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Art between Fetishism and Melancholy in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory**

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Abstract: The article explores Adorno's understanding of fetishism and melancholy as immanent to the artwork's autonomous structure. In order to understand the relation between them, the Freudian understanding of fetishism and melancholy has to be considered along with the more explicit reference to the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism. Analysing the implications of Adorno's claim that commodity fetishism is at the origin of artistic autonomy, the article shows how it should be understood not only as a materialist demystification but also as a reaffirmation of art's apparent self-sufficiency and its capacity to resist the commodification of society. Nevertheless—the article claims—this is only possible if art's fetishism is dialectically opposed to its melancholy, through which art establishes a relation to the heterogeneous element of the lost object produced by its autonomous form.

Keywords: aesthetics, commodity fetishism, melancholy, form, Adorno, Marx, Freud

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El arte entre el fetichismo y la melancolía en la *Teoría Estética* de Adorno

Resumen: El artículo explora la comprensión de Adorno del fetichismo y la melancolía como immanentes a la estructura autónoma de la obra de arte. Para comprender la relación entre estas, se debe considerar la concepción freudiana del fetichismo y la melancolía, junto con la referencia más explícita al concepto marxista del fetichismo de la mercancía. Analizando las implicaciones de la afirmación de Adorno de que el fetichismo de la mercancía está en el origen de la autonomía artística, el artículo muestra cómo debe entenderse, no solo como una desmitificación materialista, sino también como una reafirmación de la aparente autosuficiencia del arte y su capacidad para resistir la mercantilización de la sociedad. Sin embargo –afirma el artículo– esto sólo es posible si el fetichismo del arte se opone dialécticamente a su melancolía, a través de la cual el arte establece una relación con el elemento heterogéneo del objeto perdido producido por su forma autónoma.

Palabras clave: estética, fetichismo de la mercancía, melancolía, forma, Adorno, Marx, Freud

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In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno makes the astonishing claim that the “truth content” of artworks is “predicated on their fetish character” (1997, p. 227). The prism offered by the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism allows Adorno not only to subdue the idea of artistic truth to a demystifying materialist analysis but also to develop a speculative account of how art manages to resist the commodification it is a product of. The insight into the fetish character of artworks may reduce art to the social conditions of its production but also paves the way for a reaffirmation of artistic autonomy on materialist grounds. Fetishism is not the hidden truth of art, but the basis upon which its manifest truth, i.e. autonomous aesthetic appearance, is established.

While this complex entwinement between artistic autonomy and commodity fetishism has been commented on in literature on Adorno (perhaps most thoroughly by Martin, 2007), less attention has been given to the internal antinomies of art's truth content that are the direct consequences of it. The truth artworks achieve through their fetish character comes at a price. As we will see, something is suppressed and lost in the process of establishing the fetishist appearance of artworks and this loss endows art with guilt and melancholy. This raises the question of art's relation to an unconscious loss and how it makes up for it: either with a fetishist excess of appearance for its own sake or a melancholy attachment to the loss itself. By way of melancholy, the fetishised aesthetic appearance is able to express something beyond itself—namely, the suffering that is, according to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, “a condition of all truth” (1973, p. 17). The shift from the Marxist to the Freudian conceptual framework is implied here, even though Adorno stays clear of discussing these terms in their strictly Marxist or Freudian definitions. In the Freudian definition of these terms, both fetishism and melancholy relate to a lost object, albeit in very different ways, the former by way of the disavowal of loss (Freud, 1961), the latter by way of identification with the lost object (Freud, 1957).

In the following pages, I situate Adorno's conceptualisation of artistic truth between its two opposed conditions: its fetish character on the one hand and its melancholic identification with the lost object. One makes art an appearance of perfect self-sufficiency, while the other enables art to lend a voice to a heteronomous suffering. The antinomy between them comes from the fact that the self-enclosed appearance of art is the only means of expressing suffering, to which it is fundamentally indifferent.

The Fetish of Self-Sufficiency

It comes as no surprise to see a Marxist theoretician of art claiming that artworks should be understood in the context of what Marx called commodity fetishism, just like any other commodity. As Fredric Jameson claims, Adorno developed the “implications of the doctrine of exchange value for the higher reaches of philosophy” (2007, p. 26)—in this case, aesthetics. Against this background, the task of critical theory (or historical materialism) is expected to be one of demystification: We should recognise

the supposedly elevated status of art as a fetish—and look beneath it to study the social conditions of its production and the role it plays, ideologically, in social reproduction.

Yet, the claim Adorno is making suggests something different. He does not say that what we thought was the truth content of art is actually a fetish, nor does he say that its fetish character *is* the truth of art. What he does claim is that the truth content of artworks is predicated on their fetish character; in other words, the fetish character is the condition (“Bedingung” is the word used by Adorno) of artistic truth. This has two implications. First, the truth to be found in art is not reducible to art’s fetish character. Second, what is more in artworks than fetishism—their truth content—does not exist despite fetishism but precisely because of it. As Martin has observed, for Adorno, “autonomous art is not outmoded by its commodification, but is rather a contradictory product of it,” which entails that it is “both produced by *and* destroyed by capitalist culture, both its ideology *and* its critique” (2007, p. 17). What Adorno is after is a conception of artistic truth that would not be based on a denial of its social character or its commodified mode of existence as a fetish. If art is not reducible to its fetish character, it is not on account of there being something “more” to it, some superior aesthetic essence. Being predicated on its own fetish character, art’s truth content has to stem from its fetishism itself. Not only does the idea of artistic truth that Adorno is after not entail any sort of disavowal of its fetish character—on the contrary, it affirms the fetishism of art as its condition of possibility.

For Adorno, the fetish character of art refers to its appearance as something self-sufficient, something that exists for its own sake, which makes it a justified target of materialist critique: “It was plausible that socially progressive critics should have accused the program of *l’art pour l’art*, which has often been in league with political reaction, of promoting a fetish with the concept of a pure, exclusively self-sufficient artwork” (1997, p. 227). What is at stake here is not just *l’art pour l’art* as an artistic movement or part of bourgeois ideology but also the whole philosophical tradition, originating in Kant, of understanding art as something autonomous, without an external purpose, that offers itself to be enjoyed in a disinterested way. For Hegel (1988, p. 157), the artwork stands before us like a divinity, an Olympic God that displays complete indifference towards the world of the mortals, blissfully enjoying in its own self-sufficient, detached existence. For a materialist, of course, this ideal of artistic autonomy has to be demystified:

What is true in this accusation [of socially progressive critics against artistic autonomy] is that artworks, products of social labor that are subject to or produce their own law of form, seal themselves off from what they themselves are. [...] In formal terms, independent of what they say, they are ideology in that a priori they posit something spiritual as being independent from the conditions of its material production and therefore as being intrinsically superior and beyond the primordial guilt of the separation of physical and spiritual labor (Adorno, 1997, p. 227).

The appearance of art as something independent and self-sufficient is fetishised since it covers up the material conditions of its production along with the division between physical and spiritual labour on which it depends. Art also plays its role in social reproduction as its supposed purposelessness serves a specific social purpose: art's "growing independence from society," Adorno claims, "was a function of the bourgeois consciousness of freedom that was itself bound up with the social structure" (1997, p. 225). As such, art is "a vehicle of ideology" (Adorno, 1997, p. 226). For Adorno, therefore, the autonomy of art is an illusion, which can be reduced to the material conditions of its production and the ideological role it plays in class relations.

However, despite all this, Adorno's ambition here is not only to treat artworks from the perspective of historical materialism, which sees them as parts of the social totality but also from the perspective of aesthetic theory, which is interested in how social totality is inscribed into artworks through their own devices. Regardless of his materialism, Adorno's view of aesthetics is still close to Hegel's—it is a theory of how art, in its autonomy, produces an appearance of something true. The semblance of artistic autonomy, as Adorno claims in *Negative Dialectics* (1973, p. 405), "is a promise of nonsemblance" and should therefore be preserved if the truth is what we are after.

If we are to understand how the fetish character of art becomes the condition of artistic truth, we must first observe how Adorno upholds the apparent separation of art from the empirical world and society. As seen above, the "law of form" enables art's "sealed off" status. The fetish character of art is only possible because "form works like a magnet that orders elements of the empirical world in such a fashion that they are estranged from their extra-aesthetic existence" (Adorno, 1997, p. 226). It is "by virtue of separation from empirical reality," Adorno claims that artworks achieve "a heightened order of existence" (1997, p. 4). Form is what founds the appearance of autonomy as the autonomy of appearance. This is how the artwork becomes closed within itself.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno finds a conceptual metaphor for this self-enclosed appearance: artworks as windowless monads (1997, p. 5 and numerous other places throughout the book). Leibniz (1989) famously states that monads—simple substances from which the whole world is composed—are without windows. Nothing can enter or leave the monad as a completely self-enclosed and indivisible entity that has no interaction or exchange with anything external to it. The activity of the monad is entirely self-determined, which fits perfectly with how the law of form defines the closure of the artwork in its autonomous appearance. However, why does Adorno need this complicated metaphysical reference considering that he has another metaphor for artistic self-sufficiency closer at hand—a much more popular expression of artistic or scholarly separation from the world, namely the ivory tower? Yet, Adorno clearly distinguishes between both metaphors: "The cliché about the ivory tower no longer applies to the windowless monadic works" (1997, pp. 321–322). But what is the difference between an ivory tower and a monadic type of separation?

For Leibniz, monads are completely closed off from the world. However, this total lack of any relation is compensated by a mechanism that arranges and aligns them within the world they compose. Leibniz calls this mechanism the pre-established harmony through which God coordinates the monads in advance. Acting in accordance with the harmony of the world God chose to create, monads are like synchronised clocks that show the same time without being in any mutual causal relation. Despite their complete separation, universal harmony within them allows them to express the whole world. This combination of total closure with universal expression is what makes the monad preferable to the ivory tower, whose indifference to the world knows no similar counterpoint.

Applying this logic to artworks allows Adorno to reconcile artistic autonomy with its existence within the social totality. Despite their monadic closure, artworks still express something about the world, and it is in this expression that its truth can be found. This dialectic of separation and connection is why Adorno finds the monad a useful conceptual metaphor, but only after submits the Leibnizian logic to a materialist reversal. The harmony that artworks express is no longer divine but social: it is the social totality that determines the structure of our world. And unfortunately, this harmony is not even harmonious as social antagonisms ravage it. What artworks as monads express in and through their separation from society is social disharmony, at the core of which lies domination:

That artworks as windowless monads ‘represent’ what they themselves are not can scarcely be understood except in that their own dynamic, their immanent historicity as a dialectic of nature and its domination, not only is of the same essence as the dialectic external to them but resembles it without imitating it (1997, p. 5).

Here, the monadic logic is laid out. The artworks’ relation to society does not stem from how they represent or imitate social reality, but from their immanent historicity, which follows the same dialectic as that of society. If artworks were understood through the way they represent social disharmony, the monadic logic would be broken, for this would mean that artworks act as windows upon external reality. Artworks are truly windowless insofar as social antagonisms are present within them immanently, that is, through the development of their form. The connection is based on structural resemblance, not imitation. According to Adorno, disharmony in both society and art is a consequence of the principle of domination, coupled with the compulsion to identity, upon which both are based. Just as society is based on the domination of nature and the rationality that drives it is based on identification, art is based on the domination of form over its material: “What art in the broadest sense works with, it oppresses: This is the ritual of the domination of nature that lives on in play” (Adorno, 1997, p. 50). The law of form is a law of domination and can thus be described, as Josh Robinson has put it, as “a poetics of the wrong state of things” (2018, p. 206).

That being said, it is important to note that Adorno (1997, p. 285) does not entirely discard representation and imitation: “As an aesthetic category, imitation cannot simply be accepted any more than it can simply be rejected. [...] It was by way of imitation, not by avoiding it, that art achieved its autonomy.” In fact, a conception of mimesis is crucial to Adorno’s understanding of art’s immanent dialectic (see Cahn, 1984, and Robinson, 2018). The mimetic comportment, originating in mimicry and magic, leads the subject to identify with something other than itself. This assimilation to something other suggests an attitude preceding the fixation of the subject-object relation, even though it has historically, through the modern process of reification, deteriorated to mere imitation. Yet, the identification with something other strengthens the subject, which thus manages to assure its identity with itself. In the historical development of autonomous art, mimesis dialectically transforms itself from the identification with the other to the identification with the self: “The mimesis of artworks is their resemblance to themselves” (1997, p. 104). The primary mimetic identification that precedes imitation thus encapsulates the echo of the anthropological and empirical grounds for the emergence of artistic form. Even in its reduced mode, it remains a residue of heterogeneity within the form’s autonomy.

Despite his insistence on artistic autonomy, Adorno never loses sight of the illusory nature of its separation from historical and empirical grounds. There is no formal idealism in Adorno since the development of autonomous form is based on a process of sublimation and sedimentation of empirical and social elements:

If art opposes the empirical through the element of form [...] the mediation is to be sought in the recognition of aesthetic form as sedimented content. What are taken to be the purest forms (e.g., traditional musical forms) can be traced back even in the smallest idiomatic detail to content such as dance (1997, p. 5).

The historical dialectic of nature and domination in art is a dialectic of mimesis, content and function becoming form and form dominating the nature from which it stems.

In this sense, Adorno regards form as both an autonomous and a historical sedimentation of social processes. On the one hand, the violence of form is how art gains its separation from the empirical and thereby, its autonomy. On the other, it is how art reproduces the antagonisms of society through its own immanent means, regardless of what or how it represents. This is why the social can be read in artworks even when we are apparently only concerned with their form: “Only in the crystallization of its own formal law and not in a passive acceptance of objects does art converge with what is real” (Adorno, 1991, p. 224). What art has to say about society it says not despite its separation, but on the condition of its separation. The monadic logic is not a logic of the subordination of each part to the whole (thereby understanding artworks from the perspective of social totality) but a logic of the inclusion of the whole in each

separated part (thereby understanding how social antagonism is reproduced through immanently artistic means).

The application of monadic logic to the questions of aesthetics makes it easier to understand the aesthetic application of commodity fetishism. Adorno is not analysing how artworks actually function as commodities in the capitalist market. Rather, he is interested in how fetishism is (re-)produced immanently, as the establishment of their self-sufficient monadic closure.

The Mask of Truth

We can now return to the question we started with: How can art produce something true that would not be completely reducible to its fetish character? Adorno claims that art

is social 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 importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art (1997, p. 225).

If there is truth to art, which is also its social truth, it does not reside in the fact that art is part of the social totality, nor in that it represents society. The truth of art resides in its capacity to be in opposition to society, and it is its very autonomy that provides this capability. But if art's truth is conditioned by its fetish character, art's opposition to society has to be as well.

The inherent value of artworks as not being mere commodities plays an important part in the bourgeois ideology of art. Even as they are bought and sold, artworks maintain the appearance of not being commodities. Adorno claims there is some truth in this appearance, as there is something about artistic fetishism that seems to partly distinguish it from commodity fetishism. The existence of commodities is essentially a heteronomous one. They exist for something else and are meant to be consumed or exchanged. Artworks, on the other hand, are autonomous; they exist for their own sake. Even this distinction, however, can be reduced back to the fetishist logic of the commodity. The artwork, in its absolute autonomy, converges with the “absolute commodity” (Adorno, 1997, p. 21), a commodity which perfects the appearance of its independence from the material conditions and relations of its production to such an extent that it seems to exist on its own merit and for its own sake. Therefore, what is more to art than a fetish has its origins in what is more in the commodity than a commodity. The surplus of art over fetishism stems from the absolutisation of fetishism. Thus, the artwork manages to distance itself “from a commodified world through the abstraction of the commodity form itself” (Martin, 2007, 20).

Finally, we are in a position to understand how art's absolutised fetishism can resist society. Just like commodities, artworks are separated from their use value; however, their use value is not overridden by exchange value, as is the case with ordinary commodities. Rather, it is the very lack of use value itself that is made into a fetish. At the same time, their uselessness also makes artworks political:

The principle of heteronomy, apparently the counterpart of fetishism, is the principle of exchange, and in it domination is masked. Only what does not submit to that principle acts as the plenipotentary of what is free from domination; only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value. Artworks are plenipotentaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity. In the context of total semblance, art's semblance of being-in-itself is the mask of truth (Adorno, 1997, p. 227).

By acting like it is not an object that can be exchanged like any other commodity, by refusing—in principle, if not in practice—to submit to the principle of exchange, the artwork resists social domination. Its uselessness may be a fetish, but it also offers a model of an object that is not exchangeable. Therefore, artworks are not the representatives, but the plenipotentaries (*die Statthalter*) of what is lost or distorted in exchange. The fetishised uselessness thus stands in for the lost use value. The surplus (fetish) stands for the lack (use value). Against the generalised principle of exchange, artworks as the ultimate useless objects keep the promise of the lost use value alive. By testifying to something that is not possible within the given social order, artworks become the placeholders of another world no longer subjected to the disharmony of social antagonisms. For Adorno, art is still, as beauty was for Stendhal, a promise of happiness. The disharmony expressed by the artwork as a monad is also an expression of the harmony of another possible world—a world that might seem impossible, but at least we have an object that provides a semblance of it. In a false world, the false appearance of artistic autonomy becomes the mask of truth.

The Shadow of the Heterogeneous

The affirmative capacity of art's fetish character does not, however, absolve art from its “primordial guilt” (Adorno, 1997, p. 227). After all, it is based on the division of labour from the perspective of social totality, and the violence of form, which reproduces social antagonisms within the artistic monad. Form is fundamentally ambivalent; it is the “original sin of art as well as its permanent protest” (Adorno, 1997, p. 50). As we have seen, form oppresses that which it forms, but is nevertheless the means by which art can give voice to what it oppresses: “those artworks succeed that rescue over into form something of the amorphous to which they ineluctably do violence”

(Adorno, 1997, p. 50). The expression of suffering enters the scene here as the other condition for artistic truth.

While the fetish character of art produces a pure semblance, a self-sufficient appearance, expression—and expression can hardly be conceived “except as the expression of suffering”, since joy proves to be “inimical to expression”—is art’s own “rebellion against semblance, art’s dissatisfaction with itself” (Adorno, 1997, p. 110). For Adorno, “expression is the element immanent to art through which, as one of its constituents, art defends itself against the immanence that it develops by its law of form” (1997, p. 110). The expression of suffering thus functions as the immanent transcendence of art: it is the heteronomous element within its autonomy, art’s aversion towards its own fetish character. Just as the expression is external to the immanent law of form, so too, “aesthetic autonomy remains external to suffering” (Adorno, 1997, p. 39). The autonomous law of form is indifferent to the suffering it gives a voice too. Adorno stumbles upon art’s “unsolvable aporia”, the artwork being both “the echo of suffering” and a means of its “neutralization” (1997, p. 39).

Does this mean that the two conditions of artistic truth fall apart in an antinomic fashion or do they form some kind of dialectical interplay? If the law of form is the immanent monadic core of the artwork, autonomously reproducing the antagonisms of society by its own means, is the expression of suffering the irreducible element of heteronomy in art that breaks the monadic logic from within? We have seen that Adorno is, above all, interested in how art produces its own fetishism. But can artistic form also internalise even the heteronomous moment of expression?

It could indeed be said that artistic form produces its own suffering through the violence it does to its material. This is what enables form to be the expression of suffering even though it is essentially indifferent to it. The process of forming is a process of “selecting, trimming, renouncing”, which “prolongs guilty domination in artworks” (Adorno, 1997, p. 144). According to Adorno, this guilt produces an affect, immanent to art—the melancholy of form: “Melancholy is the shadow of what in all form is heterogenous, which form strives to banish: mere existence” (1997, p. 105). As art pursues its immanent identity with itself, it tries to banish any heterogeneity, anything nonidentical. This pursuit, however, melancholically ties it to the nonidentical as the lost object it has itself produced through its work of forming. By pursuing its identity with itself, Adorno claims, art “assimilates itself with the nonidentical”; it does not “identify the nonidentical”, but “identifies with it” (1997, p. 134), thereby resisting the compulsion to identity that otherwise organises social reality.

Beyond expression, this heterogeneity can be linked to mimetic comportment, which precedes and accompanies the constitution of form in art for Adorno, as we have seen above. As Michael Cahn emphasises, Adorno understands mimesis precisely as the identification with something other, rather than a mere imitation of it: “The artistic and magic ‘identification with’ designates a non-repressive behaviour which does not disfigure its object, as any ‘identification of’ does” (1984, pp. 33–34).

Thus, art identifies with its lost object, precisely the Freudian definition of melancholy. As I have argued elsewhere (Benčín, 2019a; 2019b), Freud's text on melancholy can illuminate Adorno's understanding of art's identification with the nonidentical. Freud (1957) writes that the melancholic may very well identify an actual lost object but cannot figure out what they actually lost with this object. The loss the melancholic identifies with refers to something non-identifiable. Melancholy thus seems to involve a production rather than a reaction to loss. In a similar manner, artistic melancholy of form refers less to the external heterogeneous material lost in the process of forming than to loss as a consequence of identification itself—the nonidentical as an immanent moment of heterogeneity. The properly melancholic aspect of form comes from its identification with the nonidentical, the evasive object of loss produced by the identification process itself. While the lost object can still be understood as something external to form, that is, the sensible multiplicity being unified, the object of loss form identifies with is the heterogeneous moment immanent to form itself.

Art can only relate to the nonidentical if it manages to reproduce it internally within the monad of the artwork. Yet, as we have seen, for Adorno, the monadic closure of form does not mean that art is actually separated from the outside world. On the one hand, form is nothing but the sedimentation of social content; in the immanence of formal problems, we find social disharmony again. On the other, art's semblance of separation opens a space for a harmony yet to come. The lost and the not-yet-attained refer to the nonidentical that form gives rise to and, at the same time, excludes.

Conclusion: The Two conditions

The melancholy of form appears as the exact opposite of art's fetish character: to the appearance of pure autonomy it attaches the shadow of heteronomy. As an absolute fetish that does not enter into the circulation of exchange, art is exactly what it was for Hegel: a divinity blissfully enjoying its own self in complete indifference to the world. With the reflections on the violence of form, however, art deals with its own immanent lost object. It no longer blissfully enjoys itself but enters a state of structural melancholy. If art were nothing more than a fetishised appearance, then its form would never appear to it as a problem. Form would then be reduced to a convention, something to be perfected, rather than something that requires transformation. Form, left to its own fetishist autonomy, would indeed appear to completely banish all heterogeneity. No longer affected by what it loses, it would lose the ability to transform itself and align with something true to be expressed.

Yet, if artworks really are monads, they cannot establish a relation to their outside. The only way they can be affected by something is internally: if they are to be able to

express a loss, they can only do so if they lose something themselves. What they lose is precisely what is lost in the process of forming –an immanent heterogeneity that affects them from within. Art can only express a loss because its form can identify with the nonidentical lost object it immanently produces. But if art were to surrender itself to its guilt and melancholy, dissolving its formal strive for identity, it would lose its only means of expression. Adorno's famous dictum that poetry is no longer possible after Auschwitz would be taken literally, breaking the spell of fetishism and the monadic structure using an absolute heterogeneity.

The fetishism and the melancholy of art are distinct relations to an unconscious loss; it is only in their antinomic coexistence, rather than in any dialectical resolution of their opposition, that an artistic truth can be formulated. If art is still possible, it is on the double condition of insisting on its immanent law of form and, simultaneously, the transformation that comes from relating to a heteronomous element within form.

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