Chapter II

Auschwitz and Adorno’s Philosophy of Aesthetics

Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund Adorno\(^1\) (1903–1969), a German philosopher, musicologist, social and cultural critic, and a staunch critic of literature, was born in Frankfurt-am-Main in Germany. He was of mixed Jewish-Christian parentage: His father Oskar Wisengrund (1870–1946) was an assimilated Jew (a Jew converted to Protestantism around the time of his son Adorno’s birth) and a rich wine merchant running business in Frankfurt since 1822. His mother Maria Calvelli-Adorno della Piana (1865–1952) was a Catholic. Maria’s mother was a German singer and her father was an officer in the French army with a noble lineage originally in Genoa (Italy) and later in Corsica Island. As an opera singer, Maria was an accomplished musician before marriage. Her sister Agathe Calvelli-Adorno (1868–1935) was also an accomplished concert pianist and played for the famous opera singer Adelina Patti (1843–1919). Both encouraged Adorno to learn to play the piano and to study musical composition in his early years under the guidance of Bernhard Sekles (1872–1934). The Italian sounding maternal surname “Adorno” was registered by his father at the time of Adorno’s birth, due to his mother’s request, and was adopted later to his paternal one “Wiesengrund” by which he has been known widely today.

Adorno’s intellectual career and fame was largely connected with the Frankfurt school which he served as its third important director during 1958–69 in the post-Holocaust Germany. He was held responsible for the theoretical shift of the school

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from 1930 onwards, from an analysis of bourgeois society’s socio-economic substructure to an analysis of its superstructure. He became a formal associate of *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) in Frankfurt in 1935 and before coming to Frankfurt, he got engaged in a variety of intellectual domains, without confining himself to any one of them, which prepared a ground for his development as a philosopher and a theorist. A brief account of these initial intellectual engagements by Adorno is necessary as they had an important bearing on his later writings on the philosophy of art.

In 1917, Adorno met the German cultural critic, journalist and film theorist Sigfried Kracauer (1889–1966) in the school called the Kaiser-Wilhelm Gymnasium and befriended him, though he was fourteen years older than him. They remained friends both in Germany and outside Germany during exile. Adorno spent over a year his Saturday afternoons with Kracauer discussing Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* which proved more valuable in his intellectual career than formal education in the university. Kracauer’s sociology of knowledge taught Adorno about the distrust of closed systems and about the opposition between the particular and the universal. His radically new and innovative explorations of cultural phenomenon like film in his famous book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) also made impacts on Adorno’s mind, especially evident in the collection of essays *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (1991). Therefore, there are similarities of thinking in the philosophical works of these two intellectuals of the Jewish cultural descent. During 1921-24, Adorno studied philosophy at the University of Frankfurt. He met Walter Benjamin in 1923 with whom he interacted greatly though these interactions were not without some important intellectual disagreements.

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Benjamin inculcated in Adorno an interest in Jewish mysticism and art criticism. Before Benjamin had committed suicide in Port-Bou on the French-Spanish border while escaping from the Nazis in 1940, he had handed over the manuscript of his important essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History” to the German-Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975). Arendt also fled Germany in 1933, first to Paris where she met Benjamin and some months after Benjamin, she crossed the same border to escape the Nazis. In 1940, Arendt had passed on the copy of “Theses on the Philosophy of History” to Adorno. Adorno also met Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) and Friedrich Pollock in Frankfurt in 1924 in a seminar on Edmund Husserl which was directed by Hans Cornelius, a distinguished philosopher at the University of Frankfurt. With Horkheimer, Adorno would develop greater intellectual intimacy and make important intellectual collaborations a few years later. Under Hans Cornelius’s supervision, he wrote his first doctoral dissertation on Husserl’s phenomenology *Die Transzendez des Dinglichen und Noematischen in Husserls Phänomenologie*, translated as *The Transcendence of the Material and Noematic in Husserl’s Phenomenology* at the University of Frankfurt in 1924. During these student years at the Frankfurt, psychology was introduced to him by the Gestalt psychologist Adhémar Gelb (1887–1936) who also taught Horkheimer. It was in Gelb’s seminar that Horkheimer had his first encounter with Adorno, and the relationship between the two initially was limited to encouraging the later into philosophy studies.

At the Frankfurt Festival of the Universal German Music Society in 1924, Adorno met the famous Viennese opera music composer Alban Berg (1885–1935), who was a student of the Jewish Austrian composer, painter and music theorist Arnold Schonberg (1874–1951). Berg’s three fragments of the unfinished opera named as *Wozzeck* left such a great impression on Adorno that, in the same year, he left
Frankfurt for Vienna to study innovative music under him and become a composer. The subsequent three years from 1925–1928 were an interlude in Adorno’s intellectual career, but in another sense, they inculcated in him confidence and left a long lasting impression on him as a thinker. In his late life, Adorno nostalgically looked to return to these years. In 1925, Adorno arrived in culturally radical Vienna of Karl Kraus and the Schonberg circle and became a student of Berg. He also found Eduard Steuermann (1892–1964) as an instructor in piano. As a result, he produced his own compositions in the manner of Schonberg and was greatly influenced by Schonberg’s views on aesthetics. In Vienna, he also started writing for several avant-garde journals during these years. He assumed the editorship of one of these journals called *Anbruch* in 1928. The coterie like quality of the Schonberg circle towards which Adorno was fascinated was dissolved due to Schonberg’s new wife who created a separation between Schonberg and his students. This was probably the reason behind Adorno’s decision to return to Frankfurt in 1928. As Adorno knew Horkheimer since 1922 and therefore, he was allowed to be a member of the group in Frankfurt which revolved around Horkheimer. During 1926–27, Adorno wrote his first *Habilitationsschrift* on Kant and Freud in Vienna under the guidance of Hans Cornelius on *Der Begriff des Unbewuβten in der transzendentalen Seelenlehre*, translated as *The Concept of the Unconscious in the Transcendental Theory of Mind* at the University of Frankfurt. The thesis was rejected by his advisor Cornelius for reasons unknown and Adorno had withdrawn it subsequently without protest or attempted revision. As Cornelius had retired in 1928, Adorno had to write his second *Habilitationsschrift* under the new chair of philosophy at the University of Frankfurt occupied by the theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) on *Kierkegaard: Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* (1933), translated as *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1989). Adorno became a *Privatdozent*
at the University of Frankfurt with the help of Tillich who was a close friend of Horkheimer. On the threshold of his academic career, history intervened to unseat Adorno’s plans. When the Nazis came into power in 1933, they immediately tracked down on what Jewish people were able to do and cut down on employment. On 13 March of the same year, the Gestapo closed the Institute for Social Research and on 7 April, the Ministry of Science, Art and Education withdrew Adorno’s licence to teach. Therefore, Adorno moved to Oxford in 1934 and, in order to begin his intellectual career in Britain, he followed the advice given to him (by ?) and started another doctoral research on Husserl under the supervision of the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976) at the University of Oxford. This undefended thesis was revised and published in 1956 under the title *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie: Studien über Husserl und die phänomenologischen Antinomien*, translated as *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies* (1982). The efforts to find academic career in Britain proved unsatisfactory for Adorno. As a result, when Horkheimer sent him an invitation in 1937 to come to New York where he had also emigrated following the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis, and had set up again the Institute for Social Research in Columbia University, Adorno too migrated to New York along with his new wife Gretel (*née* Karplus?) in 1938. While based in New York, Adorno also worked with Paul Lazarsfeld (1901–1976) and contributed to the Princeton radio research project funded by the Rockefeller foundation at Princeton University which was interested in studying the ideological influence of radio. In 1941, he further moved along with Horkheimer and other members of the Institute to Pacific Palisades district in Los Angeles, California. He got reunited in Los Angeles with a larger number of expatriate Jewish community which included Arnold Schoenberg, Bertolt Brecht and Thomas Mann. Adorno advised
Mann on musical matters for his anti-Nazi allegory in the novel called *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn erzählt von einem Freund* (1947), translated as *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn, as Told by a Friend*. Adorno had come to Los Angeles with a suitcase which contained the completed manuscript of *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1949), translated as *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1973 and 2006). He presented this book to Horkheimer who was so impressed by his attack on the fragmentary nature of contemporary life that he decided to collaborate intellectually with him in the years to come. The collaboration resulted into producing one of the most significant books of the modern time called *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (1947), translated as *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1973). The book was originally published only as *Philosophische Fragmente* in mimeograph in 1944, but later in 1947 it was revised and republished with a new title *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* by which it is known widely today. Adorno was not pleased by life in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, as were his general feelings about life in America from 1938–1949 about which he wrote later in a book *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Though Adorno was not comfortable with the idea of returning to Germany, he decided to go back there with Horkheimer to re-establish the Institute in Frankfurt after the Holocaust (1939–1945) and the suicide by Hitler and the defeat of Germany in World War II in 1945. After his return to Germany in 1949, he thought of starting again his academic career. When in 1950, the Institute for Social Research was reopened in Frankfurt, Adorno was granted full professorship in Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Frankfurt. Adorno became the codirector of the Institute with Horkheimer in 1955 and after Horkheimer’s retirement

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in 1958, its sole director till his death in 1969. During these years after the return, Adorno wrote seriously on culture after Auschwitz, which also included his thoughts on art and aesthetics after Auschwitz. They are very significant deliberations about our age and the eminent scholars have often visited them, generating healthy discussions. These dark years of his intellectual life were also unhappy for Adorno in some respects, particularly because he became the target of student activism (SDS). Adorno’s antipathy to any capitulation to a regimented politics, in addition to his refusal of prescribed identity, rendered him at odds with the student movements of the 1960s. The new German state wanted to curb the student movement and their protests about the Vietnam war. Adorno expressed his solidarity with the students on the question of war which was likened by him to the Holocaust, but he disliked their anti-Americanism and their anti-intellectual posture. In contrast to the adulation heaped on his colleague in the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse, the students protested Adorno’s lectures and distributed leaflets declaring “Adorno as an institution is dead.” They entered the premises of the Frankfurt Institute in 1969 and occupied his offices while protesting the Vietnam war to seek enrolment of the names of its intellectuals in their activities. Thinking that the students would destroy or damage the Institute’s building and belongings, Adorno, out of fear, telephoned (?) the police to come and intervene in this matter. In the following months, he had many fearful encounters with the students. It created a rupture between the students and the Institute and caused great criticism of Adorno as a self indulgent theorist.\footnote{Adorno views that the emphasis on the unity of theory and praxis leads to the subservience of theory to praxis and the intellectual emptiness of praxis. Praxis without theory becomes only exercise of power from which theory wants to free humanity. In joining theory and praxis, both lose. In his article “Resignation,” Adorno says that theory is resigned and fear of action, but its thinking is a form of resistance like any action.} For his part, Adorno stood by the primacy of intellectual freedom in the face of general lack of freedom. He claimed, “I established a theoretical model of thought.(?) How could I have suspected that
people would want to implement it with Molotov cocktails?”

Habermas also refused to become the director of the Institute for its theoretical indulgence at the expense of praxis and even critical theory did not focus on the Institute for almost two decades beginning with the year 1970. It is only during the recent years that a resurgence of interest has taken place with respect to the study and research of Adorno and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Having been exhausted by the events of his late period, Adorno thought of spending a vacation in his habitual holiday destination in Zermatt in Switzerland in 1969. He climbed a 3000 metre high mountain there against the advice of his doctors, and had a severe heart attack due to which he could not survive even when admitted to hospital in Visp on that very day. He died in hospital on August 6, 1969 and his widow Gretel claimed in her grief that the students were responsible for his death.


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6 In Jay, 1973: 279.

Auschwitz and Adorno

Adorno engages with the Holocaust and fascism in a number of his philosophical books and essays but it has been examined here specifically with reference to his six

The first book in which Adorno is preoccupied with the Holocaust is *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (1947), translated as *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1972 and 2002). It offers most scathing critique of modernity in the twentieth century and diagnoses how rationalized society is implicated with barbarism but it thinks itself free from it. Written in five chapters, the book deals with important issues such as myth and enlightenment, Enlightenment morality, culture industry and anti-Semitism. The fifth and last chapter “Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment” (137–172) is relevant to the exploration of this research. In the seven sections of this chapter, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the historical evidence about humanity show that science, reason and logic have transformed into mythic irrationality. Mythic reason, the tendency in fascism which displaces the human for a mathematical absolute is more dangerous than mythic irrationality. Instrumentalized reason has permitted humanity to dominate nature at the expense of humanity’s place within the natural order of things. This alienation between man and nature has been further accelerated in the dehumanizing logic of

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industrial production, the pseudo-individuality marketed by the industry and in the reduction of human being to the status of an object. The absolute atrocities of the Holocaust or Hiroshima were the logical results of an Enlightenment which privileges the rational solution of human problems over human existence. Though Dialectic of Enlightenment is pessimistic, it expresses optimism that the modern subject will use the tools of Enlightenment against instrumental reason to divert humanity from its path toward destruction.

The sentiment expressed in Dialectic of Enlightenment also enlivens another philosophical work of Adorno written in German during his exile from Germany, Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben⁸ (1951), translated as Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life⁹ (1974). It is a record of despair at the descent into hell during the Second World War, and of the faint hope for the revolutionary change of the world. It is mainly concerned with the possibility or impossibility of “good life” today. Part I (dated 1944) of Minima Moralia begins with the epigraph from the novel Der Amerika-Müde (“Tired of America”) by the Austrian writer and democrat of 1848 Austrian revolution Ferdinand Kürnberger (1821–1879), who returned to Austria-Hungary after a disappointing stay in America: Life does not live." Part II (dated 1945) of the book begins with the epigraph from Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay (1893) by the British idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley (1846–1924): Where everything is bad it must be good to know the worst." Part III (dated 1946–47) begins with the epigraph from the poem ‘Le Goût du néant’ by Charles Bauledaire: Avalanche, veux-tu m'emporter dans ta chute? (“Avalanche, sweep

⁸ Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1951.
¹⁰ Ibid. p.19
¹¹ Ibid. p.83
me off within your slide!”)\(^{12}\). Taken together, the three parts of *Minima Moralia* express melancholy and despair that Adorno attributed to his own experience of homelessness. Adorno mediates on the paradoxes of love and literature, the turmoil of exile, and the salvation of writing to communicate the hopeless wish that the fairytale of humanity might yet have a happy ending: “A man who is sorrowful and yet unbowed resembles the crinkled little old lady gathering wood, who meets the Good Lord without recognizing Him, and is blessed with bounty . . . The frog prince, an incorrigible snob, stares at the princess with eyes of longing and cannot stop hoping that she will rescue him\(^{13}\).

In the last years of his life, Adorno wrote the most significant work *Negative Dialektik\(^{14}\)* (1966), translated as *Negative Dialectics\(^{15}\)* (1973) which is an overview of the German philosophical tradition from Kant and Hegel to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Of the total three Parts, the last chapter of the book “Meditations on Metaphysics” (361–408) in Part III is significant for present research. Divided into twelve sections, it provides Adorno’s view of the possibility of thinking in the wake of barbarity. Adorno here rewrites the terms of Hegelian dialectics to describe a materialist epistemology that would break the idealist synthesis between subject and object, concept and particulars. He asserts, “Identity is the primal form of ideology.”\(^{16}\)

*The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture\(^{17}\)* (1991) is a collection of Adorno’s unpublished essays written during 1938-69 which advance his controversial theory of culture. Comprising of total nine essays, the book theorizes Adorno’s important concept of the culture industry and thinks over music, television,

\(^{12}\) Ibid. p.159
\(^{14}\) Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966.
film and political disengagement. The essay “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda” (132–157) associates culture industry with fascist propaganda.

*The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational Culture*[^18] (1941-53) (1994) is another collection which includes two important discussions of anti-Semitism in “Research Project on Anti-Semitism: Idea of the Project” (181–217) and “Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda” (218–231). Adorno offers the critique of contemporary culture and irrationality in supposedly rationalized society. The “Introduction” by Stephen Cook examines a wide range of cultural theory after Adorno which is important for Adorno’s outlandish association of fascist propaganda with the culture industry, and of the continued relevance of Adorno’s account of the irrationality of society.

*Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*[^19] (1998) brings together two works of Adorno written after World War II and his return to Germany in 1949: *Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle* (1963) translated as *Interventions: Nine Critical Models* and *Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2* (1969), translated as *Catchwords: Critical Models II*. The volume collects Adorno’s short essays, radio talks and lectures on a number of topics which are central to his thinking. The essays on the nature of philosophy and the aftermath of fascism or the condition of philosophical thought after the trauma of the Second World War are important here for the present research subject.


Adorno and Aesthetics

In addition to the Holocaust, Adorno engages with several other important issues of social and cultural relevance during his intellectual career. He brings disciplines like philosophy, sociology, music and literature to his intellectual output. He is specifically interested in how literature might become philosophical and philosophy can become literary. The analysis of society is carried out in both. Adorno’s major aim as the director of the Institute for Social Research in consort with this aim was to provide the philosophical impetus to different disciplines in humanities and social sciences. A radical connection between philosophy, criticism of artworks and the analysis of contemporary society can be found in Adorno’s works. According to Adorno, a work of art is important from a philosophical perspective because it contains philosophical statements about soul or evil, and from the artistic perspective, due to the features of art like narrative form and syntax. Adorno postulates that the philosophical interpretation of a literary text is the closest possible reading of any literary text. Philosophy helps broaden the horizon of art by following a philosophical reflection from inside the work of art than from its outside. One cannot run away from this kind of philosophical thinking in the assessment of art and literature. According to Adorno, the philosophical interpretation of art attends to the specific ways in which a work of art is put together, by comparing an artist’s method of composition with a philosopher’s method of composition, in the manner of music. Just as in music, the process of composition is important, so does in philosophy, its method of putting words together as they enter into the human head.
Adorno was greatly influenced during his young days by the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch’s\textsuperscript{20} (1885–1977) *Geist der Utopie* (1918), translated as *The Spirit of Utopia* (2000). Bloch’s two views concerning the relationship between philosophy and art held great significance for Adorno: (a) Art cannot be directly turned into philosophy because philosophy is already established; and (b) philosophy is not established because art is simply irrelevant to philosophy, and significantly, art has an access to a kind of knowledge that philosophy does not have prior to its confrontation with artistic experience.\textsuperscript{21} The task of philosophy of art was not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects, but in our contemporary times, it is the incomprehensibility of artworks that has to be comprehended. Adorno accorded a central place to art and literature in his thinking and considered the products of art and literature as significant in understanding human society and human world. Art was also important for him for its own features.

The development of Adorno’s philosophy of art has been examined in the following sections of this chapter with respect to his major writings on aesthetics after Auschwitz such as *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1949), translated as *Philosophy of New Music* (2006); *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (1951), translated as *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (1974); *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (1955), translated as *Prisms* (1967); *Noten zur Literatur I* (1957), translated as *Notes to Literature* vol. I (1991); *Noten zur Literatur II* (1961),

\textsuperscript{20} Son of an assimilated Jew of modest means, Bloch had good friendship with George Simmel and György Lukács. At the outbreak of World War I, he moved out of Berlin, first to Grünewald and then to Switzerland, where he entered into friendship with Benjamin, and after the war, returned to Berlin and became a member of circle of intellectuals like Adorno, Brecht, Eisler (1898–1962) and Klemperer (1885–1973). He also had to go again to Switzerland in 1933, to escape persecution under new race laws implemented by the Nazis, and then to the US where he waited for the war to finish. There he wrote his famous but unfinished work *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1959), translated as *The Principle of Hope* (1986) which argues that every historical age contains its own horizon, its Front over which the Not-Yet-Conscious spirit of utopia flows. Even the darkest moments in history, as of Bloch and Adorno, contain elements of Vor-Schein, ‘anticipatory illumination’/preappearance’, which point towards imminent transformation.

\textsuperscript{21} In this sense, even Hegel seemed to confirm Adorno’s views: “The philosophy of art is therefore a greater need in our day than it was in days when art by itself as art yielded full satisfaction (1975[1835]:1.11).”
translated as Notes to Literature vol. II (1992); and Ästhetische Theorie (posthumous, 1970) translated as Aesthetic Theory (both in 1984 and 1997).

Philosophie der neuen Musik\textsuperscript{22} (1949), translated twice as Philosophy of Modern Music\textsuperscript{23} (1973) and Philosophy of New Music\textsuperscript{24} (2006), is the second important book, after Aesthetic Theory, in terms of Adorno’s writings on aesthetics. Adorno announced his return after exile in the United States to a devastated Europe by composing it. It became intensely polemical and aroused strong reactions and outrage, even by Schoenberg himself. A turning point in Adorno’s musicological philosophy, the book offers a critique of musical reproduction as internal to composition itself, rather than as a matter of the reproduction of musical performance. Consisting of two seminal essays “Schoenberg and Progress” (27–102) and “Stravinsky and Reaction” (103–158), Philosophy of New Music poses the musical extremes in which Adorno perceived the struggle for the cultural future of Europe: between human emancipation and barbarism, between the compositional techniques and achievements of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. While the essay on Schoenberg is the earliest text, the “Introduction” is one of the most insightful statements of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, and the essay on Stravinsky is a significant attempt to differentiate the competing trajectories of music. Philosophy of New Music anticipates Aesthetic Theory directly by formulating the relation of music and of art in general to knowledge, about the problem of the social significance of art, the relation of musical subject to objective material, and the relation of form to content.

\textsuperscript{22} Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976.
Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben (1951), translated as Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life25 (1974) is a meditation on the paradoxes of love and literature.

Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft (1955), translated as Prisms26 (1967) comprises Adorno’s essays on aesthetics which deal with Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, Frantz Kafka’s The Castle, Jazz and Schoenberg. The opening essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” is fundamental to Adorno’s work. The reflections on Schoenberg27, Benjamin28 and Kafka29 in the succeeding essays are important documents in Adorno’s engagement with some of the figures who have played a pivotal role in his intellectual formation. Thus, Prisms reveals Adorno’s sensitivity to aesthetics.

Ästhetische Theorie (posthumous, 1970) translated as Aesthetic Theory (198430 and 199731 twice), is the first important philosophical work in terms of Adorno’s writings on aesthetics, and the culmination of his lifetime of aesthetic investigation. It is a defence of modernism or modern art. Modernist art is not self-evident. For his aesthetic theory, Adorno draws on a vast range of artists and philosophers, from Baudelaire and Beethoven to Kant and Hegel. He revisits concepts such as sublime, ugly and beautiful and demonstrates that they are reservoirs of human experience. According to Adorno, these experiences ultimately underlie aesthetics because “art is the sedimented history of human misery.” Adorno foregrounds the interdisciplinary interdependence between art and philosophy by

25 See footnote 2 and 3.
arguing that art is philosophical in a very significant way and that philosophy is artistic. He also gives an important concept of art by defining art in relation to what it is not:

Although art’s difference from the merely empirical is to be maintained, this difference is transformed in itself qualitatively; much that was not art–cultic works, for instance–has over the course of history metamorphosed into art; and much that was once art is that no longer. Posed from on high, the question whether something such as film is or is no longer art leads nowhere. Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain. The tension between what motivates art and art’s past circumscribes the so-called questions of aesthetic constitution. Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that alone would fulfill the demands of a materialistic-dialectical aesthetics.\(^{32}\)

Adorno relies on art as the last factor of resistance against a total society. He postulates the idea of art as social production by thinking of the relationship between art and its other as “a magnet to a field of iron filings.”\(^{33}\) The philosophical disjunctions and the upholding of the aesthetic ideal by the fascists made art a medium of social control in Nazi Germany. During the Nazi dictatorship, art was practiced purely with a model of aesthetics and therefore, it failed to provide resistance to social domination. In reaction to this Nazi model of art, Adorno argues: “Art is the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it. The constitution of art’s sphere

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\(^{32}\) Aesthetic Theory, p. 3.

corresponds to the constitution of an inward space of men as the space of their representation.” Art was primarily social and stood in opposition against social domination and social mores without an awareness of independence, but it achieved its autonomy and independence from society due to the bourgeois consciousness of freedom which was itself bound to society. According to Adorno, art is critical of reality by virtue of its concept which is doublefold: (a) art dissociates itself from social reality which is the thesis of art’s autonomy, and (b) art belongs to that same social reality, which is the thesis of art as social fact (fait social), meaning that art is the product of social labor of spirit. Art is a social fact “not only because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated, nor simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material. Much more art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as “socially useful,” it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it.”

Adorno defines the role of art as mediation between people and society and outlines its contribution to society in providing resistance to the powerful forces in society:

Art keeps itself alive through its social force of resistance; unless it reifies itself, it becomes a commodity. Its contribution to society is not communication with it but rather something extremely mediated: It is resistance in which, by virtue of inner-aesthetic development, social development is reproduced without being imitated. At the risk of its self-alienation, radical modernity preserves art’s immanence by admitting society only in an obscured form, as in the dreams with which artworks

34 London: Bloomsbury, 2014: 10
35 2002[1987]: 225-226
have always been compared. Nothing social in art is immediately social, not even when this is its aim.  

Thus, art, in contrast to the products of the culture industry, has a double character for Adorno: autonomous and social fact. Art is not only linked to the forces of society, but also free from all present laws and forces at the same time. Art shows reality as it is and reminds us of a better society. Art resists all attempts to be co-opted by society. It negates the present state of affairs and keeps alive the hope for a better life in a better world. Adorno understands art in its changing negative relation to society which brings us to his crucial definition of art: “Art is the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it.” This conveys two important functions of art: (a) Art is not directly reducible to reality but opposed to it, its antithesis, and (b) art is social by virtue of the fact that it is critical of society. Art is critical of society but it is not political art, though art has relation to politics and society. With respect to the definition of art and art’s relation to society, Adorno underlines two features of modern art: (1) Modern art is both a thing and not a thing, and (2) modern art is dialectical in some sense. Modern art is a thing because it refuses recourse to any preestablished definition of art; and modern art is not a thing because it has also radically separated itself from any social function and therefore does not take part in the general flow of ordinary things.

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36 2014: 308
37 2014: 10.
38 Giorgio Agamben writes in his book L’uomo senza contenuto (1994), translated as The Man Without Content (1999) that medieval art put in wunderkammer (“a cabinet of wonder”) by medieval men had its relationship with the divine world, while modern art in the form of gallery, which was unusual in the past to be accepted as an art, has now no relationship even with the outside world beyond its own. Modern art, in its pursuit of autonomy, has become closed and it has ‘built its own world for itself’.
Noten zur Literatur I (1957), translated as Notes to Literature vol. I (1991)\textsuperscript{39} and Noten zur Literatur II (1961), translated as Notes to Literature vol. II (1992)\textsuperscript{40} contain most of Adorno’s significant literary criticism and offer his view of aesthetics in general. They include Adorno’s most famous essays on aesthetics such as “The Essay as Form (3–23),” “On Lyric Poetry and Society (37–54)” and “Trying to understand Endgame (241–275),” in vol. I, and “The Artist as Deputy (98–108),” “Commitment (76–94),” and “Is Art Lighthearted? (247–253)” in vol. II. Adorno makes profound engagements with important writers like Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, Samuel Beckett and Walter Benjamin, all of whom are crucial to his intellectual development. In the essay “On Lyric Poetry and Society”, Adorno views that art refuses that something can be extricated from anything. Instead, the artwork demands knowledge from its reader which can do justice to it. Artworks demand philosophical interpretation but they cannot be completely translated into conceptual terms: “Artworks that unfold to contemplation and thought without any remainder are not artworks”\textsuperscript{41}. As an example, he tries to comprehend Samuel Beckett’s incomprehensible play Endgame (1957) in the essay “Trying to understand Endgame”. This essay reflects Adorno’s continuing preoccupation with the relationship between philosophy and art/literature.

In Notes to Literature vol. II, Adorno rejects political art. The essay “Commitment” discusses Jean-Paul Sartre’s manifesto of littérature engagée (“committed literature”) in Qu’est-ce que la littérature? (1948), translated as What is Literature?\textsuperscript{42} (1967) that literature should have a clearly defined purpose according to

\textsuperscript{41} Aesthetic Theory, p. 167.
which the free author directly appeals to free readers to act. Adorno is suspicious of connecting artworks with political standpoints and criticizes art which makes political commitments. When Adorno emphasizes the relation of art to society, he does not mean that art should make political commitments or offer social criticism. According to Adorno, Sartre and Brecht tried to make art serve certain political purposes. In the essay “Shouldn’t we abolish aesthetics?” written on June 2, 1927, Brecht dismisses aesthetics and espouses that the contemporary theatre should aim at staging examples of social conflict and provide political instruction, instead advancing universal aesthetic perspective. The prescriptions of aesthetic system are restricting. In presenting such a political view of art, Adorno says that Brecht misses the disruption caused by the catastrophic events of modern history to the traditional aesthetic categories and fails to see the socially critical tendency inherent in artworks. The rational and humanistic assumptions behind art on the basis of which Brecht advances the political view of art have been damaged to such an extent that artworks would not succeed in conveying its socially and politically useful meaning. Art can oppose society by remaining as art rather than imposing political aims on it. To impose political aims on art means to reduce the freedom of art. Art obeys no law other than its own. As Adorno writes in his *Philosophy of New Music*, “No artist is able on his own to transcend the contradiction between unchained art and enchained society: All that he is able to do, and perhaps on the verge of despair, is contradict the enchained society through unchained art”\footnote{Philosophy of New Music, p. 82.}. In its aloofness from unfree contemporary society, art suggests a possibility of a free new world. But Brecht does not trust this ideology of aesthetic individuation. In criticizing Brecht, Adorno wants to say that all art is not ideological or all in art is not ideology and ideology is not always untrue, or as its
definition goes, false consciousness. What is untrue in ideology is that it pretends to correspond to society. Ideology cannot be applied blindly to art but special attention must be paid to art as a phenomenon. Thus, Adorno does not completely reject ideology nor does borrow it wholeheartedly. The monolithic view of art is as much opposed as the monolithic view of ideology.

In the essay “Is Art Lighthearted?” in Notes to Literature, Vol. II, Adorno raises the question of seriousness or the lightheartedness of art. Refusing to draw any distinct boundaries between seriousness/thought and lightheartedness/pleasure, Adorno observes that art is neither serious nor lighthearted. It is both serious and lighthearted. Art is pleasure because it escapes the law of seriousness in real life and world. On the other hand, art is serious in the sense that through its escape from real life and world, it seeks to bring some change in our consciousness, thereby suggesting the possibility, or the need for a new kind of world or life to exist. Here Adorno provides an important definition of art: art as “something that has escaped from reality and is nevertheless permeated with it, art vibrates between this seriousness and lightheartedness. It is this tension that constitutes art. Art is both social and critical of society.”

Adorno’s concern with aesthetics, as examined above with reference to his individual works, seems to be very complicated. However, the category of aesthetics is at issue in three of his pivotal works: Philosophy of New Music (1949), Notes to Literature, vol. I (1957) & vol. II (1961), and Aesthetic Theory (1970). Adorno questions the very possibility of philosophical aesthetics. He not only tries to find a clear and exact definition of the term called “aesthetics” but he also wants to raise a question about how aesthetics can or should exist as a separate subdiscipline in

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44 *Prisms*, p. 32.
philosophy, since the philosophical thinking on art is bound to be metaphysical, logical and moral which are regarded as subdisciplines in philosophy. Adorno claims that aesthetics cannot be separated from any consideration of social and historical condition and therefore the discussion of art, being attentive to these considerations, has to provide a general thesis with particular examples. The social and historical specificity of artworks demand philosophical reflection which must be applied to real artworks practically rather than reducing them to general principles of social and historical analysis. Adorno also claims that the subject matter of the philosophy of aesthetics is not merely and specifically confined to art but it can be anything. Thus, by questioning the discipline of aesthetics, Adorno indirectly contributes to it by asking and answering the fundamental questions of the philosophical interpretation of art such as: What is art? What is aesthetics? In order to understand these questions, Adorno’s relation to two of his former and important European philosophers of aesthetics – Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel – must be examined. It would clarify Adorno’s views and position on aesthetics for us. Adorno’s aesthetics is concerned with many important questions drawn from Kant’s aesthetics and from Hegel’s response to Kant. Therefore, the views on aesthetics by Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) and by Hegel in his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts* (lectures delivered 1820–1829; published posthumously, 1835) needs to be discussed briefly again in examining Adorno’s aesthetics.

Kant’s aesthetics are chiefly concerned with aesthetic judgment which is autonomous, meaning that it is different from moral or cognitive judgment. By the autonomy of aesthetic judgment, Kant means that the work of art cannot be judged according to some pre-established principles or criteria or rules. The greater section of the first part of *The Critique of Judgement* is dedicated to the attempt to show that,
although aesthetic judgments must in a certain sense be subjective, they can
legimately claim the assent of everyone. Aesthetic judgment makes a claim to
subjective universality, i.e. a judgment to which all others must agree. Benjamin argued
in his thesis Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik (1920), translated
as “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism (1996)” that the generation of
German philosophers after Kant, particularly Schlegel (1772–1829), extended Kant’s
emphasis on aesthetic autonomy to the very domain of art. Thus, the German
Romantics shifted their focus from subjective aesthetic judgment to art objects.
Likewise, Adorno in his aesthetics maintains the autonomy of art (Schlegel) in addition
to that of judgment (Kant). Hegel criticizes Kant’s aesthetics arguing that the
subjectivity of aesthetic judgment in Kant does not relinquish its legitimate claim to be
binding on other human subjects and does not offer any knowledge (truth/untruth) of
the objects of art. According to him, aesthetics must be concerned “to determine what
the beautiful is as such and how it has displayed itself in reality, in works of art,
without wishing to provide rules for their production.” Thus, in contrast to Kant’s
subjective aesthetics, Hegel’s objective aesthetics seeks to explore the truth of the
aesthetic object, while Adorno wishes to go beyond this opposition between
subjectivity and objectivity of aesthetic judgment on art which largely forms the path
of his philosophical career. In Negative Dialectics (1966), Adorno seeks to remedy the
consequences of Kant’s focus on the subject by a renewed turn to the object which
does not mean his counter-elevation of the subject by the object. Adorno reconfigures
the relationship between subject and object in which it is precisely by way of the
subject that the merely subjective is broken through and the object is reached. This
reconfiguration of the relationship between subject (Kant) and object (Hegel), Adorno

thinks, is also necessary in aesthetics, and therefore, he espouses the idea of “dialectical aesthetics” in *Aesthetic Theory*, based on his theory of negative dialectics.

In his aesthetics, Adorno does not simply adopt the positions taken by either Kant or Hegel, but shows the mutual implications between subject and object. The subjective experience of aesthetics does not mean, for Adorno, that one can put one’s aesthetic experience in an account book. Similarly, Adorno also criticizes the consumer’s response to the products of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, saying that the products churned out on a large scale and distributed by industrialized methods are merely consumed by a mass audience, rather than adequately engaged with even when they in fact merit such engagement. An adequate response to artworks involves a much more intricate involvement of subject and object. Thus, Adorno’s aesthetics inherits and tries to overcome the opposition between Kantian subjective and Hegelian objective aesthetics. Though Adorno criticizes Kant for unduly restricting aesthetics to the investigation of subjective response, he still thinks that aesthetic response is crucial to the consideration of aesthetic objectivity and denounces any separation between feeling and thinking.

According to Adorno, understanding is not a higher stage of reaction and the initial, immediate response to artworks is important for a serious contemplation of them. Critique is immanent rather than additional to the experience of artworks. This centrality of critique to aesthetic response reflects Adorno’s emphasis on the need for philosophical interpretation of artworks, an interpretation which is not added but immanent to them. Adorno is again indebted to Benjamin for his work on the concept of criticism in German Romantic philosophy. According to Benjamin, criticism is the consummation or completion of the work of art. Criticism does not add something

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missing in art but it brings out the philosophical significance which is already latent and mute in art. Benjamin brings out the specific character of the knowledge of artworks that transpires in criticism by describing it as a kind of self-knowledge of the artwork. Thus, Adorno’s idea of philosophical interpretation of artworks does not imply that art should be knocked into philosophical shape. The philosophical interpretation of art is the complement to a requirement already evident in artworks. At the same time, Adorno also guards us against the type of criticism that would simply read philosophical or political statements and theses out of artworks. He is suspicious of the kind of philosophical interpretation that finds in artworks only whatever it has already put into them:

Adorno acknowledges that fact that art cannot be converted into philosophy without some loss, but he argues for philosophical interpretation in light of the radical developments that have taken place in the field of arts in the modern age. With respect to the modernist works such as James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939) or Hans G. Helms’s (1932–2012) *FA: M’AHNIESGWOW* (1959), Adorno states that they believe that art is not straightforwardly interpretable. While discussing the ways in which interpretive understanding is problematized in these works, Adorno also returns to the relation of subject to object in aesthetics. He says that interpretive understanding cannot be based on the effect of the artwork on the subject, but on the rational understanding of the artworks. But this does not mean that philosophical understanding means only rational and the subject has no importance. The rational understanding should be conducted by the subject on its own terms, following the intuitive perception of the artworks. Thus, philosophical understating becomes both subjective and objective.
The philosophy of art before Hegel, including that of Kant, does not have any high conception of the work of art, and only relegates art to the status of some kind of sublimated means of enjoyment. Hegel and Heidegger both believe that the beautiful days of Greek art have gone, and that the modernity has created a rupture which has resulted in the decline and the loss of the Greek art and the genuine art both. They make a general claim that the era of art is over and that the time now is to realize the truth content of art by equating it with its social content. Adorno considers such a verdict on art is a kind of totalitarianism. He feels that the abolition or the prohibition of art in our half-barbaric society which is becoming totally barbaric would make the abolition the half-partner of barbarism.

AESTHETICS AFTER AUSCHWITZ

In the postwar or post-Holocaust period, Adorno’s statement concerning the barbarity of poem (and by poem, art in general) after Auschwitz has caused considerable controversy. Towards the end of his essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1951), Adorno writes, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.” In the section called of Negative Dialectics, Adorno observes:

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time.

Further, he writes:

[...] Auschwitz demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed. That this could happen in the midst of the traditions of philosophy, of art, and of the enlightening sciences says more than that these traditions and their spirit lacked the power to take hold of men and work a change in them. There is untruth in those fields themselves, in the autarky that is emphatically claimed for them. All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage.  

Adorno considers Auschwitz as an unrepeateable act in history, while Zygmunt Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust* writes that, though the Holocaust occurred half a century ago, its immediate results have receded into the past and most of its survivors have died; yet the familiar features of Western civilization made mysterious by the Holocaust are still with us. Therefore there is also the possibility of another Holocaust which we continually avoid. Adorno raises very important issues of Holocaust representation and memory. He also questions the very survival of art, culture and philosophy when all have died symbolically with the Holocaust. Auschwitz has obliterated the very conditions under which art, culture and philosophy can be produced and therefore it is an ethical duty that one must in all endeavours commit oneself to Auschwitz. A new categorical imperative is required which resists cold refuge in redemptive thinking. Adorno in this sense is against the traditional forms of thinking. Auschwitz is an irredeemable suffering which demands a response, an artistic and creative response rather than a discursive one. Art does not depend on conventional form of thinking. The avant-gardism and anti-conventionalism of 1920s, Adorno suggests, is a historical model which is capable of capturing the historical void of meaning after Auschwitz: “The true artists of today are those in whose works

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50 1973[1966]: 366-367
absolute horror still quakes”.

Auschwitz marks the complete failure of European Enlightenment project and shows the complicity of cultural history with barbarism. Therefore the only ethical response to Auschwitz is artistic response. This kind of art resists any kind of appropriation and readymade meanings. After Auschwitz, only that art is meaningful which provides resistance to the prevailing way things are in thinking itself. Adorno offers first clarification for his strong condemnation of aesthetics:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilts of him who was spared.

Adorno also justifies his earlier classic statement refuting all arts, particularly the production of poetry — “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” — by expressing:

I do not want to soften my statement that it is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz; it expresses, negatively, the impulse that animates committed literature. The question one of the characters in Sartre's Morts sans sépulture ("The Dead Without Tombs") asks, “Does living have any meaning when men exist who beat you until your bones break?” is also the question whether art as such should still exist at all; whether spiritual

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53 Adorno’s various formulations of this significant statement regarding lyric poetry “after Auschwitz” have been collected, along with responses by a variety of German-language poets and critics in Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichte. Ed. Petra Kiedaisch. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995.
regression in the concept of committed literature is not enjoined by the regression of society itself . . . . literature must resist precisely this verdict, that is, be such that it does not surrender to cynicism merely by existing after Auschwitz.

Thus, there is an aporia at the centre of Adorno’s criticism of poetry: art must incorporate the crisis of destruction but also refute it by giving expression, form and meaning to this suffering. Adorno offers suggestions for future poetics, for poetics after Holocaust: art must dedicate itself to the brutal fact of crisis in a state of being for something else. As such, after Adorno, there is a certain difficulty of art production and the challenge of philosophical rumination on art. Adorno’s thinking is also viewed somewhat negative. A considerable number of artists such as Wladyslaw Szpilman (The Pianist, 1946), Anne Frank (Diary of a Young Girl, 1947), Primo Levi (If This is a Man, 1947, revised as Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity, 1961), Paul Celan (Death Fugue, 1948; Shibboleth, 1955; Zürich, the Stock Inn, 1960), Elie Wiesel (Night, 1956), Simon Wiesenthal (The Sunflower, 1969), Aharon Appelfeld (Badenheim 1939, 1975), William Styron (Sophie’s Choice, 1979), Joshua Sobol (Ghetto, 1984), Yehuda Amichai (Open Closed Door, 1998), etc. have produced a significant body of literature within the Holocaust canon.

Conclusion
Adorno’s aesthetic theory does not fit well into the discipline of philosophy called aesthetics because in his philosophy of art, art is not judged according to the criteria of aesthetics. But his aesthetic theory is a sustained investigation into the possibility and nature of a philosophical approach to art than an easily assimilated contribution to the established discipline of aesthetics. Adorno wanted to write an epigram from Schlegel’s
Kritische Fragmente⁵⁴ (1797) as a motto for his celebrated book on philosophy of art, Aesthetic Theory: “What is called the philosophy of art usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy or the art.”⁵⁵ He also had the intention of dedicating this book to Samuel Beckett. In this way, Adorno, as a philosopher of art, differs and separates himself from traditional Western metaphysics and charts a new path for future philosophers of art along the lines of his thinking. He expresses a need for new aesthetics, as traditional Western thinking of art will not work or aid humanity in the changed circumstances of utmost human genocide and, at the same time, provides one as a specimen. Adorno’s work in aesthetics is motivated by intellectual and historical curiosity and represents the most significant ways of thinking about the relation of subject to object and about the hope for world free of the antagonisms by which it is riven. His philosophy of art is significantly saturated with the event of the Holocaust. The succeeding three chapters of this research examines the philosophical works on aesthetics by three contemporary continental philosophers – Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben – in light of Adorno’s call for new aesthetics, for renewed art after the Holocaust. Adorno’s philosophical investigation into aesthetics is regarded in this manner as a path-breaking contribution for succeeding philosophers to think philosophically about the discipline of art after its appropriation and distortion during the Nazi genocide.