2. ‘Reification’ between Autonomy and Authenticity: Adorno on Musical Experience¹

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In an aphorism entitled ‘Le Prix de Progress’, appended to Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno write that ‘Alle Verdinglichung ist ein Vergessen’ (All reification is a forgetting) (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2008, p. 229, translation altered).² This comes as the very last sentence of a reading of a letter by Pierre Flourens, a French physiologist, who was elected to the Académie Française in preference to Victor Hugo. A ground-breaking anaesthesiologist, Flourens raised serious concerns about the use of chloroform in surgery because the substance didn’t simply inure the body to pain but, rather, consigned it to oblivion. In other words, chloroform led to a forgetting of suffering. This notion that ‘all reification is a forgetting’ is an appropriate point of departure for our discussion of what comprises ‘reification’ or Verdinglichung (literally: ‘thingification’). The reason for this is that it enables us to bring into view two exemplary ‘models’ that frame the problem of reification specifically as a form of forgetting: these are the models of dialectic, on the one hand, and difference, on the other.

The first stems from the Idealist tradition and, via a detour through Feuerbach’s ‘transformative critique’ of religion, Marx’s analysis of the commodity form in the famous fourth section of the first chapter of Capital, Volume I. It is developed further in Georg Lukács’s epochal essay ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’ published as a chapter of his 1923 book History and Class Consciousness. It could be said to culminate, mediated by the experiences of the mid-twentieth-century artistic avant-garde, in Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle. If, for Marx, capitalist society in its liberal phase presents itself as an ‘immense accumulation of commodities’, then for Debord, in late capitalism, ‘the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles’ (Debord, 1995, p. 12).

The second model of reification has its origins in the existential theology of Søren Kierkegaard and is given its fullest articulation in the phenomenological ontology of Martin Heidegger as outlined in his early magnum opus Being and Time published just four years after History and Class
Consciousness, which introduces the idea of the ‘ontological difference’. This is difference between the situated, finite human being, Dasein, and the things that are disclosed in and through Dasein’s concernful activity in the context of the sedimented meanings constitutive of the world into which he or she is ‘thrown’ (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 91–148). The tradition of Western metaphysics is characterized by a constitutive ‘forgetting’ of the ontological difference or what Heidegger calls Seinsvergessenheit.

The two concepts are not unrelated, as Lucien Goldmann has suggested, drawing attention to Heidegger’s reference in the first chapter of Part I to the failure of the attempt to ground an account of reification in terms of ‘consciousness’. Heidegger (1962, p. 487) states that ‘It has long been known that ancient ontology works with “Thing-concepts” and that there is a danger of “reifying consciousness”’. He then goes on to dismiss the formulation because it does not go deeply enough in the direction of ontological questioning, stating ‘can we even seek that answer as long as the question of the meaning of Being remains unformulated and unclarified’ (p. 487).

While Lukács isn’t named directly, he is clearly implied. So, in Goldmann’s view (2009), Heidegger seeks in Being and Time to articulate nothing less than an ontological response to History and Class Consciousness. In particular, Heidegger’s account of ‘care’ (Sorge), according to Goldmann, insofar as it unifies past, present, and future, constitutes a response to Lukács’s conception of totality as the historically mediated identity of subject and object.

The dispute between these two models and respective normative orientations has been at the heart of the key debates within late-twentieth-century social and political thought. It is my contention that the enduring importance of Adorno’s critique of reification has to do, inter alia, with the way in which brings both models into a ‘field of force’ throughout his writings, but particularly through his understanding of the philosophical significance of the autonomous artwork. It is by virtue of its autonomy that the artwork is able to maintain the possibility of an experience of the dynamic, temporal nature of the non-identical. In other words, in aesthetic experience Adorno locates an immanent path beyond reification can be surpassed by a certain form of ‘totalization’ that avoids both the collective action instigated by the revolutionary party and the resoluteness of individual decision oriented towards a project that would unify past, present, and future. Far from being an impotent retreat from politics, as the Habermasian reading holds, Adorno’s understanding of the aesthetic can be understood as a profound contribution to thinking about some of the key preconditions of political praxis (Gandesha, 2012).
On the one hand, Adorno shows, with Horkheimer, the way in which the ego’s struggle for self-preservation, paradoxically, seals the conditions of its own demise. Self-preservation reifies, and therefore destroys, the very life it putatively seeks to preserve. This is a thesis that obviously takes on urgent new meaning in the context of discussions of the ‘Anthropocene’. On the other hand, the orientation towards an ‘authentic’ life in the work of Buber, Jaspers, and especially the early Heidegger, amounts to what Adorno calls a ‘reified critique of reification’ (Adorno, 1973a). For Adorno, it is in the autonomous work of art that the logic of reification is pushed to extremes and in such a way that opens up a relation to the non-identical or transitory phenomena. Music, in particular, plays this role insofar as time itself is its very medium. Like Penelope, who undoes by night the weaving she performs by day, the artwork both actively participates in its alienation from life and, by virtue of that very separation, is a spur to reflection on the conditions of precisely such separation. Hence, as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, quoting Wagner: ‘Only the spear that wields the sword can heal the wound’. In what follows, I go on to sketch out the two models in Lukács and Heidegger in more detail (1), draw out the implicit normative dimensions of these models (2), and then look at the way the respective normative dimensions of each conception could be said to find an echo in Adorno’s understanding of musical experience (3).

1. Two Models of Reification

Returning to our two models—dialectic and difference—both could be said to take their point of departure from the understanding of reification as a form of forgetting that explicitly or implicitly also relates to attendant processes of ‘fetishism’ and ‘alienation’. For the dialectical model, reification is to be understood as Spirit’s objectifying activity that is forgotten as such, that is, as activity, but which is then subsequently re-appropriated on its return itself via the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness. Remembering, here, is to be understood as not the simple the opposite of forgetting, but rather as a process of a totalizing re-internalization (Erinnerung) of that which had been externalized, forgotten as such and mistaken for an ‘otherness’ or form of alterity standing over and against its creator or author like an ‘alien power’. In this, the concept of experience (Erfahrung), plays a key role and experience implies a journey or pathway through which the shapes of consciousness are traversed. As Hegel puts it in the ‘Preface’ to the Phenomenology of Spirit:
The Science of this pathway is the Science of the experience which consciousness goes through; the substance and its movement are viewed as the object of consciousness. Consciousness knows and comprehends only what falls within its experience; for what is contained in this is nothing but spiritual substance, and this, too, as object of the self. But Spirit becomes object because it is just this movement of becoming an other to itself, i.e. becoming an object to itself and of suspending this otherness. And experience is the name we give to just this movement, in which the immediate, the unexperienced, i.e. the abstract, whether it be of sensuous [but still unsensed] being, or only thought of as simple, becomes alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation, and is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth, just as it then has become a property of consciousness also. (1977, §36)

Experience, then, is a re-membering or putting back in relation or mediation a broken totality, whose individual parts had been severed or dismembered. Hegel’s famous example is ‘sense certainty’ which inaugurates the passage through the appearance of the various ‘shapes of consciousness’ in the Phenomenology. For Marx, the analogue is the commodity form which, insofar as it is a fetish, that is, necessarily abstracted from the conditions under which it is produced, it acquires what Marx calls a ‘phantom-like objectivity’. It is, in other words, an object that occludes the very social relations that it embodies which, therefore, gives it its ‘phantom-like’ appearance. Such a ghostly objectivity constitutes a world in which relations between human beings take on the character of relations between things, and relations between things appear as relations between human beings. In describing the commodity in a manner that evokes his early critique of religion— the very first premise of criticism per se—Marx describes the commodity form as abounding in ‘metaphysical subtleties’ (metaphysische Spitzfindigkeit) and ‘theological niceties’ (theologische Mucken). Marx is already intimating something that Lukács will subsequently elaborate into startling meta-philosophical claims (see Feenberg, 2014), namely: that the commodity poses not just a socio-economic problem but also fundamentally a cognitive one. Reification, then, in this tradition stems from the socially necessary illusion of the commodity as a ‘real abstraction’, which then, itself, occludes the grasp of the structural totality of social whole as the object not just of theory but praxis. Forgetting here is to be understood specifically as the structural incapacity to grasp the historical formation of the social world through practical activity.
Lukács shows the manner in which the process of fetishism extends from production relations and comes to penetrate qua a totalizing process of rationalization or the elaboration of a system of formal procedures even the most minute sphere of society, including the realm of intimacy. One could say that the logic of commodity fetishism, in Lukács's account, leads to the fetishism of formal logic insofar as it gives rise to apparently insoluble antinomies in philosophical thinking as in Kantian Critical Philosophy and the German Idealism that constitutes a response to it. It is only in Hegel's notion of the Absolute, according to Lukács, do we find the best attempt to cancel while simultaneously preserving these supposedly intractable oppositions. In other words, the basic problem of reification—that human relations take on the appearance of relations between things—deeply penetrates even the most otiose realm of speculative philosophy. Hegel's notion of the 'Homecoming of Spirit', culminating in the rationality of the ethical life of the modern state—the grasping of the rational content of historically produced customs or Sitten—is a false, merely one-sided solution to the problem of 'transcendental homelessness' (Lukács, 1971b p. 41) because its perpetuates a merely passive or 'contemplative' relation to the world. In Lukács's view, it was only in the world-constituting activity of the identical subject-object of history, that the intractable antinomies of bourgeois thinking would be decisively transcended. Such an 'identical subject-object of history' (Lukács, 1971a, p. 197) is able to grasp the totality of historical objectifications as the once-forgotten products of its own practical activity.

It is precisely towards such a conception of philosophy that the philosophy of difference takes as its critical point of departure. Heidegger argues at the end of Division I of Being and Time that, while Hegel is one of the first (Kant being the other) to recognize the distinctive nature of temporality, in the final instance, he conceives of Spirit through 'Kenosis'. Kenosis is the theological term that denotes the process by which God empties Himself into and ultimately out of time; the dialectic as self-described 'theodicy'. So, in Heidegger's view, while Hegel arrives at the brink of a break with the philosophical tradition's 'onto-theological' conception of being as the antithesis of time, he ultimately pulls back from it and re-inscribes the understanding of being as enduring presence as the unconscious hypostatization of a particular modality of time: namely, that of the present.

Therefore, in Heidegger's view, Hegel fails to go far enough insofar as he fails to grasp the temporality of Being (Sein) itself. And the reason why Hegel was incapable of grasping Being in this way had to do with the fact that, like the tradition of Western metaphysics originating with Plato's account.
of *eidos*, he failed to take as is starting point the ‘ontological difference’ or the difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*). In other words, the dialectical model of *remembering*, or making whole through the unfolding of its speculative drive towards freedom, cannot avoid a certain kind of *forgetting* (*Seinsvergessenheit*)—the forgetting of the finite, situated, indeed, thrown (*geworfen*) being, *Dasein*. Indeed, it is precisely because he or she is so thrown, that ‘Being’ becomes, itself, a question for the situated human being. Hegel suggests, for example, that Spirit is able to remain self-identical through the most extreme experiences including death: ‘[T]he life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself’ (1977, §32).

Spirit, on its speculative journey ‘home’ to itself, entailing the achieved ‘identity of identity and non-identity’, the unity of ‘subject and substance’, both cancels and preserves finitude itself. As a result, it fails to fully acknowledge the difference between Being or *Dasein* and beings, things that are disclosed within the so-called ‘worldhood’ of *Dasein*’s world. In contrast to the Hegelian *Heimkehr* or ‘Homecoming’, Heidegger understands *Dasein* as literally *Unheimlich* or uncanny. It is in this idea of *Seinsvergessenheit* or the ‘forgetting of being’ that we find an alternative, ontological, conception of reification—a phenomenon that Heidegger locates at the heart of the philosophical tradition stretching back to Plato’s theory of the forms. Here Being is understood as enduring presence and therefore as the antithesis of lived time as it unfolds between, to use Arendt’s terms, ‘natality’ and ‘mortality’ (Arendt, 1958). As Heidegger suggests in direct opposition to Hegel’s attempt to grasp ‘substance as subject’: ‘man’s “substance” is not spirit as a synthesis of soul and body; it is rather existence’ (1962, p. 153).

For Heidegger, the problem of ‘reification’ cannot be understood in terms of the concept of consciousness precisely because of its Cartesian starting point, that is the split between subject and object which, as previously suggested, can itself be traced back to the Greeks. The dualism of subject and object was part and parcel of *Seinsvergessenheit* that elided the ontological difference and reduced the distinctive understanding of time for human being-in-the-world to a merely *vorhanden*, ‘enduring presence’ that somehow withstood time. In contrast, Heidegger argues that *Dasein* had to be understood in terms of what he called *Sorge* or care in which the various modalities of time, namely: past, present, and future were unified in a concernful engagement within the world.

Such an account of temporality Heidegger famously explicated via the example of the tool: That in the typical engagement within the totality
of meaningful structures constitutive of the world, the artisan does not thematize the tool; it is merely an extension of his own body in undertaking a particular future-directed project. It is, in other words, to be understood, as something *Zuhanden* or ready-to-hand. It is only when the tool breaks down does it become, in a sense, a ‘fetish’, though Heidegger does not of course use the term, insofar as it is transformed from the ready-to-hand, an integral part of *Dasein*'s world, to something that is ‘de-worlded’, torn, violently we could say, from the web of meaningful relations constitutive of the world and rendered as *Vorhanden* ‘present-at-hand’. The object can be considered, in this sense, as ‘alienated’ from the *Dasein*'s own activity. What are the specifically normative dimensions of these two models of reification?

2. **Reification and Normativity**

To gain a perspective on the normative dimensions of these two models, it is useful to compare Lukács and Heidegger’s conceptions with Axel Honneth’s recent attempt, via a post-metaphysical reconstruction of the concept of recognition, to revive and resuscitate the concept of reification. To the idea with which I began the chapter, that ‘all reification is a forgetting’, Honneth adds Stanley Cavell’s notion that knowledge is grounded in a prior moment of *acknowledgement*. The reification or thingification of the person results from a failure or a breakdown in the empathetic acknowledgment of the other and opens the possibility of subsuming the person beneath the category of ‘thing’.

Honneth states that ‘[t]o the extent to which in our acts of cognition we lose sight of the fact that these acts owe their existence to our having taken up an antecedent recognitional stance, we develop a tendency to perceive other persons as mere sensate objects’ (Honneth, 2008, p. 57). Unlike in his other writings where recognition is understood roughly according to the Hegelian differentiation of ‘Objective Spirit’ into spheres of intimacy, civil society, and community, here Honneth seems to suggest that the phenomenon of reification can be understood simply at the level of the individual and therefore as a matter of subjective disposition that can be simply corrected by a rather voluntaristic change of perspective. In other words, reification, in Honneth’s ethical account the phenomenon, appears then to be something like a category mistake and can be rectified as such.

In contrast, as we have seen, Lukács and Heidegger understand reification as a form of forgetting that results from a determinate structural crisis that has profound implications for the conditions of human action. For Lukács, reification constitutes the ongoing crisis of generalized commodity
production through which the rationalization of even the most minute aspect of the social whole comes about. Reification consists of the reduction of time to space; of diachrony to ostensibly immutable synchronic laws of social motion. This amounts, as I have already suggested, to a kind of cognitive crisis that cannot, however, be solved by purely cognitive or contemplative means but must ultimately be addressed through praxis. Lukács could be said to be in agreement with the later Wittgenstein that the problem of ‘reification’ (like that of scepticism) is not so much a philosophical problem that could be met with a philosophical solution but rather a meta-philosophical problem to be dissolved by way of self-conscious action or praxis.

For Heidegger, in contrast, reification arises as result of the crisis or breakdown of our future-oriented, purposive action against the meaningful horizon of worldly commitments and engagements. In other words, reification results from the manner in which action is arrested or halted as a result of a tear in the background horizon of the meaningful world provoked by a breakdown in the zuhanden (ready-to-hand) character of things, that is, the tool, itself, which is now disclosed as Vorhanden (present-at-hand); Dasein’s thrownness into the world of pre-given meanings now is resolved into a bifurcated scene consisting of a deracinated subject passively surveying an object as it appears directly before it on the horizon of an eternal present shorn of any kind of relation to past or future. Like Wittgenstein, the sceptical problem of the certainty of our knowledge claims and, relatedly, the problem of the existence of other minds, is a function of a crisis or breakdown of worldly relations as previously described.

However wanting Honneth’s account of the origins of reification may be, insofar as it provides no compelling structural account of reification, it does provide a clear account of its normative orientation to the mutuality of recognition between persons. If structural accounts are on offer in an account of post-liberal capitalism in Lukács or in the account of the Seinsvergessenheit at the heart of the tradition of Western metaphysics, for Heidegger, their respective normative starting points are more or less implicit rather than explicitly stated. For Honneth, reification stems, as we have seen, from a misrecognition of the person; from a denial of the recognition of the other’s aspiration to self-realization. In the case of Lukács and Heidegger it is possible discern the way in which normative commitments are embedded in, on the one hand, the former’s account of history, and, on the other hand, in the latter’s history of Western metaphysics as a narrative of decline culminating, in his later writings, in the essence of technological thinking.
The first account of reification, the dialectical account, one could argue, is oriented at recovering a form of lost autonomy understood not just in terms of Kantian primacy of moral self-legislation but in political terms as the democratic self-determination of a community. In taking up a merely contemplative attitude to its own objectifications, the collective subject subordinates itself to a condition of heteronomy or of being determined by an ‘alien power’. The overcoming of such an attitude, the transformation of the petrified and barely recognizable forms of social existence is an act of freedom or, at least, inaugurates the passage from the realm of necessity to that freedom.

The second account of reification, what I’m calling the difference account, in contrast, understands the phenomenon as the reduction of the human being to a condition indistinguishable from a world of things on the temporal horizon of an eternalized present. This amounts not so much to the loss of rational, which is to say self-legislating, freedom as it does a loss of authenticity (Eigentlichkeit). Such a loss amounts to a falling into the idle chatter (das Rede) of the anonymous world of ‘publicness’ by which ‘everything gets obscured, and what has been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone’ (Heidegger, 1962, p. 165). The light of the open public sphere darkens everything because it induces Dasein to lose sight of, or indeed actively avoid, the fundamental questions of human existence.

These two models of reification—dialectic and difference—can be seen, as alluded to above, to find their way into the key philosophical positions of the late twentieth century. Each of these models, moreover, is oriented by a specific account of normativity. The first is geared to a notion of autonomy or a life that is a rationally self-legislating one. The second is oriented towards realization of a life characterized by irreducible difference or singularity. Autonomy entails action oriented towards the collective subject’s self-appropriation of the objective forms of its own activity. Authenticity, in contrast, is grounded in the irreducibly temporal nature of Dasein, its finitude and ultimate orientation towards its ownmost possibility, namely death. Being-towards-death is radically individuating insofar as only I can face my own death. Such singularity ultimately trumps the universality of moral law.

Insofar as the origins of the idea of autonomy in Kant entails the public use of reason, the problem of reification does not entail, therefore, in Heidegger’s view, the transgression of the injunction to treat fellow rational beings always as ends and never as means. Rather, in a manner that recalls Kierkegaard’s idea of a ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’, authenticity
consists in the irreducible singularity of the individual. Kierkegaard presents, in *Fear and Trembling*, an inversion of Hegel’s account of the mediations of individuality, particularity and universality within the unfolding of Absolute Spirit: ‘faith’s paradox is this, that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual [...] determines his relation to the universal through his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute through the relation to the universal’ (1985, pp. 97–98). It entails what Derrida (2005, p. 36), referring explicitly to Kierkegaard, calls the ultimately ungroundable ‘madness of decision’. Hence, for Heidegger, the falling of *Dasein* into *Das Man* (the they), which is, as he suggests, always already one of its possibilities, is an avoidance of or flight from its ‘own-most possibility’: Being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*). In other words, for *Dasein*, Being-towards-death has a radically individuating function and grounds its irreducible singularity in a manner that runs parallel to Kierkegaard’s notion of faith.

The claim that I wish to make here is that, in his conceptualization of the phenomenon of reification, Adorno draws upon both of these normative insights. On the one hand, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, his lectures on moral philosophy (2002) and the section entitled ‘Models of Freedom in Negative Dialectics’ (2007, pp. 211–299), Adorno is at considerable pains to show the manner in which an account of radical autonomy, under which he subsumes Lukács’s Fichtean critique of reification, is self-undermining. That is to say, it entails, in its account of rational self-legislation, a repressive relation to the subject’s own sensuous impulses for fulfilment and happiness. Hence, it becomes the locus of the dialectic of enlightenment: that the drive to self-preservation undermines the very (sensuous) life it is meant to preserve in the first place. If detached from the ‘object’ (somatic drives, external nature and the social order), autonomy, Adorno argues, must reverse into its opposite: heteronomy.21

On the other hand, as I have shown elsewhere (Gandesha, 2004), Adorno criticizes Heidegger’s account of reification as, itself, ‘reified’. That is, Heidegger relies upon a form of what Günther Anders calls ‘pseudo concreteness’ (1948) that substantializes historically generated and therefore contingent conditions, for example the emotional states (*Befindlichkeiten*) of *Dasein*. It is precisely because of Heidegger’s ontico-ontological difference that he is unable to root an account of reification in natural-historical processes (Gandesha, 2004).22 At the same time, the notion of authenticity can be understood as a placeholder for the non-identical or the ‘transitory’ that always already lies beyond the grasp of the concept. In late capitalist society in which the logic of reification had penetrated deeply into the
most intimate spheres, the transitory becomes a key site for resistance. The relation to the transient is also a new form of normativity grounded in non-identity, which suggests a non-subsumptive and therefore non-dominating relation between the individual and the collective. For Adorno, such a form of normativity was embodied in exemplary fashion in musical experience, which from the beginning of the Western tradition of political philosophy in Plato’s middle period dialogues, the *Republic* in particular, is inextricable from the question of justice. 23 While this interpretation cannot be fully elaborated in this context, I would like to try to sketch out in the following and concluding section the way in which auditory experience provides the basis for a non-repressive form of totalization that both borrows from the two models previously discussed and, in the process, goes beyond them.

3. Musical Experience beyond Autonomy and Authenticity

As I have previously suggested the two most significant models of reification in the twentieth century, those of Lukács and Heidegger, are oriented by two distinct forms of normativity grounded in autonomy and authenticity respectively. What I want to suggest in this section is the way in which Adorno’s approach places autonomy and authenticity in a *Kraftfeld* or field of force. Central to the development of Adorno’s position, of course, is his relation to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s early conception of allegory in his work on *Trauerspiel* or German mourning play is key, along with Lukács’s conception of ‘second nature’, to Adorno’s elaboration of the idea of ‘natural-history’ which then forms the basis not only for the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which lays bare the inextricable relation of enlightenment and myth, but also for the arguments of *Negative Dialectics*, many of which are centrally concerned to show the propensity of an account of pure practical reason geared to self-legislating autonomy to collapse under its own (rigoristic) weight. While, in Adorno’s view, the concept of autonomy must be defended (see, for example, Adorno and Becker, 1983), this can only be done by way of a seemingly aporetic receptivity to the other or the non-identical (and hence heteronomy). The aporia is only apparent, however, insofar as the supplement of aesthetic experience is the key mediation between ‘autonomy’ and ‘authenticity,’ universal concepts of reason and sensuous particularity. Specifically in relation to musical experience, understood temporally, the non-identical is a form of transience ruptures the immanence of identity-thinking and identifying processes from within.
But Benjamin’s later, Brecht-inspired work, also serves as a critical foil for Adorno’s attempt to articulate a critique of what he (Horkheimer) calls the ‘culture industry’. As they argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, enlightenment culminates in ‘mass deception’ in which the anthropomorphism of its categories reaches new heights. An earlier version of this critique of the culture industry appears in an essay published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* entitled ‘Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening’ (Adorno, 1982). Here, Adorno offers an almost explicit refutation of Benjamin’s widely influential essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility’. As the central claims of this essay have already been discussed ad nauseam, I won’t rehearse them again here. Suffice it to say, however, that the thrust of Benjamin’s argument is that the destruction of the ‘aura’ or authenticity of the artwork via technologies of mass reproducibility, photography, and film, in particular, afford new opportunities for the objective presentation of socio-historical truths that had hitherto not been available to art—an ‘optical unconscious’ in which hitherto concealed structures of power are brought to light—and new subjective conditions for the experience of art. For example, the collective experience of film supplants the individualized bourgeois forms of apprehension of art works in the museum.

Of a piece with his scepticism of much of his older friend and mentor’s later work, Adorno seeks to make an immanent critique of Benjamin’s cultural criticism. For example, in his exchange over the essay on Baudelaire, Adorno suggests that Benjamin doesn’t properly understand Marx’s concept of ‘commodity fetishism’, and that he therefore ought to return to *Capital, Volume I*. Similarly, in ‘Fetish Character’, Adorno grounds his response to what he views as Benjamin’s excessively optimistic account of mass culture not only in Marx’s account of commodity fetishism, which he quotes directly and at some length, but also in Lukács’s account of reification which, as is well-known, was also extremely highly regarded by Benjamin. Indeed, in suggesting that reification culminates in the culture industry, Adorno anticipates Debord’s account of the ‘spectacle’. Two points of intersection are worth indicating: the utter passivity (pseudo-activity) of the spectator/listener before the spectacle and the overwhelming reproduction of the ‘Always-the-same’ (*das Immergleiche*). According to Adorno, ‘A sensory pleasure turns into disgust as soon as it is seen how it only serves to betray the consumer. The betrayal consists in always offering the same thing’ (Adorno, 1982, p. 290).

However much it may seem that Adorno’s and Benjamin’s positions are strictly opposed on the question of the emancipatory character of mass
culture, it is important to recognize that Adorno is clear that mass culture and autonomous art, light and serious music, are, as he puts it ‘Both torn halves of an integral freedom to which however they do not add up’ (Adorno, 1973b, 66; see also Leppert, 2005, pp. 92–133). Both high and low culture, in other words, cannot escape the totalizing logic of commodity fetishism and reification that suffuses capitalist society in its late phase. In articulating his critique, Adorno’s concern is to challenge directly what he considers Benjamin’s all-too sanguine assessment of the political possibilities that attend modes of ‘distracted’ apperception exemplified by the cinema and that crystallize the significance not just of epic theatre but also the Russian avant-garde. In particular, Adorno’s concern is the connection between the objective processes by which music, ‘serious’ and ‘light’ alike, is subjected to the law of value, hence its ‘fetish character’, and the subjective process by which the capacity to ‘listen’ to (and therefore properly experience, erfahren rather than simply erleben) music is undermined. The fetish character of music, in other words, generates an inherently reified form of listening. If ‘all reification is a forgetting’, then reification in this specific case entails an incapacity to hold the parts in an articulated relation with the whole in the dynamic, temporal unfolding or movement (Goehr, 2008) of a musical work. Genuine musical experience (Erfahrung) entails a capacity for Erinnernung, which means the ability to reintegrate parts within the whole—literally, as we saw in connection with Hegel, to ‘re-member’ what had been dirempted or dis-membered. While regressive listening entails a certain kind of recall whereby the leitmotif, for example, particularly in the late Romantic works of Wagner, for example, function as anticipations of advertising jingles and become instantly recognizable. Such leitmotifs, themselves, as forms of disconnected forms of climactic experiences (Erlebnisse) entail a forgetting or break in the structural relation to the whole. In this sense, if Benjamin’s theses concerning film are correct at all, they certainly cannot be extended to music: ‘But if the film as a whole seems to be apprehended in a distracted manner, deconcentrated listening makes the perception of the whole impossible’ (Adorno, 1982, p. 288). Musical structure, therefore, helps to illuminate ontological questions.

Here it is possible to see the important links to both Lukács and Heidegger. For the former, as we have seen, reification is closely tied to forgetting. For Lukács, what is forgotten is the constitutive link to practical activity, the objectifications of which then confront the collective agent as an alien power from without; a condition of utter alienation or heteronomy. For Heidegger, reification understood is understood as the forgetting of the ontico-ontological difference grounded in the qualitative temporality of the
human being situated or thrown into an always already meaningful world. As I have suggested above, in the first account what is at stake is autonomy, in the second, authenticity. In Adorno’s account of musical experience (Erfahrung), it is possible to discern the attempt to defend autonomy, which is to say, aesthetic autonomy, whereby the work embodies its own self-directed lawfulness, in such a way as to rescue a notion of aura or authenticity understood as the trace of otherness that does not enter into concepts without remainder. Yet this is a kind of authenticity (Eigentlichkeit) distanced from property (Eigentum), as the temporal evanescence of music cannot be possessed as such (see Leppert, 2005). That in the autonomous, and therefore reified, artwork it is possible to discern a dialectical model for a non-reified fluid relation of sensuous particularity and universality that negates the logic of subsumption of the former beneath the latter. As Adorno (1982, p. 298) suggests, ‘Even discipline can take over the expression of free solidarity if freedom becomes its content. As little as regressive listening is a symptom of progress in consciousness of freedom, it could suddenly turn around if art, in unity with society, should ever leave the road of the always-identical’.

Specifically with reference to the musical experience of what Adorno calls ‘structural listening’, that rather than entailing a forgetting or elision of the work as a whole punctuated by the shock-like, discrete, and disconnected experiences (Erlebnisse) of individual moments, the autonomous work calls forth a kind of concentrated listening as a type of experience (Erfahrung) as a type of unfolding that works simultaneously backwards and forwards; that what in a phenomenological register would be referred to as ‘internal time consciousness’ and therefore involves a unifying process entailing both retention and protention. However, and this is a key difference from both Lukács and Heidegger, it would totalize in such a way as to generate or regenerate a (mimetic) capacity for passive receptivity (rather than active, constituting spontaneity) in relation to the genuinely other. It is a form of totalization, in other words, that sets free the transitory rather than subsuming it beneath subject-object identity (Lukács) or Dasein’s care structure unifying past and present in the futurity of one’s own most authentic (eigentlich) possibility (Heidegger). What Adorno calls ‘thinking conceptually beyond the concept’ is in a sense then a form of remembering of the necessity of forgetting—that sensuous particularity can never be subsumed beneath concepts without leaving a trace or a remainder that is simply unrecuperable because of its inherent temporality; that, like musical notes, the non-identical simply sounds and then and passes away. As Adorno suggests in reference to the free atonal works of Schönberg and
Webern: ‘They are called individualists, and yet their work is nothing but a single dialogue with the powers that destroy individuality—powers whose “formless shadows” fall gigantically on their music. In music, too, collective powers are liquidating an individuality past saving, but against them only individuals are capable of representing the aims of collectivity’ (1982, p. 299).

To return to Pierre Flourens’s rejection of the use of chloroform with which I started, his reason for doing so had to do with the fact that, in contrast to received opinion, chloroform not only fails to diminish suffering in patients who are sedated with the drug, but actually enhances it. The way chloroform acts, however, is to enable the nervous system to forget what it has undergone. Moreover, given its effectiveness in promoting such forgetfulness and therefore in widening the scope for increasing the invasiveness of medical procedures, it risks turning human beings into guinea pigs; in transforming every operation into an act of vivisection. Indeed, the unprecedented levels of pain that might be caused by the invasive nature of the procedures themselves may cause permanent mental damage or even death under narcosis, the exact nature of which would be concealed from both the relatives of the patient as well as the world at large. In a sense, this kind of reification as a forgetting would be a double forgetting: a forgetting of forgetting. A forgetting of a nature of the administering of chloroform and its effects, i.e. not the reduction in the body’s sensitivity to stimuli but rather enhancing its capacity to forget the pain that it has suffered.

My argument has been that for Adorno, Lukács’s, and Heidegger’s conceptions of reification ultimately fail to understand this problem of the forgetting of the necessity of forgetting addressed by Flourens. In this example, we see medicine as a rational system that treats the individual as a thing (as a guinea pig to be experimented on) or a mere presence-at-hand that forgets the authorship and/or irreducible singularity of the human being. However, what is not brought to memory, and what to some extent defies its powers of recall, is an irreconcilable moment of somatic suffering that pervades natural history. In contrast to Lukács and Heidegger, Adorno seeks to differentiate a notion of enlightenment as Mündigkeit from the self-destructive notion of enlightenment as Aufklärung. While Kant uses the two concepts more or less interchangeably in his famous essay ‘Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’, Adorno (with Horkheimer) differentiates the two. While Aufklärung, emphasizing the role of vision in establishing a totalizing picture of the whole, ‘the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1988, p. 3), Adorno takes Mündigkeit, to mean the capacity of the subject to speak up for him- or herself in a non-conformist way and this entails a certain kind
of danger and riskiness that comes with a refusal of ‘identification with the aggressor’, one that in his youth Adorno (1991, p. 186) came to associate with the use of *Fremdwörter*, which he understood as the ‘Jews of language’. Far from simply emphasizing the autonomy of the subject and perpetuating the self-destructive logic of the dialectic of enlightenment, however, Adorno stresses the importance, indeed the irreducibility, of aspiring to ‘express the inexpressible’. Indeed such irreducibility comes into its own precisely by virtue of the specialized (and therefore reified) dialectic of *aesthetic* autonomy that releases the transitory, the ‘unexpressable’, from the hold of identity or the ‘expressable’. It is the *resistance* of the former that makes possible what Hannah Arendt regards as the very signature of the political: namely, the possibility of a ‘new beginning’.

Bibliography


