political, and social realms. Hence, as we have repeatedly witnessed, it is driven to join the

movement of knowledge that bears that name precisely because it begins to sense the possibility

of a real reconciliation for empirical experience. Expressed differently, play begins to want to

help elicit truth-content, or begins to want to give up that aspect of it that copes with the status

quo through the formal repetition of it. This is part of the reason why, running counter to

Benjamin's polarization, Adorno, for instance, titles a section of his analysis of Schoenberg's

music—the emergence of which no doubt marks precisely this enlightened movement of

maturity *against* play—"Schoenberg's Criticism of Semblance and Play"(GS12: 42/ PNM: 34).

There he unsurprisingly maintains that, "with the critique of semblance and play, music tends

towards knowledge" (GS12: 46/ PNM: 36). That *both* elements of mimesis are implicated in the

spell of unfreedom and need to be negated or critiqued for the sake of the mimetic idea of real

peace, is explained by the fact that they both contribute to *giving the appearance* of being the in-

itself, when they are, in fact, through the sublimation of mimesis into form, part of a pacification

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[12] For more on Adorno's understanding of the false dichotomy between work and play, see his essay "Free Time" in *Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. Jay Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 187-97/ GS10.2: 645-55.

of the practical drives necessary for undoing real unfreedom. To state it once more, play is

inseparable from the attempt to expiate the guilt of *Schein* (GS7: 64/ AT: 39). This places it

within civilization's cycle of guilt and atonement, with the newly awakened proviso that it can

only break this cycle by recognizing and expressing just how entangled it is with a mythological

fatalism (GS7: 85/ AT: 53).[13]

This intertwinement of play with the spell that is part of the mechanism ultimately

denying happiness, art's *promesse du bonheur* (GS7: 26/ AT: 12), is also allied, for good

reasons, with that same formalism that we have argued points immanently to traditional beauty's

demise. Adorno is not casually connecting the play drive and the formal and repetitive

productions of artworks. In the effort to establish symmetry or unity, there is rather, in his view,

something menacing about the roundedness pounding away, so to speak, in the majority of play's

instantiations. A play that does not come to realize the degree to which its play is a play with

Schein, a play with itself, and thus, at bottom, a masturbatory maintenance of the semblance of

subjectivity, fails as a progressive model of critique. But even further, the formalism that uses

this play to facilitate what amounts to an illusory mastery, the repetitiveness whose seeming

cheerfulness even Nietzsche still conservatively praised in contrast to Wagner[14] (GS7: 294/ AT:

197), is no longer successful in its presentation, since it persists as part of the mendacious

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[13] What likely drives much of the criticism against Adorno's refusal to think of artworks as functional, intentional or communicative artifacts, is certainly not something to which Adorno himself was oblivious. His reflections on the guilt and *Trauer* of art make it clear that he realized what not participating in *praxis* meant for artworks. But, unlike thinkers of the second and third generation Frankfurt School like Richard Wolin, Axel Honneth, or Jürgen Habermas, Adorno refuses the so-called "linguistic turn" to intersubjectivity because he insists on reflecting what the world would look like if that moment of non-purposive, non-functional rationality in artworks were completely effaced. His answer is that it would be total domination, devoid of a voice that speaks to a world beyond the frightening "spell of *praxis*." For more on this problem, see Richard Wolin, "Utopia Mimesis and Reconciliation" *Representations* No. 32. (Autumn, 1990), 33-49.

[14] Adorno's reading of Wagner is far more dialectical than Nietzsche's. On the one hand, Wagner anticipates the worrisome prescriptions of the culture industry, but on the other hand, he still contains something highly progressive. See Adorno, *In Search of Wager*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 2005), GS13: 8-148.

symbol of harmony that we have implied the sublime more and more wants to shatter.[15] Hence,

as Adorno continues this fragment, he argues that something of what he calls the link between

blind convention or blind collectivity and play is forced to consciousness in the modern

development of artworks:

> In art, play is from the outset disciplinary [*disziplinär*]; it fulfills the taboo on expression that inheres in the ritual of imitation [*im Ritual der Nachahmung*]; when art exclusively [*ganz und gar*] plays, nothing remains of expression [*Ausdruck*]. Secretly, play is in complicity with fate [*Schicksal*], a representative of the weight of the mythical [*Repräsentant des mythisch Lastenden*], which art would like to throw off [*abschütteln*]; the repressive aspect [*repressive Aspekt*] is obvious in such phrases as that of the of the rhythm of the blood [*Rhythmus des Bluts*], with which the formal playfulness [*Spielformen*] of dance is so readily invoked. If games of chance are the opposite of art, as forms of play [*Spielformen*] they nevertheless stretch [*reichen*] into art. The putative play drive [*Spieltrieb*] has ever been fused with the primacy [*Vorherrschaft*] of blind collectivity [*blinder Kollektivität*]. Only where play becomes aware [*innewird*] of its own terror [*Grauens*], as in Beckett, does it in any way [*irgend*] share in art's power of reconciliation [*Versöhnung*]. If art is thinkable [*denkbar*] just as little [*so wenig*] without play [*Spiel*] as it is totally without repetition [*Wiederholung*], then it is nevertheless able to negatively determine the frightening remainder within itself [*so vermag sie doch den furchtbaren Rest in sich als negativ zu bestimmen*]. (GS7: 470/ AT 317, translation modified)

Recalling the analysis in Chapter Two about the materialist lineage of mimesis and its struggle

against the mimetic taboo, we are reminded that the greatest danger, the potential dialectical

reversal of mimesis, consists in the potential eradication of the expression of suffering, that

precondition of truth. This closer look at the play component in mimesis pinpoints what exactly

is transpiring in a mimesis whose discipline pushes it to this desperate attempt to eliminate

expression. In the end, there is no ridding us of the play involved in the so-called ritual of

imitation. The ritual character of our relation to nature lives on despite appearances, just as

mythology lives on despite the appearance of total enlightenment. Yet the inescapability of the

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[15] Another aspect of this confrontation with the symbol, first theorized by Benjamin, centers around just how much this conception of the sublime avoids an aesthetic regression to the instrumental reason which art resists. In Adorno's words, "Kant covertly considered art to be a servant. Art becomes human in the moment [*Augenblick*], since it terminates this service [*den Dienst kündigt*]. Its humanity is incompatible with any ideology of service to humankind. It is loyal to humanity only through inhumanity toward it" (GS7: 293/ AT: 197, translation modified). Given our repeated analysis of the critical moment, translating *Augenblick* as "moment" instead of "instant," captures the manner in which there is a possible interruption (*Unterbrechung*) in the instrumental character of the dialectic of mimesis and rationality that happens within the work's own immanent process. Adorno does not claim that art wholly renounces the communicative side of presentation. This would be tantamount to claiming that art renounces form altogether.

ritualistic drive for imitation does not simply relegate us to an acceptance of the eternal recurrence of the same. Adorno just as much insists that "the human is indissolubly linked [*haftet an*] to imitation [*Nachahmung*]" (GS4: 174/ MM: 154). The fact, then, that this mimetic impulse, so essential to our latent humanity, is always bordering on a kind of domination that eliminates the material trace, grounds Adorno's reasons for stressing that authentic artworks do not simply reject play undialectically, but change their comportment through a recognition of their horror (*Grauen*). Adorno's question about the role of the modern work of art is thus fundamentally linked to answering what happens to the artwork's comportment once this horrifying play ascends historically to consciousness.

In a very similar passage, Adorno further elaborates upon this ambivalence of play: "[w]hat art in the broadest sense works with, it oppresses: This is the ritual of the domination of nature that lives on in play" (GS7: 80/ AT: 50). It should be clear at this stage in our analysis that Adorno is not simply making a value judgment against play. He does not contend that artworks should give up on play because of the "cruelty" with which they oppress the mute in-itself, the necessity of working against the very thing they are trying to liberate. The play necessary for the awaking of freedom needs to persist, for in an irrational world the purposelessness of its behavior still exposes the fact that, "to this day no rationality has been fully rational, none has unrestrictedly benefited humanity, its potential, or even a 'humanized nature'."(GS7: 487/ AT: 330). Yet if it attempted to employ its need for play anachronistically, by, for example, embodying the play that emerges from the tensions (*Spannungen*) in Beethoven's world, or more obviously, the play operative in traditional opera or direct representation, then it would fail at its

task of immanent critique and neglect the binding, precise or stringent moment that is expressive

of the exact suffering[16] stored up in contemporary experience.

It could be said that the turn to the horrifying, to what recognizes just how complicit play

can be, and resists the affirmation[17] of it by negatively pointing to the remainder (*Rest*) of play's

imposed form,[18] actually anticipates what we have called the internal dynamic of the sublime.

That is to say, it already hints at the movement away from the sublime's original comportment,

where, as we will see below, subjective sovereignty is no longer upheld. But before we can

understand this dynamic as an instantiation of mimesis, we need to finally address the initial

emergence of the sublime in artworks. Everything we have witnessed about this repressive

tendency of play points to the need for mimesis to transition to the sublime, however mendacious

the original comportment of the latter is. The false *Schein* of the subject, what Adorno calls

"form in the broadest sense" (GS7: 169/ AT: 110), now acknowledged as facilitating a contrived

unity through nothing other than repetitive play, implies that art's dreadful recognition is

inextricably linked to the compulsion to break with the formal, organic harmony of the beautiful.

In this respect, it is small wonder that Kant, whose aesthetics is, of course, always in

some way informing Adorno, depicts the sublime not as the *free play* of the imagination and the

understanding, but rather as a situation in which the form given by the presentation is essentially

"contrapurposive [*zweckwidrig*]" i.e., dissonant, or overwhelming the imagination that

previously came into harmony. The form confronting the imagination is in fact, as Kant also puts

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[16] It is important to grasp that exact suffering is not meant as a statement about adequation. I intend it rather to evoke Adorno's conception of exact fantasy. See page 89 of this work.

[17] For more on the affirmative character of ideological art, see Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in *Art and Liberation*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2007), 82-112.

[18] Jay Bernstein illustrates this problem of the imposition of form on excess as it appears in both Adorno and Derrida when he claims that the non-identical or "excess" with which both of them are grappling, is a "document of barbarism" for Adorno, but "transcendentally" grounded for Derrida. The implication is that Adorno's analysis of the shifts of mimetic play are more historical and thus better able to register and respond to history's *specific* suffering without lapsing into universal, transhistorical claims about art's comportment. Jay Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 221.

it, "unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence [*gewalttätig*] to our imagination."[19] Such an inability to cognize has a repelling emotional effect on us, in contrast to the feeling of pleasure operative in the beautiful. But the sublime experience, as conceived by Kant, does not stop with plain repulsion. It is also essentially a movement of our faculties characterized by seriousness (*Ernst*).[20] This concurs, no doubt, with the previously described claim about the maturity in artworks being constituted by their movement against the play element. Seriousness as a pressing need in art springs forth all the more starkly when the lightness of play is uncovered as being part of the *Schein* of experience. The seriousness of the sublime, of course, emerges alongside a sense of being constituted through this dialectical tension with play, yet this suggests that it also emerges as an implicit critique of the beautiful.

Although it is the case that Kant has distinct reasons to situate the sublime as a mere appendix in his *Critique of Judgment*,[21] we can see, following this logic that echoes the modern need to recognize the shudder, that if artworks are compelled to take up relations to nature that are banished from immediate experience, this certainly applies to artworks confronted with the experiential problems of the general coercion of form. The migratory process is grounded, as it was concerning the beautiful, in experience, so if experience[22] itself is confronted with a newly awakened recognition of the contrapurposive opacity of the object impinging, so to speak, on its previous harmony, then it makes sense to claim, with Adorno, that the sublime also migrates into

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[19] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 245.

[20] Ibid, 5: 245.

[21] Kant's argument is that because the sublime generates both a sense of something other than nature and disrupts the faculties, it does not, like the judgment of beauty, serve as a propaedeutic to bridging the gap between practical and theoretical reason by seeing freedom negatively reflected in nature. See Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 246. For a further discussion of this problem of the sublime as a mere appendix see Henrey E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 344; Paul Guyer, *Kant* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 369-71; Robert R. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[22] Following Benjamin, Adorno always distinguishes between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. The experience that artworks sorrowfully register in their banishment is *Erfahrung*, not the disconnected "lived experience" of *Erlebnis*. See Jay, *Adorno*, 74-75.

the work of art grappling, as ever, with the irreducible "given" of experience. The difference now is that the starting point from which Kant's regressive analysis springs—the "given"—begins to appear in a qualitatively different manner, indeed one that is felt to be antagonistic to the present state of subjectivity.[23]

As we previously implied regarding the deeper dialectic of enlightenment undergirding the movement of the beautiful, this means that the act of mimetic doubling is impelled, in Tom Huhn's formulation, "to set back in motion the frozen Kantian dialectic between beauty and the sublime."[24] We might say that the compulsion to make claims of universality about our aesthetic judgments already implicitly points to revitalizing this stagnated dialectic in which the sublime takes dominion over the beautiful. As Huhn also claims, the judgment of the beautiful is, in a certain regard, constituted by a "subreption" in our aesthetic judgment, the mistaking of object for subject.[25] A part of us, to be sure, knows that we are just playing in the realm of artistic presentation, but we also sense that something is happening that is *objectively* binding in the aesthetic presentation. The object's unrest, what Huhn calls, to repeat, the "opacity" of the object, its resistance to subsumption, is, therefore, the very condition that not only sets in motion the productions of the beautiful, it also more fundamentally shows the negative excess involved in the beautiful's pretension to unity.

Such an awakened excess as constituting the index of mimetic development has, in fact, been implied throughout much of our previous discussion. That the aesthetic subject is

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[23] For more on Adorno's understanding of the concept of the "given" in Kant's thought, see Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 17; Adorno, *Kants "Kritik der reinen Vernunft,"* 33. Juxtaposing this discussion with Adorno's materialism suggests that he is continuing the lineage of regressive analysis, but without the drive for apodicticity or foundations that constituted Kant's method, and without the necessity of viewing the world teleologically. My position is that something in mimesis senses the untenability of the conception of time that emerges from out of Kant's "given."

[24] Huhn, "Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic," 237.

[25] Tom Huhn, "The Movement of Mimesis: Heidegger's 'Origin of the Work of Art' in Relation to Adorno and Lyotard," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 22 (1996):45-69.

compelled to nestle up with that which is outside of it, be touched by what is other to the form

that is, in truth, externally imposed, was already an indication of the need for the imagination to

militate against form, while nevertheless, paradoxically, maintaining form. Stated differently, the

form that overwhelms the imagination in the experience of sublime nature, already implies the

imagination that overwhelms form in the mimetically doubled artwork that is wrestling with

unrequited experiential possibilities. This is also perhaps the place to best understand Adorno's

intentionally exaggerated statement that "artists do not sublimate"(GS4: 240/ MM: 212).[26] The

products of artists have always been part of the process of the object's attempt to shatter a

harmony, seemingly achieved in sublimation, that to this day maintains the semblance of

subjectivity. Their very nature is from the start driven to rub against the ideology of an

individuality that is allegedly already achieved. "The substance of the contradiction between

universal and particular," i.e., the substance of the contradiction between mimesis and the

concept, which is indicative of antagonistic society, "is that individuality is not yet—and that,

therefore, it is bad wherever established" (GS6: 154/ ND: 151).

We can thus finally grasp why Adorno ultimately claims that, "after the fall of formal

beauty, the sublime was in a subtle [*zart*] way, the only thing left to modern art" (GS7: 293 AT:

197). The question of this subtlety will be addressed shortly. However it may be, the recognition

of opacity, the shudder, the excess of form, are all in essence part of the same process as

consciousness coming to recognize its essential mimetic struggle with nature. This awareness is

tied to the fact that the sublime is, at bottom, the truth of the beautiful, or, in Adorno's similar

turn of phrase, "dissonance is the truth about harmony" (GS7: 168/ AT: 110). Adorno

substantiates this claim by following out a position that we have now repeatedly seen was first

initiated by Benjamin, namely that mimesis starts to attempt to twist out of mythology through

[26] For more on Adorno's use of exaggeration see Jay, *Adorno*, 15.

nothing other than the sublime unveiling of the illusion that it itself helps to maintain. Traditional beauty is still too shrouded by the veil of false mimetic reconciliation, too shrouded by the process that betrays its immanent tendency to elicit truth as the voice of protest against what need not be the case. "The ascendancy of the sublime," thus claims Adorno,

> is one with art's need [*Nötigung*] that fundamental contradictions [*tragenden Widersprüche*] not be covered up [*überspielen*], but fought through in themselves [*sich auszukämpfen*]; reconciliation [*Versöhnung*] for them is not the result of the conflict but exclusively that the conflict finds language" [*Sprache findet*]. (GS7: 294/ AT: 197, translation modified)

The veiling that is always already attempting to unveil itself is now definitively tied to this, literally speaking, over-playing (*überspielen*) of form, this play that all too rigidly covers or glosses over the truth of the moment of falsehood, the contradiction, bound to its presentation. The degree to which works fail to alter themselves, so that they tarry with (*verbleiben*) or work through (*auszukämpfen*) the tensions (*Spannung*)[27] gathered in the current state of the artistic material, without prematurely resolving these tensions, is the degree to which they fail at making the antagonisms of the present speak or become eloquent (*Sprache finden*).

Against his own intention, then, Kant's depiction of the sublime is part of the movement of enlightenment unfolding in the movement of mimetic artworks. "Self-reflection in the face of sublimity," writes Adorno, to be sure, addressing the moment of truth in Kant's depiction as it applies to more than just our experience of nature, "anticipates something of a reconciliation [*Versöhnung*] with nature" (GS7: 293/ AT: 197). Adorno's refusal to give up on the promise of enlightenment evidenced in this assertion, commits him to holding on to the belief that the power of thought, of self-reflection, could, despite its dangerous link to domination, still potentially

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[27] With regard to this important concept of tension (*Spannung*), Adorno writes, "This loyalty [*Treue*] [to the image of beauty] demands tension [*Spunnung*] and ultimately turns against its equilibrium [*Ausgleich*]. The loss of tension [*Spannungsverlust*], an indifference [*Gleichgültigkeit*] of the relation of parts to the whole, is the strongest objection to be made against much contemporary art. Yet the abstract demand for tension would itself be mediocre and artificial: the concept of tension applies to what is always under tension [*immer auch Gespannten*], namely form and its other, which is represented in the work by the particularities" (GS7: 85/ AT 53, translation modified).

help to form a true reconciliation with nature. If enlightenment is to be truly enlightened, then it cannot, in a reduction of spirit to mere nature (GS7: 295/ AT: 198), or nature to mere spirit,[28] lose that moment of thought that has the force of elevating itself above collective passivity. His criticism of Kant, as well as his description of how the sublime actually unfolds, is not, therefore, that the sublime is, as such, part of the delusion of spirit's sovereignty, it is rather that, when it neglects to see its terrifying link to illusion, the sublime eventually forfeits the critical, rupturing moment of distance. Hence the task of mimetic modification is comprised of the attempt to live up to Adorno's assertion that, despite everything, "the happiness of thought, the promise of its truth, lies in elevation [*Elevation*] alone" (GS6: 357/ ND: 364, translation modified). In order to fulfill the persistent need for thought to think transcendence (GS6: 396/ ND: 404),[29] the sublime too alters itself through the specific metamorphosis of the play in mimesis.

II. The Downfall of Subjective Sovereignty:
The Playful Metamorphosis of the Sublime Farce

Turning momentarily to recall Kant's analysis of the sublime can more distinctly bring to light this transformation of the original comportment of the sublime, this immanent "change in the composition [*Zusammensetzung*] of the concept" (GS7: 295/ AT: 198). Indeed, the reference back to Kant helps to show not only that Adorno's understanding of Kant's conception contains both an element of truth and untruth, it also brings into sharper relief just how much Adorno

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[28] This reduction of spirit to the matter constitutes the crude materialism discussed in *Negative Dialectics* that is actually a secret idealism for Adorno. See, for example, GS6: 201-202/ND: 198-200. That Adorno is conscious of this potential reversal of materialism into its opposite helps us to understand how his rescue of a concept like "spirit" (*Geist*) attempts to shed its idealist residue without alleging an immediate access to the particular.

[29] Adorno similarly asserts that, "[n]o light [*Licht*] falls on men and things without reflecting [*widerschiene*] transcendence" (GS6: 396/ ND 404).

conceives the idea of mimesis as a struggle with the play negatively built into sublime

presentation (*Darstellung*).

Kant maintains that the sublime consists of a "momentary inhibition of the living forces

[*Lebenskräfte*] and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring [*stärkeren*

Ergießung] of them."[30] His argument is that the inability to synthesize the manifold does not

endure as an experience of the subject being, as it were, demolished by the might or power of

nature. On the contrary, because the aesthetic observer is at a distance, not truly harmed by the

violent presentation,[31] he or she is impelled beyond this inhibition to a negative recognition of

his or her "supersensible substratum [*übersinnliche Substrat*],"[32] that glimmer of hope that we

can still rise above the empirical world. Autonomy, although never unified by both concept and

intuition, and thus experienced in the strict sense, is affirmed despite this momentary inhibition.

Kant's famous description of the sublime as a "negative pleasure"[33] does not, therefore, simply

mean that the sublime is concurrently pervaded by feelings of repulsion and attraction,

displeasure and pleasure, it is also centrally related to the negativity, or indeterminacy, of this

appeal to autonomy. Said another way, what springs forth, as it were, the moment of reflection,

is always, despite the need to change its original comportment, a matter of sensing the negativity

in hypostatized empirical reality and thereby resisting the *Schein* of what, in myth, is presented

as unchangeable. The negativity of the experience resembles what we have seen is the "more" of

both natural beauty and the aura, and it persists even today as the *felt* inadequacy of conceptual

determination (GS6: 154/ ND: 151).

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[30] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 245, translation modified.
[31] Ibid., 5: 261.
[32] Ibid., 5: 255-56.
[33] Ibid., 5: 245

We especially witness the dynamic of play with this look at the sublime, then, in view of the fact that the appeal to the "pure" supersensible substratum, to the autonomy or spirit that wholly separates itself from nature, manifests itself as part of an arrogant metaphysical illusion that, taken to the extreme, is nothing other than the cause of destruction.[34] Historically speaking, the bourgeois confidence in play has been answered by the brutal seriousness of reality. At the same time, this original appeal to the intelligible self, the sovereignty of spirit, still contains an element of truth, for without some remnant of it, there would be no chance of calling a halt to the momentum of history or resisting what Adorno once called the radical evil of "inertia."[35] This element of spirit (*Geist*) always emerges in and through a momentary recognition of the "nothingness [*Nichtigkeit*] of man" (GS7: 295 AT: 198), i.e., a recognition of the fact that there is something illusory in subjectivity, or that nature contains forces that are far greater than us. Adorno's question is thus, What becomes of the constitution of the sublime and mimetic play once it is the case that the antagonistic givenness of empirical reality cannot be denied in the same way? That is, what becomes of aesthetic comportment once it becomes evident that, as Adorno once put it, the "wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (GS4: 43/ MM: 39)? In an administered society, where it is, in truth, empirical reality that is still the, so to speak, victor, ridding all humans of their freedom, increasingly subjecting them to the "market's"[36] volatility, atomizing them from one another, or at best factionalizing them into clans that blindly compete until the threat of liquidation makes precariousness virtually omnipresent—when all of this is constitutive of contemporary experience, the (sublime) claim of self-control and moral fortitude

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[34] Aside from Bernstein's *The Fate of Art*, the secondary literature has rarely addressed the manner in which this reversal of the sublime is very similar to Derrida's discussion of mimesis and the sublime. See Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," in *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kearney & David M. Rasmussen (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

[35] Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problem*, 115; Adorno, *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, 180.

[36] See Martin, *Ethical Marxism*, 240-43.

looks all the more absurd. Adorno's position is that this state of affairs drives all artworks to the sublime, with the caveat that the second half of the trajectory in the so-called vital outpouring cannot maintain the faith that it once had. Maintaining such faith would actually serve to perpetuate the myth that freedom is possible in the midst of anything like the present, hostile structure of society, or worse, that freedom has already been achieved. "We despair of what is," writes Adorno, expressing the demise of the Kantian position, but also its subtle preservation, "and our despair spreads to the transcendental ideas that used to call a halt to despair" (GS6: 368/ ND: 375).

Another way to describe the same development is to say that with this new, modern untenability, what we have also described as the humbling of the pretensions of spirit in the face of real, material conditions, the sublime embraces the moment of truth of its original appearance, i.e., the "nothingness," but now rejects the path leading to its alleged, complete spiritual elevation. This explains why, regarding those artworks that grapple with the current state of mimetic experience, Adorno asserts that, "[t]he more empirical reality hermetically excludes this event [of leaving behind the spell of sovereignty's aim, i.e., the more empirical reality excludes truly achieving freedom], the more art contracts [*zieht zusammen*] into the element of the sublime" (GS7: 293/ AT: 197). It contracts in this way because it has no other way to live up to its promise of eliciting truth, the possibility of genuine freedom, genuine reconciliation, which require nothing short of awakening real subjectivity through the tearing down of its current formation. Yet, to clarify, the fact that it is compelled to do so without that second moment in which the vital forces claim superiority over nature, implies, in Adorno's terms, that modern art "is not capable of the positivity of negation that animated the traditional concept of the sublime as the presence of the infinite" (GS7: 294/ AT: 197).

Here, again, we can see the play element dialectically festering, so to speak, amidst all of this alteration of the sublime's serious comportment. The sublime is indeed marked by what Adorno calls the "the decline [*Niedergang*] of the categories of play" (GS7: 294/ AT: 197), the desire to shatter the self-satisfied play of form, but, as we already observed regarding the recognition of the horror in formation so emphatically present in Beckett, this does not mean that play can or should want to be eliminated entirely. In fact, in this same section of *Aesthetic Theory* that most directly addresses the developments of the sublime and that makes this claim about the decline of play, Adorno also declares that "with art's dynamic, its immanent determination as an action [*immanenten Bestimmung als eines Tuns*], its play character also secretly intensified" (GS7: 294/ AT: 198, translation modified). The reason Adorno puts two seemingly antithetical statements in the same aphorism can be understood by addressing what it really means for the appeal to subjective sovereignty to fall away in the realm of art. Conjuring up Beckett's success at transforming play by calling out the joke of false profundity, Adorno writes,

> [t]hrough the triumph of the intelligible essence in the individual [*Intelligiblen im Einzelnen*] who stands firm spiritually against death, man puffs himself up [*plustert er sich auf*] as if in spite of everything, as the bearer of spirit, he were absolute. He is thus delivered over to the comical [*überantwortet ihn der Komik*]. Advanced art writes the comedy of the tragic: here the sublime and play converge. (GS7: 295/ AT: 198, translation modified)

With this account we finally arrive at the consequence of the persistence of a *critical* play that autonomously follows the compulsion of the mimetic idea, in contrast to the play that remains an empty abstraction, disconnected from the resonance of material tensions, and thus incapable of performing critique. The original appearance of the sublime, whether in artworks or our experience of nature, becomes comical because of the embarrassing difference between its almost religious claim of triumph and the reality that denies any semblance of this triumph. In other words, the experience descends to that which is merely laughable for the reason that such a

"puffed up" appeal to superiority over nature is staggeringly disproportionate to conditions under which it is in actuality nature, or better, second cultural nature, that haunts and controls experience as if by a monstrous, invisible force.

Because the negation maintains that which it negates, the sublime itself is not, however, completely liquidated as a result of this critique levied against the overestimation of subjective reason. The static, ahistorical view of the sublime, threatens to "revers[e] into its opposite" (GS7: 295/ AT: 198), and, confirming Napoleon's dictum, become the ridiculous, but it could also transform itself to counter this descent into that which is laughable because of its utter blindness. "If […] the experience of the sublime," asserts Adorno, "unveils [*enthüllt*] itself as the self-consciousness of the human beings' naturalness, then the composition of the concept changes" (GS7: 295/ AT: 198, translation modified). Not unlike our discussion of the shudder becoming a conscious need for artworks, we can see that the sublime is now constituted by an appreciation of the natural element that, in reality, humans can never altogether master. It is suitable to still describe this comportment as sublime, despite the cultural "twaddle [*Salbadern*]" (GS7: 295/ AT: 198) that inevitably accompanies positively asserting it, for this new mimetic comportment cannot be separated from what Adorno, echoing Kant, frequently calls the negativity of experience. "The legacy of the sublime is unassuaged negativity [*ungemilderte Negativität*], as stark and illusionless [*scheinlos*] as was once promised by the semblance of the sublime [*Schein des Erhabenen*]" (GS7: 296 AT: 199).

If the task of mimetic transformation is, in fact, compelled to counter the descent into what one would quite justifiably laugh at, why, it could be asked, does Adorno nonetheless maintain that the sublime and play "converge" in the modern artwork? Why does something comical still persist, or why does play secretly intensify? The successful avoidance of a

clownish, spiritual overestimation might give the impression that outright seriousness once more takes precedence in the dynamic of mimesis. But Adorno implies that not even this avoidance or critique of sovereignty can ward off the lingering ridiculousness of the contemporary predicament of mimesis. This is the "subtle" persistence of both the sublime and play. Considering art's tendency to overstep (*überschreiten*) itself, as well as its desire to express, despite its impossibility, the entire weight of the world's lament, the fact that artworks are part of the guilt of what maintains semblance in play, indicates that they cannot avoid the above described convergence of the sublime and play. In Adorno's articulation,

> [t]he divergence [*Divergenz*] of the constructive and the mimetic, which no artwork can resolve and which is virtually the original sin [*Erbsünde*] of aesthetic spirit, has its correlative in that element of the ridiculous and clownish [*Albernen und Clownshaften*] that even the most significant works bear and that, unmasked [*nicht zuzuschminken*], is a piece of their significance [*ein Stück ihrer Bedeutung*]. (GS7: 180-181/ AT 118-119, translation modified)

Precisely because all artworks are objectifications that sell out the immediate subject-object relation that mimesis immerses itself in, they cannot disregard their dialectic with the constructive, formal or spiritual side. The absurdity of being a part of this divergence, but nevertheless needing to speak against it while leaving on the mime's, so to speak, make-up (*Schminken*), propels an appreciation for the clownish or ridiculous aspect of all art. This transforms the comportment of artworks in general, and the play moment in particular, such that even those seemingly transhistorical categories of tragedy or comedy are ultimately altered and registered by modern artworks in their process of going under (*untergehen*) (GS7: 296/ AT: 199). By not denying the fact that they are masked, playful *Schein*, artworks unconceal the ridiculousness of needing to feebly exist, without at the same time being able to wipe themselves clean of their guilt.

Although Adorno never explicitly declares it, this depiction of the dynamic of play has, in the end, effectively theorized the emergence of the modern farce. Beckett's dramas and the play

they employ are, to be sure, inseparable from the farcical. They often consist of deranged children-adults who, maimed, at once unleash a kind of vertiginous eruption of language that disclaims tragic catharsis and gives rise to a circus-like jest.[37] This transformation of play is not, it should be noted, merely an illustration of the development of theater, or of the latest aesthetic developments in Adorno's lifetime, however. Although not identical to it, something about this transformation seems to speak to the heart of our world as well.[38] One is just as much reminded of the incomparable element of farce in the atonal, debilitated clown horns that increase their tempo into a kind of limping frolic to the prelude of Ligeti's apocalyptic Opera, *Le Grand Macabre*. Or, similarly, one cannot escape the farcical, indeed, equally sublime and terrifyingly playful infantilism of Jean De Buffet's *D'hôtel nuance d'abricot*. Perhaps no other work more literally fulfills Adorno's claim about artworks gazing back at us (GS7: 185/ AT: 122). The trifling contours, painted as if by a child, but nevertheless converging with a mutilated corpse, is a refracted mirror image of an objective spirit that shudders for its refusal to console us over the nightmare that we have become.

We might say, along these lines, that the so-called maturation of enlightenment in art plays out as a greater steadfastness before the ancient philosophical task of knowing thyself. Although artworks of the past were arguably in denial of what was already implicit in them, the truth of this task today cannot be separated from the knowledge of a condition that has itself

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[37] Although this is simply a general characterization that threatens to be reduced to the abstract "message" operative in each of Beckett's works, the simultaneity of seriousness and ridiculousness is an inescapable element of almost all of his works.

[38] Following Benjamin's claim that fascism is the "aestheticizing of politics" (SW4: 270/ GS1.2: 508), Adorno, almost uncannily predicting the convergence of the ideology film with the politics of the last decade, once wrote, "[t]he favourite theme of such films is the rehabilitation of drunkards, whose miserable intoxication [the audience] envy" (GS4: 229/ MM: 202).

become farcical or absurd.[39] Hence Adorno, drawing yet another element into the constellation of the present, maddening condition, that was previously noted in the divergence between mimesis and construction, maintains that, "[i]n the similarity of clowns to animals the likeness of humans to apes flashes up; the constellation animal/fool/clown is a fundamental layer of art" (GS7: 182/ AT: 119).

Have we merely stumbled upon an accidental variation in the developments of Twentieth Century Art? As we asked before, is this merely Adorno's own moralizing[40] and external taste being voiced in his aesthetics of mimetic development? Or does not the consciousness of a play that is, in truth, bloody, terrifying, and—because of its inability to extricate itself from the foolishness of animals—clownish, forcefully induce the inner transformation of aesthetic comportment itself? To express it differently, does not the mimesis of the present, following the compulsion of the object itself, force art to autonomously move in this new, playfully critical, yet horrifying direction, regardless of whether such a movement increasingly turns against all so-called reality? Furthermore, echoing Adorno's claim about something of modernism persisting as a result of the persistence of alienation, does not our present condition, comprised of what is perhaps more uncannily childish than anything even Adorno and Horkheimer could conceive of in their notion of "ticket thinking" (GS3: 232 /DOE: 171),[41] still impel a mimesis that follows its

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[39] While Adorno acknowledge the absurd and farcical components of modern art, the fundamental difference between he and Sartre or French existentialism, is that the latter ontologizes a situation that is, above all else, historical in nature. See Adorno, "Trying to Understand Endgame," 241/ GS11:281-324.

[40] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 84.

[41] A deeper analysis of this concept from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* could foster interesting connections between its "fragmenting" effect on historical experience or memory, and the current you-tube, talking-point oriented politics of the present. This also brings to mind several more contemporary analyses regarding the coercive power of the image and the accompanying dissolution of reading and writing in advanced capitalism. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 1983), 260-65; Jean Baudriallard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998), 120-125; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative* (Washington: Zero Books, 2009), 21-30.

impulse to "contract" into a farcically sublime confrontation with the form that would deny precisely this childishness?

Answering these questions, in fact, asks us to do nothing short of justifying why certain aesthetic judgments or aesthetic comportments are more philosophically legitimate than others; it asks us to answer why, as Adorno once ironically titled a fragment, *De gustibus est disputandum* (GS4: 84/ MM: 75). It should now be clear that if such a task concerning the objectivity of taste is to be genuinely fulfilled, then there are considerable reasons to heed what we have described as the dialectic of enlightenment immanent to the idea of mimesis. If Adorno and Benjamin are right, it is precisely in following this dialectical development of mimesis constituted by the historically varying accents of the play and *Schein* elements, that aesthetics can have a basis, even in the face of bourgeois relativism, for determining whether or not an artwork speaks today.

Conclusion: Rescuing a Materialist Aesthetics

Taking into account our analysis of the progressive attempt of mimesis to rescue objective expression, i.e., its historically embedded attempt to lend voice to suffering through the myth-rupturing truth still arguably latent in the tensions of the available artistic material, it is likely not too contentious to claim that something of Adorno's aesthetics remains relevant to the present experiential condition. It would be difficult, after all, to argue that contemporary experience has ceased to be linked to a process that shores up myth, and we have surely demonstrated that the dynamic idea of mimesis is perhaps, above all else, guided by the attempt to do nothing short of breaking with that myth. We have also shown that mimesis responds to this call for objective expression or critical resistance by following where play and *Schein* want to go for the sake of their idea of reconciliation. Indeed, the critique of *Schein*, the preservation and sublation of the aura and magic, as well as the play that converges with the sublime in the attempt to atone for false coherence (*Stimmigkeit*), are all part of the critical movement that is roused through the dialectic of enlightenment built into mimesis. This appears to give Adorno's theory a certain advantage, in that, especially with the help of the *idea* of mimesis, there is a concrete means to understand those tensions that are unreconciled and thus potentially gathered in the expression of this precise historical hour. And yet, even though we have shown that this dynamic of play and *Schein* illuminates a similarity between Adorno's aesthetics and a contemporary aesthetic theory that is so often characterized by its support of the rise of the comedic or farcical dimension addressed at the end of Chapters Three and Four, there are

nonetheless several accusations made against Adorno that, if true, would substantially weaken the claim of his persisting relevance.[1]

Whereas Adorno, for instance, comes close to Arthur Danto in their mutual—and in my view quite accurate—assertion that the dissolution of tragedy leads to the farcical joke,[2] there are several intricacies that starkly distinguish Adorno from contemporary theorists such as Danto. The most pronounced distinction seems to be that most contemporary discussions have appeared to neglect the horror, discussed in Chapter Four, that at once contributes to the deterioration of traditional comedy and spurs a new farcical relation that is united with the sublime. In short, echoing the abstractness we witnessed in Benjamin's conception of play, the assertion that the rise of the farcical or post-tragic comedy is merely indicative of the postmodern condition, arguably borders on being aligned with an aesthetic phenomenology that is too vague because of its failure to address the *specific* comportment of the play-moment involved in this historical transformation.

In my estimation it is, in fact, precisely these neglected intricacies that, to be more specific, refuse to let go of the sensuous moment in presentation, that do not cast off the brittle seriousness of the present, and that, most importantly, bear in mind the internal development of mimesis itself, that give Adorno and Benjamin a critical advantage and descriptive superiority to many contemporary theorists. Despite the reflective insights of the current aesthetic theory concerning what is certainly an altered condition for artistic production, the question of whether the current milieu in aesthetic debates is tied to the anti-enlightenment movement of nominalism,

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[1] For a few examples of these accusations other than Habermas's well known critique of Adorno's alleged appeal to an anti-enlightenment irrationalism, see Ernesto Verdeja, "Adorno's Mimesis and its Limitations for Social Thought" *European Journal of Political Theory* Vol.8, No. 4 (October 2009): 493-511; David Roberts, *Art and Enlightenment: Aesthetic Theory after Adorno* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Seyla Benhabib, "Modernity and the Aporias of Critical Theory" in *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments*, vol. 1, ed. Jay Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1994), 115-135.

[2] Danto, *After the End of Art*, 217.

is still especially pressing. Following Peter Bürger's claim, there is surely a definite tendency

amongst contemporary theorists, especially in the face of the relatively recent deterioration of

traditional forms, styles, and isms,[3] to assert something to the effect that, after the rebellion of the

avant-garde against the social and political impotence of art, "no form could any longer claim

that it alone had either eternal or temporally limited validity."[4] This could well indicate, as is

often claimed, a circumstance that has finally abandoned the old metaphysical and idealistic

systems that insist on the normative basis of aesthetic judgment. But it could also signify nothing

other than the conquest of nominalism,[5] of what we have shown is the goal of the mimetic taboo,

which comes at the expense of the possibility of truly reading with the mimetic "tempo" of the

matter. To recapitulate a theme from Chapters Two and Three, this circumstance would mean

that registering the material persistence of irreconciliation, registering the shudder, danger, or

fragility still felt between subject and object, between rationality and mimesis, is somehow no

longer a constitutive feature of the comportment of artworks.

Following the former logic about the end of metaphysical deception, there do,

nonetheless, appear to be legitimate reasons to contend that Adorno's aesthetics is outmoded or

antiquated for its conservative and modernist appeal to truth claims, radical darkness, autonomy,

etc. But is this fall from acceptance simply the result of a change in historical circumstances that

Adorno did not live to see, or rather a misunderstanding of some of the most important

tendencies in Adorno's and Benjamin's thought taken together? For example, is it not the case

that, in general, relatively recent discussions have failed, with the possible exception of Lyotard,[6]

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[3] Cf. Adorno GS7: 44-46/ AT: 24-26.

[4] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 86.

[5] For more on this question of the nominalism associated with developments in advanced capitalism, see Frederic Jameson, "Immanence and Nominalism in Postmodern Theoretical Discourse" in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 181-259.

[6] Jean François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 151.

to theorize just how linked the play of our current experiential condition compels mimetic artistic productions to take hold of the relation of play to the sublime as both a convergence with the latter and a reflection of the *Untergang* of tragedy and traditional comedy? Similarly, could it not be the case that, rather than being an indication of a new, anti-modern era of art in which there are no longer binding justifications for why one work is superior to another, the tendency of theory to relinquish identifying how and why artworks still speak truth as objective protest (*Einspruch*), is actually a worrisome example of capitulation?[7]

If the latter capitulation is not the case, then these claims of the disbanding of aesthetic theory would need to offer an argument against the material lineage that we have described as being essential to mimetic experience. In other words, they would have to show how it is the case that what we have respectively elucidated as Benjamin's and Adorno's conceptions of the lament (*Klage*) and shudder (*Schauer*) registered by mimesis no longer propel a musical transformation of mimesis that, like *Trauerspiel*, is compelled to hear and re-configure the unsettled phonetic tensions of art's present language (*Sprache*). What is more, it would somehow have to show that mimesis, objectified and sedimented into the form of artworks, is not the faculty that most acutely senses the dialectic of subject and object still constituted by antagonisms and still confronted by form's attempt to momentarily call a halt to them.

With these questions in view, we can narrow down the problems that have surfaced from our delineation of the idea of mimesis into three basic allegations against Adorno, all of which supposedly weaken or disqualify him from being engaged in the contemporary aesthetic

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[7] This is David Harvey's general thesis in Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990). On this claim about the ideological role of "postmodern" theory, see also Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

climate.[8] In the first place there is the argument that Adorno is far too beholden to the now

famous "grand-narrative"[9] position, whose speciousness contemporary theory has apparently

made explicit. Although he should not necessarily be coupled with many of the recent currents in

aesthetics, this criticism is perhaps also best exemplified by Bürger's assertion that the claim of a

"more advanced" form of artworks, still seemingly championed by Adorno, has now become

obsolete or antiquated.[10] To call something more advanced or more progressive amidst "infinite

possibilities" or to say that one work can set the rule, is apparently a relic from modernism's

naïve pretension to grandeur.[11] For it may indeed be the case that "where the formal possibilities

have become infinite, not only authentic creation but also its scholarly analysis become

difficult," if not entirely impossible.[12] The plethora of possibilities that do not fit into an easy

story might mark the end of the ability to justify any work's superiority over another.

In the second place, there is the accusation that, as mentioned above, Adorno, unlike

Benjamin, inherits an antiquated and bourgeois notion of autonomy. He is, in a word, still a

victim of the *l'art pour l'art* bias, or the classist appeal to "high" art. Aside from the more

substantial thread of this argument that states, as Zuidervaart has noted, that there does not

appear to be a firm basis for alleging the categorical claim of autonomy as the *only* vehicle of

critical art,[13] this general accusation maintains that Adorno is still caught within the discourse of

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[8] I will not discuss what is alleged to be a fourth shortcoming in Adorno's thought, namely that raised by adherents of the latest linguistic turn in the Frankfurt School. This view, held by, for example, Sheyla Benhabib or Albrecht Wellmer in Wellmer, "Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime" in *Endgame: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity: Essays and Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 155-183, 169, maintains that Adorno forfeits the practical, communicative possibilities of artworks. As I have already discussed the manner in which this type of emphasis misses the importance of Adorno's claim that artworks, first and foremost, attempt to avoid losing sight of their critical capacity, discussions of this sort fall outside the domain of our immediate concern. See footnote 13 from Chapter Four as well.

[9] Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[10] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 63.

[11] Ibid., 63.

[12] Ibid., 94

[13] Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 223.

the sovereignty of the subject, long since repudiated by philosophy and the social sciences. In other words, to conceive of the autonomy of artworks as standing over and against other spheres of life, seems not only too rigid, but blind to the manner in which other spheres such as the economic, social or political are porous with and help constitute the comportment of art.

And thirdly, there is the argument that Adorno's aesthetics anachronistically holds onto the concept of the new. Of the three charges, this third one appears to be, at first glance, the most convincing. It is indeed hard to avoid the feeling of outright pretentiousness that accompanies a "new," seemingly "radical" production that, in actuality, likely reached its apex of expression some fifty years ago. Once again, in the face of all the different styles and comportments that are available and that have already been experimented with as a result of the dissolution of traditional form, the appeal to the new seems like a particularly modern concern. Tersely put, the situation that spurred Schoenberg's radicalness does, in fact, seem like a thing of the past.

My position is that, as we conclude, we can begin to find a, so to speak, middle way through all of these difficulties. To be more specific, we can begin to find a path where the appeal to the new is not necessarily upheld with the same inflexible vehemence, but where, in refusing to renounce the movement of mimesis as the index of critique, aesthetic criticism can, and should, be compelled to register the success of artworks through an understanding of the development of mimetic language. In other words, if we follow our argument about how the dynamic of play and semblance move within mimesis, we can see that Adorno is indeed still quite relevant, in particular by virtue of the fact that he does not descend to the status of an "anything goes"[14] aesthetics, and still accords with what is all the more needed in the face of omnipresent nominalism: a materialist aesthetics. Following out the implications of mimesis as we have seen them described by Adorno and Benjamin steers us to a position that does not

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[14] Danto, *After the End of Art*, 47.

discard critique, yet is also aware of a condition in which the radicalness of the avant-garde has, of course, appeared to fade. The best way we can come to this stance of upholding mimetic critique in artworks, that is, maintaining the idea of mimesis, or what we have come to call art's immanent pursuit of real peace, is through an attempt to disabuse several of the above misreading.

Above all else, these readings are misguided in their understanding of what the previous two chapters ultimately implied, namely that the dynamic of mimesis leads directly to and is intertwined with Adorno's conception of autonomy. Everything we have now illustrated concerning this dynamic should give the impression that play and *Schein* want to play themselves out, so to speak, want to follow tendencies that would fulfill the hopes of the past, regardless of whether the social totality stringently represses these tendencies and refuses their entrance into real experience. Explicating the link between mimesis and autonomy, and thereby addressing the second accusation against Adorno, actually puts us in the best possible position to refute many of the misguided threads to the other accusations. That is, truly grasping this link between autonomy and mimesis just as much begins to dispel the problems with Adorno's grand narrative logic and his concept of the new as it clears up the misunderstandings about the role of autonomy.

What, then, does Adorno mean by autonomy (*Autonomie*)? To begin with, is there really any, as it were, bite to the claim that he is an elitist who, in his pessimistic cultural mandarinism,[15] could not let go of the classist claim of "high," "pure," and autonomous art? He does, after all, give the impression in several instances that the critical force of autonomous works rests on their complete denial and thus autonomy or independence from society (GS7:

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[15] See Jay, *Adorno*, 22

334/ AT: 225).[16] Yet, does this denial or refusal to answer to the demands of the commodity form, i.e., the totalizing and fetishistic logic of society, come to the fore in Adorno's thinking as the arrogant claim of a well-deserved privilege, or similarly, as something that is wholly "pure" in the traditional sense of *l'art pour l'art*? Even further, in this context, what does Adorno, who declares that autonomy is "itself suspect of giving consolation" (GS7: 10/ AT: 2), mean by the "society" from which artworks apparently turn? Does he mean that the mimesis involved in autonomous works is mere arbitrariness (*Willkür*), free to express, willy-nilly, whatever it wants about society? Similarly, does he mean that the mimesis involved in autonomous works somehow sheds the compulsion to be the mimesis of the present? Our analysis of the material trace or echo sensed and gathered by mimesis and the corresponding need that drives the transformation of play and *Schein* should unequivocally demonstrate that Adorno's answer is no. In order to avoid regression, mimesis must uncompromisingly be the mimesis of the present.

We have, furthermore, already witnessed, in a telling letter to Benjamin on the second draft of the "Technology" essay, that Adorno, in fact, contends that autonomy is itself a scar, a "torn half" of an unreconciled world (CC: 130). In keeping with the narrative we have attempted to elucidate about the dynamic idea of mimesis, Adorno's conception of autonomy as a scar is thus, first and foremost, the result of an historical process. This must be part of what Adorno is gesturing at when he paradoxically insists that "art is for itself and it is not [*Sie ist für sich und ist es nicht*]" (GS7: 17/ AT: 6, translation modified), or that artworks are "autonomous" but they are also comprised of a "*fait social*" (GS7: 16/ AT: 5). Much the way a need or compulsion (*Nötigung*) in the object drives all artworks to express something of the sublime in a "contraction" (*Zusammenziehen*) or reflex from the bad totality that permits no truth, we might

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[16] See also, GS7: 334/ AT: 225: "Prior to the emancipation of the subject, art was undoubtedly in a certain sense more immediately social than it was afterward. Its autonomy, its growing independence from society, was a function of the bourgeois consciousness of freedom that was itself bound up with the social structure."

say that autonomy too is a kind of contraction that is a necessary, yet guilt-ridden, consequence of the banishment of mimetic comportment from real experience. To be more specific, if, as we showed in Chapter Two, the mimetic taboo seeks to eliminate the expression of objective suffering, while nevertheless setting into motion a dialectic of enlightenment that need not remain completely hostile to mimesis; if, to state it differently, the possibility of a *sublation* of mimesis in which the latter is no longer antagonistic to rationality is possible for real experience, then it is not simply the case that mimesis is banished to or seeks refuge in the neutralized sphere of art or language. Rather, this state of affairs also means that *a particular comportment of mimesis* seeks to express itself in the refuge of art, i.e., a particular comportment that would actually live up to the promise of a reconciled mimesis. However mired, as we saw in Chapter Three, by the guilt of art's persistent *Schein*, that comportment must be bound to the attempt to achieve autonomy, since only the latter aims to avoid sacrificing—at least in principle—the possibilities or openness latent in the current state of the matter.

When Adorno, therefore, continually tries to theorize this paradoxical concept of autonomy in artworks, he must be trying to get to the bottom of what it would mean for mimesis to follow, without fetters or external imposition, the objectively changing constellation, to mimetically "read" this constellation (SW2.2: 697/ GS2.1: 209), as Benjamin put it, in the moment of its recognizability, the critical moment (*Augenblick*) of its fissure (*Sprung*), especially insofar as doing so implies resisting what the ruling instrumental logic of "society" ceaselessly tries to deny. Reading with the critical tempo of the present demands reading with an immersion in the details of that present, not, as we also observed in Chapter Three, in a flight from them. Importantly, the demand thus placed upon art for the sake of eliciting a situation beyond art, entails the continued recognition—despite the changed condition of postmodernity—of the

hostile manner with which that very object confronts every subject. Who but the desperate reactionary could maintain, in the face of the increasing number and magnitude of economic crises manifest as the structural antagonisms of advanced capitalism, that the object[17] has ceased appearing as the "unassailable force" that Marx so aptly linked to the mythical reflex more than one hundred and fifty years ago?[18] Who, moreover, but the former could maintain in the face of what is doubtless capital's expanding stranglehold vis-à-vis labor in the neoliberal period, that the rise, for instance, of the concept of "human capital" actually affords human beings more freedom?[19] As Adorno once wrote, "[o]nly when the process that begins with the metamorphosis of labor-power into a commodity has permeated [*durchdringt*] men through and through and objectified each of their impulses [*Regungen*] as *a priori* commensurable variations of the exchange relation [*eine Spielart des Tauschverhältnisses*], is it possible for life [*Leben*] to reproduce itself under the dominant [*herrschenden*] relations of production" (GS4: 260/ MM: 229, translation modified). The default reaction or "second nature" with which every man and woman appeals to relativistic arguments, or to an anachronistic entrepreneurialism that rarely, if ever, serves their interests, must be part of this same controlled submission to the ruling order. Indeed, the current introjection of brutality, administering even the seemingly most personal impulses, and thereby unremittingly affirming the spell of inevitability, is likely different from Adorno's characterization only in the increased intensity of the dominant machinations.[20] As Adorno often put it, the more desperate the situation gets, the more desperately will humans

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[17] It is important to note that for Benjamin, when we speak of nonsensuous similarity that "reads" the "object" this object can refer to the unconscious, internal and external nature, the community, or the material conditions. Essentially, nonsensuous similarity itself problematizes the inside-outside dichotomy.

[18] Engels and Marx, *Collected Works* 5, 44/ *Werke* 3, 31.

[19] Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008).

[20] Aside from Foucault's groundbreaking work on this question of the increased intensity and expanded space into which the control society's bio-political self-regulation enters, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's contribution is, similarly, a highly suggestive analysis of the increased domination of the neo-liberal period that bears resemblance to Adorno's analysis. See Hardt and Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

cling to the ideology that subdues them. A mimesis that speaks or lends voice (*ertönen lassen*) to that which is thus, more than ever, denied to experience, but nevertheless still possible for it, must be called to understand the intricacies through which this constellation is able to maintain such an increasingly blatant affront.

Along these lines, when Adorno insists that works of art need to be autonomous, he is neither claiming that autonomy is somehow to be desired for its own sake, nor that it somehow becomes indifferent to the world it is currently enmeshed in. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is why he repeatedly maintains that art is always based on "some degree of external imitation" (GS7: 158/ AT: 103), or that "only by immersing its autonomy in society's *imagerie* can art surmount the heteronomous market" (GS7: 39/ AT: 21). He even goes so far as to say that, "new art is so burdened by the weight of the empirical that its pleasure in fiction lapses" (GS7: 36/ AT: 19). The substance of authentic, contemporary mimetic comportment cannot be separated, then, from the degree to which it acts in agreement with whatever is necessary for exact imagination to resist being imprisoned by this weight. Hence what Zuidervaart disparagingly calls Adorno's all-too categorical exclusion of non-autonomous works misses the rhetorical force behind Adorno's claim. This force lies in the fact that Adorno believes that, above all else, mimesis strives to find language (*Sprache finden*) or speak to the expressionless silence of nature—regardless of what it would take to render this possible. If it is the case that some commodified works are capable of unswervingly following the nuances of the matter, phonetically registering the unresolved tensions of experience, finding the eloquent language of suffering, and thus avoiding a surrender to the external demands of instrumental reason, then there is nothing in Adorno's view that fundamentally disagrees with Benjamin's more inclusive aesthetics. We might say that, in view of the hegemony of coercion involved in the culture

industry,[21] Adorno simply finds it quite dubious to think that such a state of affairs could be anything but anomalous. Not indifferent to the form of his philosophical presentation, his categorical exclusion of commodified works is, in truth, designed to highlight the more urgent issue of just how central letting mimesis play out its potential is. In other words, quite conscious of the rhetorical force of exaggeration, the "only" in claims like 'only autonomous works are critical' is not to be taken literally—as if concepts and the objects they purport to describe were ever identical to one another, and as if Adorno did not on several occasions mark the profundity of the seemingly most banal commodities.[22] The exclusion should rather be taken as an apt configuration within the, so to speak, force field of an aphorism; that is, it should be taken as a statement that expressively concentrates its energy on just how severe the coercive grip of the value-form currently is.

If one nevertheless remains bogged down in the question of Adorno's alleged elitism, the consequence will likely be that one will neglect understanding Adorno's far more important and related point about autonomy, namely that, with and against Benjamin, the comportment of autonomy is wrapped up with the increasingly frail or weak (*schwache*) messianic force of artistic and philosophical presentation. Not only is grasping the perpetual task of acting for an all-too belated redemption (*Erlösung*) thwarted before it is ever attempted, such a myopic reading will more than likely cause one to neglect the significance of Adorno's assertion that, on

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[21] For an excellent contemporary reading of the culture industry that both avoids some of the pitfalls in cultural studies that pass over Adorno's contemporary relevance and does not sacrifice an acute understanding of the connection this concept has with the Marxian tradition, see Shane Gunster, *Capitalizing Culture* (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

[22] See, for example, GS3: 164/ DE: 113-14: "The more seriously art takes its opposition to existence, the more it resembles the seriousness of existence, its antithesis: the more it labors to develop strictly according to its own formal laws, the more labor it requires to be understood, whereas its goal has been precisely to negate the burden of labor. In some revue films, and especially in grotesque stories and "funnies," the possibility of this negation momentarily flashes forth [*blitzt auf*]" (translation modified). It is telling that when referring to these commodified works Adorno uses the exact verb that he and Benjamin always employ to signify the critical moment (*Augenblick*) of art, namely *aufblitzen*. Elsewhere, Adorno also comments on the critical capacity of "non-autonomous" phenomena such as Mickey Mouse, Erik Satie, and Fairytales.

the one hand, "mimetic comportment does not imitate [*nachahmt*] something but rather makes itself like itself" (GS7: 169/ AT: 111), and on the other hand, the rational, spiritual or constructive element—itself a "mimetic force [*Kraft*]"—"works toward the identity of the formation with itself [*Gleichheit des Gebildes mit sich selbst*]" (GS7: 142/ AT: 92, translation modified). Clearly, in passages such as these, Adorno is trying to once again cite the importance of the dialectic of mimesis and rationality entailed in the struggle of enlightenment with identity. He is also, of course, highlighting that mimesis is a non-judging judgment, the moment of *Indifferenz* prior to or outside of a full-fledged determination that would present "something." But, even further, he is evoking the regulative pursuit of a complete immersion with the matter, whereby the "communicative struggle" or play of *Trauer-spiel* would cease to be operative. In other words, by claiming that mimesis attempts to wholly follow its death-impulse, become identical with itself such that subject and object are at last different in their unity,[23] Adorno is not holding onto the old idealist façade, he is rather trying to illustrate how much a non-regressive mimesis tries to elicit what the state of language would be if, as he once put it, "no human had a part of his living-labor withheld [*lebendigen Arbeit vorenthalten*]" (GS6: 150/ ND: 147, translation modified),[24] or if the Name itself could speak so eloquently that its need to coerce or compel had fallen away. To attempt to become identical with itself through both the active moment of a constructive and technical spirit as well as the passive moment of magically registering nonsensuous similarity, thus means that the autonomy linked to mimesis is fundamentally concerned with letting mimesis go where it would go within experience, if experience were not, as ever, constituted by the bitter repression of mimesis. It means to follow

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[23] Cf. GS6: 153/ ND 150: "Utopia would be above identity and above contradiction, a togetherness of diversity [*ein Miteinander des Verschiedenen*]."

[24] The whole passage reads as follows: "If no man had part of his living-labor [*lebendigen Arbeit*] withheld from him any more, rational identity would be reached [*erreicht*], and society would have transcended the identity mode of thinking [*identifizierende Denken*]" (GS6: 150/ ND 147, translation modified).

mimesis through the inescapable process of coming to form, coming to objectification, not following it where "society"[25] says it must go for the sake of being in step with a long since antiquated self-preservation. In this sense, a vital part of the strength in the appeal to autonomy is that we could not possibly call the critical component of artworks critical if it did not at once help assemble and unleash an image[26] of what is truly possible for experience but denied by the necessary illusion: real happiness, i.e., a mimesis finally released (*erlöst*) from the guilt (*Schuld*) of civilization.

Hence, without even needing to note that Adorno, of course, always attributed the reified and easy division between "high" and "low" art to "cultural conservatism,"[27] we can see that autonomy plays such an important role for Adorno for the same reason that mimetic development plays such an important role. They are, indeed, part of the same dynamic, but even further than that, they complement each other in what we have seen is the historical struggle to resist *Schein* via expression. In Adorno's words,

> The lineament of expression [*Züge des Ausdrucks*] inscribed in artworks, if they are not to be toneless [*stumpf*], are demarcation lines [*Demarkationslinien*] against *Schein*. Yet, because they, as artworks, remain *Schein*, the conflict [*Konflikt*] between *Schein*—form in the broadest sense— and expression [*Ausdruck*] remains unresolved [*unausgetragen*] and fluctuates historically. Mimetic comportment [*Verhaltensweise*], an attitude toward reality this side of the fixed antithesis of subject and object [*eine Stellung zur Realität diesseits der fixen Gegenübersetzung von Subjekt und Objekt*], is seized [*ergriffen*] in art—the organ of mimesis [*Organ der Mimesis*] since the mimetic taboo—from *Schein* and, as the compliment [*komplementär*] to the autonomy of form, becomes its bearer. (GS7: 169/ AT: 110, translation modified)[28]

Once again we observe that autonomy is not a good in itself for Adorno, but is rather part of an historical fluctuation that emerges out of a newly aroused need to combat the very illusion that

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[25] Cf. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?: The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society" in *Can one Live after Auschwitz?*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003);
[26] For a further discussion of the "image (Bild)" in Benjamin and Adorno's thought, see Rolf Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the Passagen-Werk" in *The Arcades Project*.
[27] See, for example, Adorno, "Little Heresy," in *Essays on Music*, 319; "On Popular Music," in Essays on Music, 437-469.
[28] In a very similar passage on the relation between mimesis and autonomy, Adorno writes, "[a]rt is a refuge [*Zuflucht*] for mimetic comportment. In art the subject exposes itself, at various levels of autonomy, to its other, separated from it and yet not altogether separated" (GS7: 86/ AT 53).

would efface the expression of suffering. Autonomy is intertwined with the comportment that, before anything else, seeks to avoid falling silent or becoming part of the deadened (*abgestumpft*), disenchanted world. Since it and its "compliment," mimesis, are nevertheless *Schein*, i.e., illusory art, they have to be responsive to the changing configuration that would best bring the unresolved (*unausgetragen*) conflict to the surface. As we saw in Chapter One, Benjamin was fully aware that this drive in art that acts for the sake of expression has to come with the simultaneous desire for art itself to go under (*untergehen*). Indeed the movement toward the sublime, towards the critique of abstract play, even towards the critical role of artworks seeking knowledge, is nothing other than the expression of this historical strife that fights against *Schein*. Adorno is, therefore, simply adding to the Benjaminian insight that *both* mimesis and autonomy are linked to this attempt to avoid the deaf, the conventional, or that which no longer captures the saturated friction existing between the nonsensuous similarity of subject and object.

We are thus compelled to ask whether there is something in the postmodern condition that has stopped this implicit need to combat *Schein*, illusion, or the persistence of myth. Or, given the previous passage, we could ask whether there is something in the postmodern condition that has caused artworks to be less concerned with, as it were, falling flat or not finding language when confronted with the potential of reification or the suppression of suffering. If we conceive of autonomy as the bearer (*Träger*) of artistic comportment and expression, as that which, taken with mimesis, listens to the current phonetic tensions as they, in Benjamin's terms, are crystallized into the now-time of the present (AP 475 [N10a,3]/ GS5.1: 595), then autonomy is not a mere holdover from Adorno's bourgeois or modern bias, it is, instead, a highly efficacious, if not wholly necessary, fluctuation point in the sorrowful (*traurig*) dynamic of mimesis. To state it simply, it is nothing other than the "spirit [that] follows its formations

[*Gebilden*] where they want to go, setting free their immanent language [*entbindet ihre immanente Sprache*]" (GS7: 142/ AT: 92, translation modified).

If we, accordingly, shift the emphasis and observe that finding language, becoming eloquent or speaking with singularity is the guiding thrust behind the need for autonomy, then we discover that we are, in fact, also subtly confronted with the other two accusations of irrelevance made against Adorno, namely his outmoded grand-narrative logic and his concept of the new. Autonomy does, after all, appear to provide an opening for Adorno to claim that the "most advanced" or "progressive" works are the ones that follow the latest developments, that understand—unlike those that preceded it—what is now possible or can be unlocked within the available material. Yet, to directly address the accusation of the former, is this position, which, to repeat, also implies that some artworks still set the rule or at least display their superiority over their predecessors as part of the internal development of art, grounded in a teleological or linear understanding of art? Asked differently, is Adorno's claim about the superiority of autonomous works that listen to the current mimetic developments on their way towards objectification, made with reference to the untenable concept of progress, wherein the knowledge that artworks perform is merely a piece of ever-advancing enlightenment?

The answer to these questions is also, to clarify our previous allusion, linked to the problem of the new in Adorno's thought, because we can presume that the new is precisely that which is set free in autonomous works by a recognition of the historically most advanced or contemporaneous tensions. It is, in other words, exactly what slips through the seemingly gapless web by following the continual shift of that web. However it may be concerning the latter, the answer to this charge of Adorno's grand-narrative logic primarily pivots on what Adorno means by this progressive or advanced movement. In actuality, it is clear that the grandiosity of

teleology is far from what he intends. On the contrary, Adorno goes to great lengths to expose the, so to speak, flimsiness to an argument that employs the "false concept of continuity [*Kontinuität*] implicit in the view of artistic technique as a straight line of progress [*geraden Fortschritts*] independent of content" (GS7: 320/ AT: 215).[29] And this is not to mention that, as Gianmario Borio has observed,[30] in his late phase Adorno relinquished a good portion of the language of the "progressive advancement" employed in the *Philosophy of New Music*. Do not these facts taken together begin to weaken the legitimacy of the allegation of Adorno's appeal to a grand-narrative? In Adorno's late work, he, in fact, explicitly rejects the claim of one work setting the rule in the manner that, say, Schoenberg did in the earlier half of the Twentieth Century. "[T]he treatment of musical time," writes Adorno, "allows for widely diverging solutions [*weit divergierenden Lösungen*]" (GS7: 42/ AT: 23).[31] Could this not be a result of Adorno realizing that the historical friction surrounding the production of works was already changing in his lifetime? That is to say, could this not be based on a change that adheres to another of his late insights, namely that the avant-garde "now has some[thing] of the comic quality of aged youth" about it (GS7: 44/ AT: 24-25)?

Looking further into Adorno's conception, we discover that the truth of Adorno's claim about autonomy and its superior access is not only devoid of the antiquated claims of a totalizing

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[29] For more on Adorno's acknowledgment of the absurdity of claiming a straight line of necessity in artistic development, see GS7: 445/ AT: 300.

[30] Gianmario Borio, "Dire cela, sans savoir quoi: The Question of Meaning in Adorno and the Musical Avant-Garde" in *Apparitions: New Perspectives on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. Berthold Hoeckner (New York: Routledge, 2006), 41-68.

[31] The complete passage is helpful here, since it establishes the significance of the concept of the new. It is also noteworthy that this passage emerges in the midst of an aphorism that is discussing the moment that destroys temporal validity through something like Benjamin's concept of the shock entailed in the dialectical image: "Today music rebels against conventional temporal order; in any case, the treatment of musical time allows for widely diverging solutions. As questionable as it is that music can ever wrest itself from the invariant of time, it is just as certain that once this invariant is an object of reflection it becomes an element of composition and no longer an apriori.—The violence of the new [*Das Gewalttätige am Neuen*], for which the name "experimental" was adopted, is not to be attributed to subjective convictions or the psychological character of the artist. When impulse [*Drang*] can no longer find preestablished security in forms or content, productive artists are objectively compelled to experiment" (GS7: 42/ AT: 23)

narrative, it is equally tied to what we have seen Benjamin maintain about the necessity of the

immanent context from which a ruptured view outside of that context is possible:

> Whoever resists the overwhelming collective pressure [*unmäßigen kollektiven Druck*] in order to insists on the passage of art through the subject, need on no account at the same time think underneath the veil of subjectivism [*unter subjektivistischem Schleier denken*]. Aesthetic being-for-itself [*Fürsichsein*] encompasses what is collectively most advanced [*kollektiv Fortgeschrittenem*], what has escaped the spell [*Bann Entronnene*]. By virtue of its mimetic preindividual moments [*mimetisch-vorindividuellen Moments*], every idiosyncrasy lives [*lebt*] from collective forces [*kollektiven Kräften*] of which it is unconscious [*unbewußten*]. The critical [*kritische*] reflection of the subject, however isolated that subject, stands watch [*darüber wacht*] that these forces do not provoke regression [*Regression treiben*]. Social reflection [*Gesellschaftliches Denken*] on aesthetics habitually neglect the concept of productive force [*Produktivkraft*]. Yet deeply embedded in the technological processes this force is the subject, the subject congealed [*geronnen*] as technology. (GS7: 69/ AT: 42, translation modified).

It is noteworthy that Hullot-Kentor translates this *Fürsichsein* that only *seems* to be caught

within the falsehood of subjectivism as "autonomy." While this is perhaps another case of over-

emphasis, he has once again touched upon something crucial in his translation. Artworks do

become subjective, solipsistic, or even monadological, but, as evidenced in the previous passage

cited, their subjective turn does not evade *Realität*, it simply steers clear of the semblance of so-

called *Gesellschaft*. The unconscious collective forces, which doubtless refer to Benjamin's

conception of nonsensuous similarity and which parallel Adorno's famous claim that, "true

thoughts are those alone which do not understand themselves" (GS4: 216/ MM: 192), are exactly

what the artwork, as a hypothetical subject who is merely banished as of yet to the realm of

Schein, gleans and enlivens (*beleben*).

So the autonomy of the artwork, or the fact that it is being-for-itself, not the fetishistic

being-for-another of the market place, indicates that, in reality, it has a deeper sense of that

which is outside of the subject, i.e., the pre-individual, the immeasurable collective pressure, the

unreconciled object, or even more generally, the political and socio-historical nexus

(*Zusammenhang*). As Adorno once expressed this unconscious sympathy for the non-identical,

> [m]usic says We [*Wir sagt*] immediately [*unmittelbar*], regardless of its intentions. Even the depositional figures [*Gebilde*] of its expressionist phase register binding experiences [*verzeichnen*

Erfahrungen von Verbindlichkeit], and these figures' own bindingness, their formative force [*Gestaltungskraft*], depends on whether these experiences actually speak through the works. (GS7: 250/ AT: 167, translation modified)

If the strength of the subject consists in successfully watching over (*über wachend*) the comportment of mimesis so that it avoids regression, then this must mean that it avoids what we have seen is the mimesis of mimesis or the false mimesis that elides mediation with immediacy. At its core, the advanced artwork consists of a mimesis working with subjectivity, such that, however much it must radically transform its original comportment, mimesis still strives after speaking to that which escapes intentionality. This, then, captures the essence of Adorno's conception of autonomy. With good reason, the "collectively most advanced" is coupled with precisely that which escapes the spell and is, as it were, "bindingly" (*verbindlich*) indexed in the autonomy or being-for-itself of artworks. In the face of this clarification, is there really a convincing argument regarding how the urgent need to appreciate what escapes the spell is no longer the predicament of the postmodern world? Could one, that is to say, really maintain that today the aesthetics of "anything goes" better describes a strong subject's confrontation with the falsehood of objective spirit? One thinks, for instance, of the ease with which most of Phillip Glass's music is smoothly incorporated into the appalling merriment of every last advertisement. Is this a circumstance that, because of the dissolution of traditional forms, simply bespeaks the egalitarian spirit of equally valid possibilities, or is it rather, especially when juxtaposed to the latest developments in noise music, which incorporates the outermost consequences of computer and digital technology, laid radically bare as a quintessentially complicitous mimetic variation?

It is surely the case that, like with philosophy, critical artworks are always called to transgress their boundaries, redefine themselves. Yet insisting for its own sake that an aesthetics should be more conscious of the importance of commodified works would be akin to insisting that interdisciplinarity is, as such, a value, when the necessity of critique should be the source of

the alteration or inclusion. To state it differently, proclaiming that Adorno has theoretical shortcomings simply because he has a narrow or "pessimistic" view about what qualifies for critical art would be analogous to philosophers insisting that self-help books or the whole of the "metaphysics" section in the bookstore be taken into consideration, simply because this broadens its perspective.[32] Abstract diversity is not a good in itself. Of course, this is all not to mention that such an exclusion would never, in Adorno's view, take its stance prior to engaging in an immanent analysis of the articulation of the current problems gathered in the sedimentation of mimetic language—how, that is to say, the work structures its statements, its contrasts, its use of repetition, development, etc., and how this implementation assembles the current contradictions into a fleeting image (*Bild*) of an otherwise.

To state it more concretely, the farcical jest in David Foster Wallace is obviously not akin to Dan Brown. No one would compare the truth-content (*Warheitsgehalt*) of the former with the latter, after doing a close analysis. Less obviously, however, the ostentatious clamor of a wholly unformed, primitivistic dissonant music is not comparable to the eloquence of contemporary Finish composer Kaija Saariaho, whose works use an advanced consciousness of micro-tonal timbre alongside the most progressive productive forces available in computerization. Something absolutely distinguishes these works. And although what it is might not be explainable by a straight line of necessity, or as the only possible solution that sets the rule—recall Adorno's claim about the "wide" range of possibilities—there is no doubt a mimetic sensitivity to Saariaho that, to say nothing of the play and *Schein* organized in her work, makes her far more "progressive" and truer than either the pompous artist of disorganized "art-music," or the ubiquity of popular music's pre-digested, 4/4 time. Mimesis as the index of both aesthetic

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[32] Incidentally, the furor aroused against Adorno about his distaste for jazz misses the point. Indeed, it is likely the case that Adorno was never introduced to radical, "free" jazz. See Nealon, "Maxima Immoralia?", 136.

judgment and successful artistic formation as it doubles itself into a work, as it autonomously tries to become identical with itself, must be the nodal point on which to differentiate these supposedly equally valid alternatives.

Importantly, Adorno's mention of the concept of a productive force is not incidental to this discussion. It is, in fact, thoroughly instructive not only in furthering an explanation of what is, in truth, his fragmented, syncopated and polyvalent narrative of artistic development, it also begins to more explicitly shed light on the problems surrounding his concept of the new. When we look carefully at the matter, we discover that Adorno's claim about the concept of a productive force, of course derived from Marx, is not altogether unrelated to our analysis in Chapters One and Two of the material trace in mimesis that was articulated by both Adorno and Benjamin. Indeed, for Benjamin, to assert that all language is in some sense "onomatopoetic [*onomatopoetisch*]" (SW2.2: 721/ GS2.1: 212, translation modified), which is to say, materially bound to a mimetic double as it passes from nature-sound (*Naturlaut*) and the lament (*Klage*) to musicality (SW1: 60/ GS2.1: 138), really amounts to him claiming that there is always some technical apparatus[33] that helps synthesize or organize this lament that was initially *not* language or had no *Sprachcharakter.* When, in Chapter One, we drew connections between the forceful moment of recognition in the critical reading of mimesis and the historical fissure (*Sprung*) in historical materialism, this, in fact, implied all along that there is always a changing technical moment, a moment of mediation—subjectivity—that reads with and against the current state of the matter.

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[33] Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand" in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*: *The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 161-196. This essay might be summed up as a critique of Heidegger's reactionary stance towards the forces of production. Surely the word processor and the use of two hands afford a kind of advantage to contemporary writers, for whom Benjamin's task of the eloquent configuration of content still awaits.

Reiterating an important theme from Chapter One, this means that, for Benjamin, the appreciation of the constellational coming-together of the polyphonous, nonsensuous elements in a relation of microcosm and macrocosm is the condition for the possibility of momentarily, in a flash, seeing outside of that relation (SW2.2: 697/ GS2.1: 208-09). The same is true for Adorno. In his terms, this particular nexus, or better, a technical appreciation of this nexus that follows mimesis "where it was never permitted to go" (GS7: 258/ AT: 172), is indispensible to seeing outside of the spell of identity. As we have in numerous manners witnessed, it is only in sensing the current tensions stored up or sedimented in the current state of aesthetic language, only from that which takes hold of the shifting accents or historical echo in mimesis, that one truly hears the possibilities opened up from out of the present situation. In a more Marxian tone, "advancements" in the forces of production provide a negative glimpse into how they could be peacefully arranged if they were no longer in contradiction with the relations of production. Despite the fact that "there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (SW4: 407/ GS1.3: 1241), those barbarous advancements are still necessary preconditions for unlocking the current solutions. If the mechanism of domination is in flux, adaptive, or, in a word, flexible, then the technical facility that would resist domination must be equally capable of change and flexibility. When one, accordingly, thinks of the possibilities opened in the latest technical developments vis-à-vis filmmaking, the contrast, signaled by Peter Greenaway,[34] between these possibilities and the constraints of representation that have accompanied most of cinema—even many of the radical works—becomes striking. What Benjamin long ago called modernity's dialectic of convention and expression, singularity and repetition (OTS: 46/ GS1.1 226), is today born by film in particular and art in general as the

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[34] For a discussion of Greenaway and some of the contemporary problems emerging for cinema amidst the new digital video technology see Holly Willis, *The New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 1-17.

inner aesthetic pressure to break with that which hardens the non-representational excess of the present constellation.

It is in view of this that we can start to understand Adorno's claim that the compulsion for the new is "satanic" (GS4: 268/ MM: 236), or "akin to death" (GS7: 38/ AT: 21), not something that should be dogmatically or uncritically praised. Spurning the liberal cult of the new that Adorno is so often wrongly accused of clinging to, Adorno was, in truth, quite conscious of just how sinister and frightening the new is under the incessant attempt of advanced capitalism to deny that very dialectic of expression and convention. Much of his criticism against Benjamin's original draft introduction for the *Arcades Project* was, in fact, centered around the possibility, first evidenced by Baudelaire, that amidst the *Schein* of the new, the ever-same of damnation might secretly predominate (CC: 283). Adorno's claim—a claim, to be sure, brought into further relief by our analysis of mimetic development—is that one should guard against undialectically maintaining that the spell of the new, the blind drive forward that, to state it differently, actually ensnares the whole of humanity into the old of history's continual "wreckage (*Trümmer*)" (SW4: 392/ GS1.2: 697), cannot be avoided by simply renouncing the need (*Nötigung*) underlying it. We might say that, resembling the scar of autonomy, the need for the new is a very real need. "The new," in Adorno's provocative words, "is a compulsion of the matter [*von der Sache erzwungen*]" (GS7: 40/ AT: 22, translation modified). It does not emerge arbitrarily, it is rather part of the disenchantment of modernity and probably only fully surfaces in periods of decline as "a rebellion against the fact that there is no longer anything new" (GS4: 267/ MM: 235). It thus contains, like all ideology, a moment of truth and falsehood, without being able to escape the fact that, especially in the "postmodern condition," our circumstance is

still devoid of genuine newness and is thus further plummeting humanity into the infinitely resounding catastrophe.

In this respect, resembling Kant, who once sought the unconditional spontaneity of a freedom that parts with the mechanistic causes, any concept of the new in artworks has to embody something of the principle of spontaneity for Adorno. The difficulty is, of course, that the task of defying the ever-same is not a simple prescription that, adhered to abstractly, automatically signifies success. In a world that furiously denies an imaginative immersion with the object, which is to say, denies a mimetic experience that is permitted to escape reification in and through a confrontation with it, the newness of each production is itself problematized by the commodification of that very newness. Once again the schematism of production looms large:

> The new, sought for its own sake [*um seiner selbst willen gesucht*], a kind of laboratory product, hardened into the conceptual schema [*zum begrifflichen Schema verhärtet*], becomes in its sudden appearance [*Erscheinen*] a compulsive return of the old [*zwangshaften Rückkehr des Alten*], not unlike that in traumatic neuroses. To the dazzled vision the veil of temporal succession [*Schleier der zeitlichen Sukzession*] is rent [*zerreißt*] before the archetypes of perpetual sameness [*Immergleichheit*]: this is why the discovery of the new is satanic; eternal recurrence as damnation [*ewige Wiederkehr als Verdammnis*]. (GS4: 268/ MM: 236, translation modified)

In opposition to the spontaneity or life-element (*Lebenselement*) that preserves a natural facet beyond the control of the concept, this abstract formula tries to master exactly that which should be uncoerced or released from the calculative schema, if the desire to break loose (*erlösen*) into the, so to speak, fresh air[35] of nature's expressionless silence is really the goal. Turned into a mere push-button newness, it is not hard to see why today the concern for newness in artworks is displaced into such triviality as the "eccentric" nature of the artist, or the still fetishized myth of the "genius" who is likely exemplified either by his penchant for discovering new styles of clothing or by his morose character.

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[35] See GS7: 100/ AT: 63: "Authentic artworks, which hold fast to the idea of reconciliation [*Versöhnung*] with nature by making themselves completely a second nature, have consistently felt the urge, as if in need of a breath of fresh air, to step outside of themselves."

There is no denying, then, that Adorno is claiming that this fixation on the new is impossible to conceive without its connection to the "modern." The question, however, that arises from the four chapters of this work on mimesis concerns whether the material conditions within which the new emerges as a need for thought have now undergone such a metamorphosis that this compulsion of the new—of course, always contaminated by falsehood or mired by the guilt of *Schein*—is no longer as urgent in the so-called postmodern condition. Adorno does, bearing this question in mind, state that, "[t]he new only becomes mere evil in its totalitarian adjustment [*Zurichtung*], where all the tension between individual and society [*jene Spannung des Individuums zur Gesellschaft*], that once gave rise to the category of the new, is equalized [*ausgleicht*]" (GS4: 270/ MM: 238, translation modified). Is this not, upon further reflection, the better characterization of the present hour? In other words, is it not the totalitarian tendency of our own situation that dissipates, levels, or equalizes this tension while also subverting mimesis from the forceful moment (*Augenblick*) of critique that could still be seized today? This would suggest that, as opposed to entering into a qualitatively new historical stage, what is actually occurring falls under what Adorno once called the "ever fluctuating concept of the modern [*immer auch schwebenden Begriff von Moderne*]" (GS7: 37/ AT: 19). Without answering this abstract question of epoch which bears a notable resemblance to the dubious effort to distinguish art versus non-art, we could suggest that perhaps the fragments Adorno left us are only primers waiting to be, so to speak, filled out, waiting to be grasped as a speculative precision which anticipated that play, the jest, would become infinite in its sorrow, to the point where thought cannot help but address a "mankind that has run out of tears but not of laughter" (SW2.2: 448/ GS2.1: 355).[36] What, in this light, is left to a world plagued with such sickness but a dose of the

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[36] Cf. Simon Critchley, "To Die Laughing" in *Limits of Death: Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Joanne Morra, Mark Robson, and Marquard Smith (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 3-21.

vaccine that mimetically resembles what afflicts it? What could be left but the eloquent
organization of deranged laughter?

To live in a world where even those who cannot "read," those who are increasingly
transfixed by the affective associations and tempo of the Image, can nevertheless sense to their
core that civilization is reaching a breaking point, must mean that, as we discussed in Chapter
Four, tragedy and traditional comedy have lost something of their capacity to speak (*Sprache
finden*). At the present hour the contradiction is more glaring than ever. Or better, the
contradiction is *felt* now, it is *sensed* more than ever as the inability to wholly deny the volatility
erupting across the globe. And yet, despite the unprecedented technical developments that could
liberate all of humanity in a manner unimaginable just twenty years ago, the "world spirit" is
propelled forward, "on wings and without a head" (GS4: 305/ MM: 55), as if cursed by a turn-
around time (*Umschlagszeit*) that will never turn around like the angel of history, and cry the
necessary, redemptive tears. This historical nexus would make the once powerful presentation of
the conflict between divine and human law,[37] or the happy-go-lucky resolution of a whimsical
love affair, look like a sideshow *bagatelle*, if these anachronistic presentations were not so
frighteningly apart of a cultural condition that maniacally mocks the desire for peace. "There is
nothing innocuous left" (GS4: 26 /MM: 25). Technically reproduced laughter becomes the
whipped echo of the tortured. Parallel to Hegel's claim about Shakespearean comedy overtaking
the truth content of tragedy,[38] there comes a time when the tensions of artworks can no longer
gather or adequately express the tensions of the historical moment without comically puffing
themselves up into something they no longer are. When the fate of every human being and the
planet as we know it is determined by ruling buffoons fighting it out amongst themselves,

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[37] See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 280; Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics*, 464.
[38] Ibid., 1208-1237.

narcissistically embodying only the principle of "*apre moi le dèluge,*"[39] even the well-intentioned exhibition of tragic suffering begins to look ridiculous.

In the end, the iron grip of administered society would have already completely succeeded if it were the case that the genuine longing for the new, purported to be an artifact from a previous era, did not still make its way into the most minute comportment of artworks that reflect the wretched conditions of their existence and take this dynamic constellation of laughter seriously. The microcosm-macrocosm, subject-object relationship, that, if aligned with true consciousness, knows full well that all harmony between each side, "between individual and society," is as of yet false *Schein*, false reconciliation, cannot therefore be abandoned without secretly proclaiming that there is no longer anything to be done.

Does it follow that our analysis of mimesis simply puts us in the conservative framework that would maintain a "back to" posture towards modernism, in which one still clutches, for instance, at the notion that important works speak in the same manner as that of *Ulysses* or *Pierrot Lunaire*? Certainly not: everything that we have argued indicates that autonomously following where the play and *Schein* elements of mimesis want to go of their own accord is synonymous with attempting, by whatever radical means necessary, to maintain critique. The new is thus most succinctly expressed as the "negation of what no longer holds [*was nun nicht mehr sein soll*]" (GS7: 38/ AT: 21); yet this cannot be done without some reference, conscious or otherwise, to what once held or what has now emerged from the always changing constellation. It does not imply radical otherness or setting the rule via linear, progressive development, it simply means being better engaged with the fits and starts of the current chance of language. Thus it cannot be separated from Benjamin's claim that, "catastrophe [is] to have missed the opportunity [*Gelegenheit*]" and the "critical moment [*kritische Augenblick*] [is] the status quo

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[39] Marx, *Capital* 1, 381/ *Werke* 23, 285.

threaten[ing] to be preserved [*erhalten*]" (AP: 474 [N10, 2]/ GS5.1: 593). Surely one would

admit that this threat and this chance, missed by the blind, liberal drive for the new, and in

actuality "coming more quickly and more brutally to the fore" as a result of the "accelerated

tempo of technology," are constituted differently at different moments in history (AP: 462

[N2a,2]/ GS5.1: 576). To state it again, who but the nominalist or reactionary could maintain that

the objectivity of the changing constellation, sedimented in all the developments of art, sensed in

the mimetic imagination as it struggles against the current antagonism of technology, is no

longer constitutive of artworks that attempt to speak (*Sprache finden*)? The confrontation of

forces and relations of production, or the most current instantiation of their struggle against one

another, i.e., labor stored up or archived in a fight against the commodity-form's leveling power

of convention and equivalence,[40] must still be essential to a comportment that does not wish to

disavow the horror of maintaining the status quo.

To reiterate our previous concern, the need of the new today, whose impulse must be

parallel to the will to destroy (*vernichten*) the conditions which gave rise to the *Schein* of

traditional beauty, by no means signifies an appeal to an atavistic expressionism that once tried

to explode and shock. The simplicity and childlike play of Cage's profound *Sonatas and*

Interludes, which anticipate the contemporary work of Chris Rehm's *(Not Thinking about the*

Future) and Laurie Anderson's *O Superman*,[41] still abides by the *Selbstvernichtung* of all

artworks against one another and themselves for the sake of a situation that would no longer need

art as a refuge of plight. Restrained works like these are explosive, then, by not being explosive,

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[40] Cf. Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Ideologies of Linguistic Relativity* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973). Rossi-Landi provides one of the best accounts of how to conceive the ideology of language as being tied to this problem of the dialectic between forces and relations of production.

[41] Blurring the line between commodified works and so-called "high" art, it could be argued that these two works do not veer from Adorno's appeal to autonomy. Insofar as pre-digested patterns, or anticipated conventions of listening do not comprise their inner movement, these works are autonomous, i.e., not fettered by external restrictions imposed upon form.

they shock by subtly pointing out just how monstrous it is to not be shocked—because the situation demands that they comport themselves so, or because the triumphalism of what once was, can no longer speak with the same force (*Gewalt*).[42] Their superiority is their sensitivity for the historical *Zusammenhang*, and, as if drawn by gravity face to face with what their predecessors or contemporaries have said, with what does or does not hold or speak any longer, their jest shatters the substantiality of their rivals through a calm monotony that hits the mark precisely because it appears incapable of shattering anything. This embodiment of the frailty (*Schwäche*) of mimetic comportment means nothing more than that mimetic play sinks down into the latest variations of the hardened and alienated, and pharmakologically[43] becomes similar to what irrefutably constitutes our experience: the metallic hum of commercial airplanes, the frightening drone of ubiquitous automobiles, the monotonous murmur of street lamps.[44]

Anyone intimate with some of the critical currents in contemporary music knows that this state of affairs often shows itself as the literal and figurative incorporation of an electronic musicality first hinted at long ago by Stockhausen's innovations.[45] Modeled on the image of human beings as mere appendages of machinery, as mere coordinates on a computational profit graph, the work of musicians as diverse as Ryoji Ikeda and Iannis Xenakis, speak in a way that silences other works for having failed to take on this development of digitized experience, and

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[42] For more on the persistence of this triumphalism in the form of Romanticism, see Anthony J. Cascardi, "Heidegger, Adorno and the Persistence of Romanticism," *Dialogue* and *Universalism* XIII, no.11-12 (2003), 13-22.

[43] Very few thinkers have examined the interconnections between Adorno's idea of mimesis and "Plato's Pharmacy." An examination of this kind that also considers Derrida's essay "Economimesis" and his introduction to Lacoue-Labarthe's *Topography*, entitled "Desistence," would be highly beneficial. See Jacque Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (New York: Continuum, 1981), 67-186.

[44] See GS7: 325/AT: 219: "That today any walk in the woods, unless elaborate plans have been made to seek out the most remote forests, is accompanied by the sound of jet engines overhead not only destroys the actuality of nature as, for instance, and object of poetic celebration. It affects the mimetic impulse. Nature poetry is anachronistic not only as a subject: Its truth content has vanished."

[45] See Adorno, "Vers une musique informale," 267.

for having been, at bottom, designed for nothing but background, "atomized listening."[46] Indeed, the muffled, robotic voice of this critical music, as if twitching, scratching at the static surface, and comprised of an ambiance that—punctured only by intermittent shocks of feedback—tends toward perpetual redlining, is perhaps the only musicality equal to a world as alienated from nature as our own. That this music can even exist illustrates just how much it is the case that mimetic artworks still unconsciously seek to actualize Beckett's dictum of *Comment c'est*. Who could listen to this play on the high-pitched, strident ringing of experience so often present in the best electronic artworks, and already burgeoning in Penderecki's magnificent *De Natura Sonoris No. 2* as the critique of unmediated nature—who could listen to works like these and not be confronted with just how mute and, to be sure, stupid other works become in comparison? Their obliteration of the washed up rhythms and pre-digested[47] melodies of most popular music is inescapable, which is not even to mention their devastating critique of an experience that has lost its memory. Language merges with the electronic machine. This does not necessitate that a new rule or surefire appeal to "temporal validity" is established,[48] it simply means that works that find language are, in truth, unavoidably drawn into relation with the universal, with Beethoven's promise, regardless of the intentionality of their author. It is this still-operative compulsion for newness, distinguished, of course, from the literal newness that once accompanied Schoenberg's radical atonality, that nonetheless festers or aggravates in the most infinitesimal behavior of every critically assembled work.

If Adorno and Benjamin are, accordingly, right about truth being that which speaks as objective resistance, then the danger that lives today is the same general danger and corresponding exigency that we identified from the start of this work. Artworks that are

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[46] Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music," 305/ GS14: 37.
[47] Adorno, "On Popular Music," 443.
[48] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 86.

dedicated to their immanent idea take on critique in the hope of avoiding the ever-threatening

devolution into myth. We can thus, at last, situate Adorno's assertion that, "through the new,

critique—refusal [*Refus*]—becomes an objective moment [*objektiven Moment*] of art itself"

(GS7: 41/ AT: 22, translation modified). The persisting relevance of Adorno and Benjamin is

that their aesthetic analysis is guided every step of the way by the attempt to ward off the

premature end of this objective criticism first roused and made immanent to aesthetic

comportment by the concept of the new. Moreover, they stop at nothing to understand how it is

that this critical element is compelled to transform itself if it is to resist betraying the idea of

mimesis, art's promise of happiness. "Only in the new," writes Adorno, expressing yet another

variation of this same unwavering commitment to a materialist aesthetics, "[o]nly in the new,

does mimesis unite [*vermählt sich*] with rationality without regression [*Rückfall*]: *Ratio* itself

becomes mimetic in the shudder of the new [*im Schauer des Neuen*]…" (GS7: 38/ AT: 20). The

threat of regression remains as pressing as ever today, and this must imply that the dialectic of

enlightenment built into the idea of mimesis lives on as well. We, therefore, perhaps most

accurately depict Adorno's relation to Benjamin as the attempt to fulfill what Benjamin had only

just begun to think regarding the dialectic of mimesis and rationality in the "Doctrine of the

Similar." The shudder, potentially registered and united with the rationality to come, is another

name for the danger that founds all mimetic reading; it promises, as it did from the beginning,

that the semiotic, conceptual side of experience need not remain hostile to its other, and could

itself be awoken from the slumber of the repression of nature. Just as it is not the "reality or

unreality of redemption [*Erlösung*]" that matters most for Adorno (GS4: 281/ MM: 247), but

rather the weight of that which was missed pressing down on each newly constituted moment

(*Augenblick*) of history, the actual possibility of new works is not the central issue, but rather the

"longing of the new" (GS7: 55/ AT: 32), and the continued, though altered, expression of that

longing as the negative gesture to the fact that this is not all there is.

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