

Adorno's realism

by **Sven-Olov Wallenstein**

Adorno's understanding of realism in the present is often taken to have been simply negative: once a progressive artistic form, it had degenerated under the pressure of the culture industry in the West, and of the party apparatus in the East, into a set form that merely duplicated the world and played a key role in upholding an affirmative culture. This view largely informs his postwar critique of Lukács, which draws on the earlier quarrel over expressionism in the 1930s. In the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, too, the negative view is predominant; there are, however, traces of another conception of realism that Adorno deems to be not only adequate but also indispensable for art at present, one that would be attuned to the reality of the administered world, not simply as a mirror reflection, but as a way to gain a critical purchase on the contemporary world.

The first quarrel over expressionism

The wider context in which Adorno's understanding of realism must be seen takes us back to the 1930s and the attack on modernism launched by Lukács in his essay "Größe und Verfall des Expressionismus" (1934), which occasioned an extensive debate in the Moscow exile literary review *Das Wort*, with contributions by, among others, Herwarth Walden, Béla Bálasz, Hanns Eisler, and most notably Lukács's former philosophical ally Ernst Bloch, as well as further interventions by Bertolt Brecht and, indirectly, Walter Benjamin.¹ While Adorno himself never took part in this first discussion, it forms the matrix for his postwar quarrels with Lukács, which extend all the way to his final position in *Aesthetic Theory*. These final reflections can be taken as an ultimate attempt to sort out the terms and precon-

ditions of the earlier debate, on the levels of artistic practices and of the underlying philosophical assumption, whose result, however, as we will see, is far from unambiguous.

THE TERM "EXPRESSIONISM" might seem to indicate that the terrain of the initial debate was a rather limited one, but what was at stake was nothing less than the meaning of modern art in the widest sense of the term, for which expressionism was only a shorthand. The immediate political thrust of the debate was Lukács's initial allegation that modernism, unwittingly or not, paved the way for fascism in presenting us with an incoherent

and fragmented world as well as an equally incoherent and fragmented subject, the effect of which was not only political impotence, but also a call for the return of an authoritarian and fascist politics that promised the resurrection of a stable order. Initially, therefore, the charge was largely phrased in terms of political issues, and less based on general philosophical and theoretical claims, although the latter were made explicit as the debate progressed.

In Bloch's answer, "Diskussionen über Expressionismus" (1938),² he mounts a defense that has since been repeated in many versions, and in some respects still resonates in Adorno's final claims in *Aesthetic Theory*. Apart from chastising Lukács for his rudimentary awareness of current artistic production, notably painting and music, Bloch advances an argument based more on principles: if capitalism leads to a fragmentation of subject and object alike, this renders an equally fragmented art necessary, i.e. an art that, if it is to be true, must stay close to experience in its immediacy, whereas the nineteenth-century forms advocated by Lukács have become obsolete, not just

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abstract

Adorno's understanding of realism in the present is often taken to have been simply negative. In the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, too, the negative view is predominant; there are, however, traces of another conception of realism. Adorno proposes, although with some caveats, that what he calls an adequate conception of realism is not only possible, but also something that art in the present cannot and must not avoid.

KEY WORDS: socialist realism, Adorno, negative dialectics, Hegel.



Theodor Adorno (at right) with Max Horkheimer. In the background, at right Jürgen Habermas.

because of progress in artistic techniques, but more importantly because they cannot express the experience of the contemporary word. Realism for Bloch, we might say, means giving us reality as it appears to us, in all its alienation and laceration.

For Lukács, this is an inadequate conception of art and reality that falls short of the necessity of thinking of totality as a dialectical whole, as he intimates in his response the same year, “Es geht um den Realismus.”³ While the surface of society remains unbroken as long as its underlying parts continue to function in separation from each other, when they are drawn into a unity, i.e. when the fundamental contradiction emerges, it begins to crack and break up. Fragmentation is thus an integral part of semblance – it belongs to the structure of *Schein* – but as such it is located at the immediate and external side of consciousness and of society, whereas essence is a contradictory unity that conditions what appears as an immediate, given content of consciousness. Any art that is to have a cognitive and dialectical function must thus seek to establish a connection between depth and surface that shows fragmentation to be merely a result and not an ultimate fact, and for that, the inherited forms of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism are best suited, while the forms of “expressionism” stubbornly remain at the phenomenal surface and render any interpretation of depth impossible. For Lukács, expressionism is fundamentally anti-dialectical in its refusal to acknowledge that all immediacy is mediated, and that all experiences of laceration need to be understood and comprehended within a larger framework.

OF THE MANY TANGLED threads that can be found in this debate, the philosophically most pertinent one leads us back to Hegel, and particularly to the *Logic*. The question is how we are to un-

derstand totality as contradictory whole and its mediation in the singularity of the work, and the relation between semblance (*Schein*) and appearance (*Erscheinung*) as the domain of the particular in relation to essence (*Wesen*), if the latter is grasped as something whose movement is necessarily to come apart as this very relation, and not to constitute a domain that exists as a Platonic behind the real. These are the

problems that will come to the fore again after the war, in a different context that Adorno will attempt to conceive in terms of a *negative* dialectic. Rather than subscribing to Hegel or simply rejecting him, Adorno wants to continue the dialectic precisely by *immanently* breaking away from Hegel, which means that the mediation between the singular and the universal as demanded by Lukács is revealed to be an enforced reconciliation. Instead, mediation appears as necessarily broken, as that which is lacking in experience, precisely because the reconciliation offered by society is a coercive one, and the task will be to think it differently, as a placeholder for that which does not yet exist. In a sense, we might say that Adorno once more plays Bloch against Lukács, but also Lukács against Bloch: his claim is neither to cherish fragmentation nor to demand totality, but to suggest the possibility of a free and non-coercive being-together of that which remains different without becoming a set of fragments. It is here, caught up the precarious balance between that which *is*, the present of an administered world that everywhere offers images of reconciliation and imperatives of enjoyment, and that which is *not yet*, a world seen from the vantage point of a redemption that presents us with utopia in the subjunctive mood,⁴ that Adorno will suggest that a certain idea of realism can be forged.

Adorno versus Lukács: reconciliation under duress

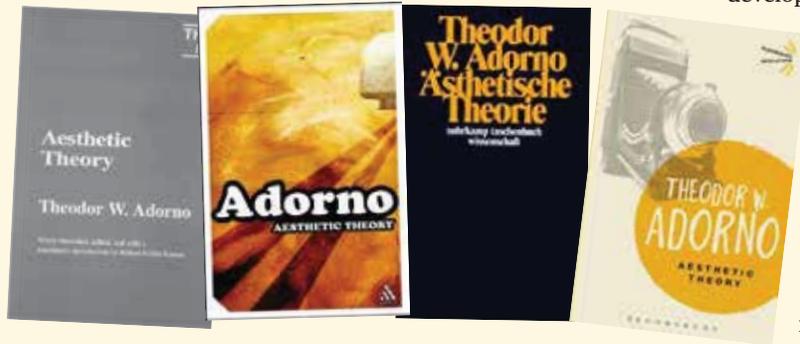
The immediate context of the postwar debate is Lukács’s book on realism, *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus* (1958),⁵ to which Adorno two years later dedicates a review essay, “Erpresste Versöhnung,”⁶ which develops into a highly polemical settling of accounts. The review is in fact so acerbic that Adorno often seems to fall short of his own standards of immanent cri-

tique, i.e. a reading that turns the inner strength of the other work against the work itself and pries it open by extending those inner lines of force that are suspended within it, instead of subjecting it to external criteria that in fact leave the work as it is.

The vehemence of Adorno's critique could arguably give the impression that he rejects realism altogether as a dead end. Furthermore, much could indeed be said about the political context of this discussion, and about Adorno's apparent blindness to the asymmetry in the protagonists' social position and the respective powers that they wield at this moment in the intellectual community. More simply: while Adorno was a cherished figure in the West, enjoying all kinds of institutional authority, in Hungary Lukács was condemned to silence after the 1956 revolt and led an almost wholly marginalized life, which makes the allegation that Lukács speaks in voice of an authoritarian cultural police somewhat one-

sided, to say the least.⁷ A reason for the violence of the attack is no doubt the diatribe launched by Lukács a few years earlier in *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (1954), whose subtitle, added later, "Der Weg des Irrationalismus von Schelling zu Hitler," delineates a trajectory that also includes the Frankfurt School and Adorno. Here, however, I will bypass the personal aggressions that were undoubtedly implicated and instead focus on the underlying philosophical claims which would be developed in *Aesthetic Theory*.

ADORNO SINGLES OUT those aspects of Lukács's critique that bear on terms like ontologism, subjectivity, and formalism, and while we can note that some parts of the latter's vocabulary have changed, as well as his examples – Musil and Beckett now assume their place among the accused in lieu of the expressionists of the 1910s – the underlying scheme of the analysis of expressionism from the 1930s remains the same (the other arts have here wholly receded into the background, as if to unwittingly verify the allegations already made by Bloch in the first debate). Just as before the war, however, Thomas Mann remains Lukács's true paradigm of what an author could and should be: he is the true heir of the classical realist novel, and while Lukács does not refrain from criticism of socialist realism, which he chastises for a certain directness, voluntarism, and romanticism, his solution is that a "critical realism" is the way ahead through a present conceived of as a time of transition. Realism, as it has been bequeathed to us by the nineteenth century and continued by a select lineage of authors in the twentieth, remains an unsurpassed mode that no subsequent literary form can displace, if we are to understand literature as an instrument for attaining critical knowledge of the world.



Various editions of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.

Many of Adorno's remarks bear on what he sees as Lukács's philistine conformism and the particular strain of Darwinism that underlies his repeated talk of modernism as "decadence" – that is on the very tone which suffuses the book, and which leads Adorno to some of his more scathing remarks, which often seem to turn Lukács's rhetoric back on himself. But more fundamentally, what Adorno emphatically opposes is the idea of art as reflection, in which the objective content of the work would be central. This, Adorno objects, leads Lukács to misread the moment of form in art: he overlooks the autonomy of the

development of formal features, which in the end also entails a neglect of the structural aspects of those realist works that he praises, whose language and composition are treated as if they were somehow given, outside of history, and constituted natural schemata for the mediation of the social totality. In short, to use a

term from Roland Barthes that was not yet available to Adorno in 1960, Lukács can be understood as mistaking the "reality effect" produced by a historically mediated form for the only true mediation of reality itself.⁸ Adorno claims that we must rather analyze the way in which art sets up another world, dependent on and yet poised against this one; its moment of reflection is not that it introduces objective content that would depict or mirror the social in its empirical aspects – obviously art can do this too, but it is not essential to its function as art: no given moment of reality can ever enter as such into the configuration of a work – but that it embodies social contradictions as inner contradictions in its own form, an idea he would later develop in *Aesthetic Theory*.

Now, this formula may seem to place Adorno squarely in the formalist camp, since it is indeed *form* that bears out the contradiction. But rather than pitting form against content, or fusing them into an organic whole, Adorno's claim is that form is always a content that is historically mediated (and thus in turn replete with vestiges of earlier forms), just as no content, even the most minute sensuous detail, can enter into an artwork without being transfigured through the law of form that commands it. Neither separable nor moments in an organic whole, form and content are dimensions that exist as tensions on each level of the work – which is why both the act of interpreting existing works and the production of new ones, each in their respective way, can be taken to release conflictual forces that are locked up in past works that have become classical and canonized, and thus made to appear as self-enclosed totalities: it is Schönberg that lets us understand what was repressed in Beethoven, and hear the subterranean murmurings beneath the seemingly unbroken surfaces.⁹

The reconciliation between form and content that Lukács

claims was achieved in the nineteenth-century novel, and which he then sets up as model for contemporary literary production, was in its original version already an enforced or extorted reconciliation, under duress, and consequently even more so today.¹⁰ For Adorno, this fundamentally betrays the possible reconciliation – which to be sure does not yet exist and may never come about – of the singular and the universal, a theme that would become crucial both in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*. It would thus be mistaken to read Adorno as simply rejecting the project of realism because of its general orientation towards harmony and reconciliation; what he rejects is only its enforced version, and in fact, as we will see, his own brand of utopianism hinges upon the possibility of a different sense of realism that would be attuned to the problem of the real itself as it appears in late capitalism.¹¹ Here we must turn to his final work, *Aesthetic Theory*, where we can find scattered proposals for such a realism, which, ultimately, also have a bearing on what realism might mean today.

Varieties of realism

Adorno's later work addresses the problem of realism in several places, both as a general theoretical issue and in terms of its historical specificity, but here I will focus mainly on *Aesthetic Theory*, where the threads are drawn together in what is arguably Adorno's final position – less so, however, with respect to realism, which still remains an elusive concept subjected to many divergent interpretations. But rather than attempting to even out the differences in the name of some underlying coherent conception, it is perhaps more productive to begin by tracing these divergent lines, since they display the tension between different senses of the term that remains to the end.

First, as a historical category implicated in the emergence of modern art, realism for Adorno occupies a fairly conventional place in the nineteenth century, when it was still a progressive force. This is the case of the nineteenth-century novel, which allowed new experiences to enter into art (334/295),¹² prefiguring reportage and social science (17/8; see also 426/367). Because of this, which constitutes “aesthetic elements under the façade,” realist works were also in some respects more substantial than those that opted for an ideal of purity which, for Adorno, always involves a moment of self-deception in attempting to seal off the work from its social conditions: “The mistake of aestheticism was aesthetic: it confused its own guiding concept with the work accomplished” (60/45).

IN THE PRESENT, the tables have turned, and what was once a breakthrough towards new avenues in sensibility as well as in science has congealed into a feeble-minded doctrine, and especially so in the case of a social realism which, in its “thoughtless and—in the detestable sense—realistic confirmation and reproduction of what is” (145/123), accommodates itself to the demands of the culture industry, and in the end is no more than

a “petty bourgeois fixation” (377/330). Against the claims made by Lukács that art needs to address the general as it is reflected in types, Adorno stresses that no art is typical, and that radical art has always refused to obey such imperatives, which in fact signal the surrender of art to the administered world (147/124). Socialist realism not only willingly subjects itself to the power of administration, but also forecloses any critical purchase that art might have on the world, and blocks its utopian potential, all of which leads Adorno to his emphatic and often cited rebuttal: “rather no art than socialist realism” (85/69).

HOWEVER, THIS DOES not seal the fate of realism in the present once and for all, and there are highly significant instances located at the line that separates the repressive dimension of socialist realism from a possible different version: above all in Brecht. While he can in no way be made into a part of the social realism that Adorno decries – “Jesuitical machinations were needed sufficiently to camouflage what he wrote as socialist realism to escape the inquisition” (336/297) – he is often the target of sharp criticism, above all in relation to the uncompromisingly didactic aspect of his plays, which puts a definite limit to his claims about art as a process of estrangement. The problem of realism

remains tangential to Adorno's debate with Brecht, however, and in order to unearth a positive sense of the term we have to look elsewhere.

At first it may seem that, even apart from socialist realism, the negative view of realism's role in the present as a general aesthetic project seems to prevail. Cast as “sane realism” (350/308), it tends to advocate an art that belongs to leisure and aspires to

provide us with the facile pleasures of recognition, even though in the end it is nothing but “unrealistic” (373/327) in the face of the state of the world. It is – and Adorno here returns to the vocabulary of the earlier essay on Lukács – subject and object so “falsely reconciled” by a “trumped-up realism” (385/337). Thus Adorno seems to conclude that not only social realism, but even realism itself would simply be an impossible option today as far as advanced art goes: “By appearing as art, that which insists that it is realistic injects meaning into reality, which such art is pledged to copy without illusions. In the face of reality this is a priori ideological. Today the impossibility of realism is not to be concluded on inner-aesthetic grounds but equally on the basis of the historical constellation of art and reality.” (477/406)

And yet there is another sense of realism, attuned to the depletion of sense in the administered world, and its main protagonists are, not surprisingly, Beckett and Kafka, and to some extent Picasso. As a negative version of such a world, Beckett can be called realist (53/40), in fact more realistic than the socialist realists (477/406), since the grimaces he provides us with are the truth of the subject, whereas socialist realism is simply childish (370/325). What is essential here is not the depicted content, which is the “most childish and deceptive” aspect, whereas “[r]eal denunciation is probably only a capacity of form,” as is the

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The monument to Adorno on the Westend campus in Frankfurt am Main, 2016.

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case in Kafka: while the structures of monopoly capitalism appear only distantly in texts, his work “codifies in the dregs of the administered world what becomes of people under the total social spell more faithfully and powerfully than do any novels of corrupt industrial trusts” (341–342/300–301).¹³ Finally, as a third case, there is Picasso, whose *Guernica* breaks with a “prescribed realism” (353/310) of painterly representation, and in this gains a power of expression that turns his work into a social protest.

Together, these three cases are like steps toward a different theory of what realism might be: instead of emphasizing the empirical things that are depicted (*das Stoffliche*, which is not yet content in a qualified sense), realism should be taken as a process of realization of form: “thoroughly formed artworks that are criticized as formalistic are the most realistic insofar as they are realized in themselves.” This gives them a “truth content” beyond the content that they directly “signify” (*bedeuten*), i.e. a truth that surpasses empirical states as well as subjective intentions, and allows false consciousness to be overcome (171/196). In this way, Adorno proposes, formalism and social realism, together with politically charged terms like “progress” and “reaction” (381/333), are in the end abstract and aesthetically useless oppositions, since they remain at the surface of works and never reach the level of art itself, which is why there is no necessary link between philosophical materialism and aesthetic realism. Art is indeed knowledge, although not of sensible particulars in their outward appearance, but of their inward existence: “Through its own figuration, art brings the essence into appearing in opposition to its own appearance” (384/335, mod).¹⁴ But because of this inner opposition that pits essence against itself, the essence cannot be presented as such, but only through a specific transformation and constellation of particulars, which will be Adorno’s ultimate take on realism.

Adorno’s other realism

Only in one passage, in the section of fragments called “Paralipomena,”¹⁵ does Adorno propose something like a straightforwardly positive interpretation of the term “realism” on a more theo-

retical level. This section contains material that the editors Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann did not know where to place in the text, and while, obviously, this may be simply coincidental, perhaps it would still be possible to say that the placing of this fragment is itself significant, since it seems to open a rather different avenue than the other remarks. Here Adorno proposes, although with some caveats, not only the possibility of what he calls an *adequate* conception of realism, but also that this is something that art in the present cannot and must not *avoid*:

The mediation between the content of artworks and their composition is subjective mediation. It consists not only in the labor and struggle of objectification. What goes beyond subjective intention and its arbitrariness

(*in deren Willkür gegeben*), what is given in it as free choice) has a correlative objectivity in the subject: in the form of that subject’s experiences, insofar as their locus is situated beyond the conscious will. As their sedimentation, artworks are imageless images, and these experiences mock representational depiction (*vergegenständlichenden Abbildung*). Their innervation (*innervieren*) and registration is the subjective path to truth content. The only adequate concept of realism, which no art today dare shun, would be an unflinching fidelity to these experiences. Provided they go deeply enough, they touch in historical constellations back of the façades of reality and psychology. Just as the interpretation of traditional philosophy must excavate the experiences that motivated the categorical apparatus and deductive sequence in the first place, the interpenetration of artworks penetrates to this subjectively experienced kernel of experience, which goes beyond the subject; interpretation thereby obeys the convergence of philosophy and art in truth content. Whereas it is this truth content that artworks speak in themselves, beyond their meaning, it takes shape in that artworks sediment historical experiences in their configuration, and this is not possible except by way of the subject: The truth content is no abstract in-itself. The truth of important works of false consciousness is situated in the gesture with which they indicate the strength (*Stand*) of this false consciousness as inescapable, not in immediately possessing as their content the theoretical truth, although indeed the unalloyed portrayal (*reine Darstellung*) of false consciousness irresistibly makes the transition to true consciousness. (421/364)

This long and dense quotation contains many themes that are developed in detail in other parts of the book, with the difference that they here are bound up with a positive conception of realism, and unpacking it with this connection in view might

give us a sense of what an immanent critique of Lukács, so sorely missing in the 1960 review, might look like.

First of all, Adorno stresses that realism cannot be understood outside of a subjective mediation; it is only through its effects on the subject that the real can be apprehended,¹⁶ not as an objective given. This order of the real is beyond the subject, beyond its intentions, choices, and acts of volition, but it is also given as the insistence of an objectivity *in* the subject, an experience of the social order and the structure of reification, which however does not simply make the subject into an object, but rather *subjectivizes* it in its relation to a core that it cannot grasp. A free and autonomous subject, Adorno often suggests, would be one that does not domesticate or expel the other within it, but experiences it as openness and fluidity.

AS A “SEDIMENTATION” (*Niederschlag*) of such experiences, artworks are images, yet not in the sense that they pose something before us as an object in an act of *Vergegenständlichung*: they are *imageless images*, located at the limit between inside and the outside, or rather, at the junction where the outside violently passes into the subject just as the subject holds this violence at bay in the form of an image. These experiences can first only be approached in the form of a nervous, visceral sensing, as something that touches us at a level that lies beneath the layers of perception and cognition (the term *Innervation*, which recurs throughout *Aesthetic Theory* in various contexts, seems to suggest quasi-physiological quality) that we must “register” (*verzeichnen*), and to which we must uphold an “unflinching fidelity” (*unbeirrte Treue*); we must not shun them by escaping into an already formatted world of epistemic or aesthetic objects if we are to be realists, and thus they are just as much what “no art today dare shun.”

If we sound the depths of these experiences, they prove to be not just subjective, but open onto a dimension that runs deeper than both reality (in the sense of a merely given objective reality) and psychology (which Adorno generally understands as techniques of adaptation geared toward the individual subject), which is that of “historical constellations,” i.e. the dimension in which experience is always mediated by history and the social. This is also what connects art to philosophy, in terms of their “convergence” in “truth content” (*Wahrheitsgehalt*): for Adorno, the texts handed down by the history of philosophy must be brought back to life, de-sedimented, so that they reveal experiences – which themselves are not merely individual, but form part of historical constellations – that have been congealed into systems and categories, just as the artworks have deposited in themselves experiences that are not simply those of individuals, and thus can be pried open by present works. Convergence does not however imply that art and philosophy would mimic or borrow forms from each other, but remains a regulative idea of sorts: the truth is not to be had fully in either of them, it is

not an “in-itself” that would simply exist out there, but only exists as a horizon for subjectivity, or the idea of an experience that would no longer be subjected to the strictures that make experience possible – which is Adorno’s strict obedience to the Kantian imperative that finitude must be respected, just as the imperative that no finite form can be accepted as it is, but must be understood as congealed history, is his fidelity to the Hegelian demand.

FROM ANOTHER ANGLE, the finitude of truth also means that it is always bound up with false consciousness, from which there is no escape in the form of science or objectivity, which is why the truth of works that endure their falseness, as it were, also lets us see through this very falseness. They show the strength, or better, the standpoint or stance (*Stand*) of falsity as inescapable, to the extent that we would simply oppose it to truth; but, and this is another of Adorno’s profoundly Hegelian moves, a pure presentation of false consciousness, of ideology, will always begin to take us towards truth. On my reading here, the translation of *reine Darstellung* as “unalloyed portrayal” seems misleading: *Darstellung* does not mean portrayal as merely a faithful rendering (although the art of portraiture can no doubt be understood in many ways, and faithfulness could imply a kind of “unflinching fidelity” to the invisible truth of a character), but should be taken in the heavy sense that it has in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the “presentation of appearing knowledge” (*Darstellung des erscheinenden Wissens*). It is a setting forth, laying bare, explication, etc. of knowledge in its constitutive and consecutive moment, so that we see its inner genesis as it unfolds step by step, at each level pushed ahead by its own inner contradiction

and negativity, which means that the phenomenologist who observes this movement need not apply any external criteria. Consciousness *criticizes itself*, and what Hegelian phenomenology adds is precisely the *Darstellung*, the “pure” presentation of this movement that nonetheless lets it be seen as not mere despair, but as a progressive movement towards a fuller comprehension.

In one respect, this is in itself the idea of Adorno’s immanent critique: to turn the power of the work against itself by unleashing it from the strictures imposed on it by

its own self-understanding, by turning form as tension against form as closure. On the other hand, Adorno is, as we have seen, also a loyal Kantian, and the idea of absolute knowledge that secretly guides Hegel’s *Darstellung* – or, in terms closer to the quarrel over realism, a discourse that would know the reality of society as it is, and be able to judge whether a particular artistic form approximates this or not – is suspended, which is why Adorno’s dialectic remains negative. The pure presentation of falsity leads in the direction of truth, and yet truth as the discourse of a totality that would bring subject and object together remains barred; the artwork’s task is, as we have seen, to oppose appearing to

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appearance as the negative dialectic of essence, which suspends the movement toward the concept while not simply rejecting it.

A consequence of this is the fundamental chiasmus that in *Negative Dialectics* appears as the transition from the “preponderance” (*Vorrang*, sometimes *Präponderanz*) of the object, which flies in the face of subjective idealism, to the possibility of breaking open the subject, of dispelling the mirage of constituting subjectivity, but doing so through the power of the subject, or the power of that which is lodged inside the subject. Object and subject are equally reified entities, and to reach a different dimension of their togetherness they must be allowed to correct each other, but not through any enforced reconciliation.

Realism thus means to enter into this structure of experience as it is given in a historical moment; it cannot be sealed within history as a particular style or technique to be discarded or emulated, and thus it is a striking illustration of why aesthetic categories must be historical, although not in the sense that they can be comfortably placed before us as objects of historical studies. They must be thought of as challenges: in order to understand what realism means, we must indeed ask what it once meant, and how it attempted to mediate between subjectivity and world at a historical conjuncture that is no longer ours; this would be a precondition for posing the question of what this elusive real means for us today, which also, finally, opens toward the question of what it might mean in the future. ✕

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- As is noted in the anonymous introduction to the translation of Adorno’s essay in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 143.
- See Roland Barthes, “L’Effet de réel”, *Communications* 11 (1968), reprinted in Barthes, *Le bruissement de la langue: Essais critiques IV* (Paris: Seuil, 1984). See also the detailed discussion of Balzac and the code system of realism in *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
- This does not mean that such moments of breaking forth can be present in the past itself, as Adorno suggests in his concept of “late style,” and particularly so in the case of Beethoven. This lateness is the opposite of a subjectivity that would eventually break free from external historical constraints; it is the irruption of history and objectivity in the subject, which turns the work into a series of fragments that may become the starting point for later works; see Adorno, “Spätstil Beethovens” (1934), in *Moments Musicaux* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964), and my discussion of this in “Adorno and the Problem of Late Style,” in *Site* 31–21 (2012): 95–110.
- Adorno’s essay was subsequently translated under the title “Extorted Realism”, in Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991–92).
- For this reason it is equally mistaken, I believe, to want to free his aesthetic theory from the idea of reconciliation in order to attain a more fluid, open, and pluralist aesthetics. When, for instance, Albrecht Weller writes that “all the elements of postmetaphysical aesthetics of modernity are gathered together in Adorno, but in an optic that has been distorted by his philosophy of reconciliation,” and that this requires a “stereoscopic reading” that separates the useful from the obsolete in his thought, I think this in fact deprives Adorno’s aesthetics of its philosophical thrust, so that what would remain is a series of brilliant yet disjointed aperçus on the formal problems in modern art. See Wellmer, “Adorno, die Moderne und das Erhabene,” in Franz Koppe (ed.), *Perspektiven der Kunstphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 190.
- Page references given directly in the text are henceforth to Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), followed by *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997): German/English.
- As Adorno ironically – but not only ironically – quips, Lukács himself, after his days of imprisonment in Romania, is “reported to have said that he had finally realized that Kafka was a realistic writer.” (477/406)
- “Sie [die Kunst] verhält es [das Wesen] durch ihre eigene Komplexion zum Erscheinen wider die Erscheinung.” Hullot-Kentors translation renders this as an opposition between *appearance* and *semblance*, which I think too much reduces the paradoxical proximity and distance between the terms, around which the tension of art revolves: it is an *appearing* that opposes the *appearance*, that *turns against itself*, and not a truth that would simply rid us of *semblance* (*Schein*).
- In the German edition these fragments are presented with two levels of separation: page breaks between sections and blank lines between fragments. In the 1997 Continuum edition of Hullot-Kentor’s excellent translation, the sections have inexplicably been run together into a continuous text, which gives the distorted impression that they form one sustained argument.
- The use of a term like “the real” instead of “reality” may seem to give an unwarranted Lacanian twist to Adorno’s claims, but while it is true that his use of Freud rarely strays from a rather conventional one, I think that linking him to the developments already well underway in the French milieu would be productive; in this sense, realism would be, not about accurately capturing a reality that simply precedes us, but about allowing the effects of the real to unfold within the subject.