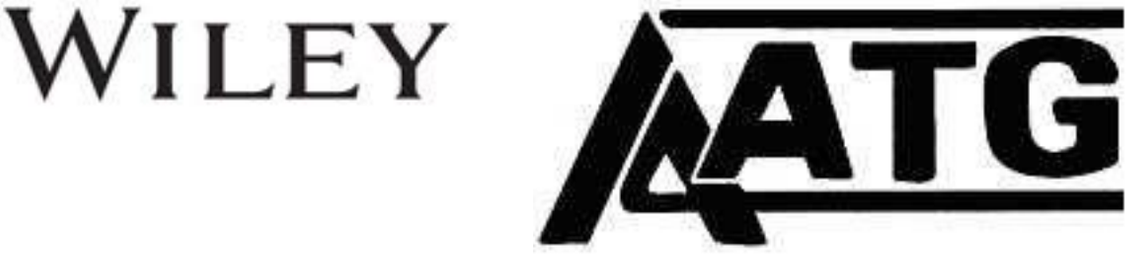

No "Fun": Aporias of Pleasure in Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory"

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No *Fun*: Aporias of Pleasure in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*

> "It's good, but it won't film. You've got to remember your audience. What about the barber in Perdue? He's been cutting hair all day and he's tired. He doesn't want to see some dope carrying a valise or fooling with a nickel machine. What the barber wants is amour and glamor."
> —Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*

> There is no system without its residue.
> —Theodor W. Adorno, *"Notes on Kafka"*

"Whoever concretely enjoys artworks is a philistine"[1]: thus Adorno lays out the prohibition, in no uncertain terms, on the notion of aesthetic pleasure. For Adorno, in the wake of centuries of politically motivated violence and in the face of a society characterized by the degradation of the subject to a mere laborer-consumer, an immediate enjoyment of artworks is a measure of false consciousness and political idiocy, the glossy flip-side to violence and degradation themselves. The "dissonance" of the autonomous artwork is thus one of the few things—perhaps the only thing—capable of both withstanding and delivering the refusal to such a situation. "Only in memory and longing," Adorno writes in typically aphoristic mode, "not as a copy or an immediate effect, is pleasure absorbed by art" (AT 14). If Kant's aesthetics is, according to Adorno, a "castrated hedonism" (AT 11), Adorno's own aesthetic theory is castration pure and simple: the unavailability of present pleasure and its corollaries in favor of a permanently frustrated future anterior of satisfaction.

Adorno has been vigorously and exhaustively criticized, by people from every point on the political spectrum, for being a pseudo-revolutionary killjoy, a narrow-minded elitist, a closet conservative, the fetishizer of his own (historically particular) miserabilism. Such arguments have at least some basis in fact, and there is no need to repeat them here. And yet the simultaneous vehemence and ambivalence of Adorno's arguments against aesthetic enjoyment, and specifically "fun," also tell a slightly different story. Much

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more than a mere object of repudiation, "fun" is the specter haunting Adorno's politicized aesthetics: the precise thing that must be cast out, in the logic of the Derridean supplement, to delineate the boundaries of the field, and yet—also in the logic of the supplement—the thing that, insofar as its exteriority is the definition of a privileged interiority, threatens time and time again to return and definitively compromise these same boundaries. Or rather, and despite all Adorno's efforts to defend against it, "fun" is always already there in *Aesthetic Theory*, at once the "guilt" and the precondition of every artwork. And it is perhaps the structural omnipresence of this rowdy poltergeist that simultaneously overturns Adorno's thinking on art and allows it to continue to be read without repeating its dilemmas.

For obvious reasons, "fun" appears more often in Adorno's writings on the culture industry (including the works co-authored with Horkheimer) than in *Aesthetic Theory* itself. Often left untranslated from the English—or rather, from the American[2]—the term usually functions in these works as a kind of cipher for the emptiest and most mind-numbing experiences of the culture industry's relentlessly amusing products. "Fun is a medicinal bath," Adorno writes in a typically damning passage on laughter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "The pleasure industry never fails to prescribe it [...]. In the culture industry, jovial denial takes the place of the pain found in ecstasy and in asceticism. The supreme law is that they shall not satisfy their desires at any price; they must laugh and be content with laughter."[3] Here as elsewhere in Adorno's writings, "fun" is not even pleasure but the simulacrum of pleasure, a temporary release which enables the enjoying subject to forget the forces of domination and unfreedom to which he or she is actually in thrall. The provision of an impoverished escapism through fun is indeed one of the defining characteristics of the culture industry and its "pornographic" (DE 140) products: "The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory; all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu" (DE 139). Moreover, for Adorno "fun" is in many cases not *even* the specious satisfaction of simulacra or an anticipation which provides a sparkling façade for political coercion; it is the coercion itself, a sadistic cultural mandate to enjoy. Fun in this case is a kind of commodity as such, the token of a pseudo-solidarity which is normative *a priori*. "In American conventional speech, having a good time means being present at the enjoyment of others, which in its turn has as its only content being present"[4]: one might say this is the vulgar version of Kant's *sensus communis*, in which both subjectivity and objectivity are suspended in favor of a tacit mass deception which becomes its own truth. "Fun" is here no more and no less than the agreement that one is "having fun," a

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tautological performance of pleasurability that only serves to reinforce the status quo.

Adorno's critique of fun as the fake pleasure of normativity is connected with his criticism of psychoanalysis and the construction of the bourgeois subject: specifically, the construction of the bourgeois subject as one who is able to experience pleasure in normal (i.e., non-neurotic or -psychotic) ways. "What a state the dominant consciousness must have reached," he writes in a section of *Minima Moralia* entitled "Invitation to the dance," "when the resolute proclamation of compulsive extravagance and champagne jollity [...] is elevated in deadly earnest to a maxim of right living."[5] The aim of psychoanalysis is to mold the subject to enjoy what he or she is supposed to enjoy in order to be a normally-functioning subject, which is not so coincidentally the precise form of pleasure prescribed by the powers that be. Enjoyment of pleasures deemed taboo, not to speak of the unwillingness or refusal to enjoy at all, thus threatens one's own status as a full human subject. Thus, once again, "fun" is not pleasure but an interest-laden activity in the economic sense; to have fun means that one has proven oneself worthy of being a human being, a sovereign subject, and a citizen invested with rights and autonomy. Of course, for Adorno this autonomy is merely a sham autonomy, since it is granted only on the condition that one has already submitted to the dominant order. Thus "there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the construction of camps of extermination" (MM 63).

In other sections of *Minima Moralia*, as well as in the essay "Free Time," Adorno also associates amusement with *work* in the same fashion as fun is associated with domination: not as its antithesis, but as its pendant. Culturally sanctioned hobbies and leisure activities are so empty and un-fun (the paradigmatic activity of this phenomenon for Adorno is sunbathing, which "is not at all enjoyable, might very possibly be physically unpleasant, and certainly impoverishes the mind" [CI 191]) precisely because the act of "taking time off" is itself under the sign of administered labor: evenings and weekends. In a certain sense, they are as mandated as the labor itself: "Free time remains the reflex-action to a production rhythm imposed heteronomously on the subject, compulsively maintained even in the weary pauses" (MM 175). The "pseudo-activity" of the hobby or of the consumption of the culture industry's products is "misguided spontaneity" (CI 194), the freedom of creative action channeled into standardized, socially acceptable, and sterile forms of activity.

The term "spontaneity," taken from Marxist doctrine, is key here, however, providing one of the several links between a seemingly opposed "fun" and the almost redemptive status of the work of art. In "Culture and Administration" Adorno associates the injunction to spontaneity with the "jargon of authenticity" (CI 125), itself a servant of contemporary forms of administered culture. Nevertheless, spontaneity also has to do with play, and play, accord-

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ing to Adorno, is an indispensable if problematic aspect of the work of art. Adorno's usage of the term "fun" undergoes changes and variations over the course of his career; one of the most frequent ways in which he deploys "fun," however, is as a play that is no longer play, and a pleasure that is no longer pleasure: childishness without childlikeness, to use another of Adorno's key metaphors. Certainly, within the context of Adorno's thinking, both "play" and "the child" are signs no less fraught with contradictions, paradoxes, and hesitations than "fun." But they are not nearly so roundly disdained, and if they are not, it is largely because Adorno would protect something like real pleasure: "voluptuous life" (see AT 13). As Catherine Liu has put it: "Fun is the miniaturization not just of pleasure but of experience in general."[6] One of the rare appearances of "fun" in *Aesthetic Theory* actually comes in the form of a quotation from another work, namely Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which Adorno both acknowledges and takes to task (if only within a fragment from the "Paralipomena"). While Adorno does find fault with Huizinga's anthropological methodology and his emphasis on origin, among other points of dissension, he agrees with him on the connection between seriousness and fun meeting within play, adding, "What is here predicated of play holds true for art as well" (AT 318).

It would be wrong to claim that Adorno is in favor of unfettered explosions of impulse (perhaps because there is always a whiff of false consciousness in the childishness of adults). But despite his reputation as the bitter doyen of the continental Left and the advocate of all that is unpleasing in art, he is without a doubt more sympathetic to art as play than art as message-bearer, still less as the repository of an "ideal beauty." Indeed, in some cases, "play" even manages to stand on its own (i.e., without any higher degree of spiritualization or determinate form in its transformation to art) as a bulwark against all that is administered and alienated in life. In a section of *Minima Moralia* entitled "Toy Shop," Adorno describes what is almost a microcosmic (but not "miniaturized") version of utopia achieved:

> Disenchantment with the contemplated world is the sensorium's reaction to its objective role as a "commodity world." Only when purified of appropriation would things be colourful and useful at once: under universal compulsion the two cannot be reconciled. Children, however, [are] still aware, in their spontaneous perception, of the contradiction between phenomenon and fungibility that the resigned adult no longer sees, and they shun it. Play is their defence [...]. In his purposeless activity the child, by a subterfuge, sides with use-value against exchange-value [...]. The little trucks travel nowhere and the tiny barrels on them are empty; yet they remain true to their destiny by not performing, not participating in the process of abstraction that levels down that destiny, but instead abide as allegories of what they are specifically for. (MM 227–28)

Of course, art proper (and this is certainly Adorno's concern in *Aesthetic Theory*), inevitably tied to the disenchanted adult world, is not permitted this

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relative innocence of spontaneous allegory or mimesis. Nevertheless, the child's play is *also* a form of "purposefulness without purpose" which is the hallmark of Kantian aesthetics. The image is *just so*, as if it were necessary that it were to be just so; the trucks must go *just there*, because… Moreover, as Adorno makes explicit in the above passage, the play of the child is in an oppositional or negative stance—a "defence"—against the exchange-value orientation of the adult world, which deprives it of its sensuous particularity and "steep[s] all in grey" (MM 227). J. M. Bernstein specifies that "Adorno reads [art's] autonomy as double: both as art's loss of a (direct) social purpose, and as art's refusal of the kind of purposiveness that has come to dominate society."[7] Like autonomous art in this description, the play of the child is a chance at restoring the enchantment of a disenchanted world through "purposeless activity," in which the non-fungibility of the particular (for Adorno, one of the defining attributes of artworks) may once again assert itself. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno famously compares the unveiling of "newness" in the artwork to a child fiddling at the piano (AT 32). The evocation of the child is somewhat different in this passage, and it is significant that Adorno speaks of the finding of a chord rather than the production of formless sound. Nonetheless, the passage still places the emphasis on a certain kind of arbitrary and directionless enjoyment—which is here a precondition for artistic creation as such, and is the closest Adorno ever dares to get to something like a theory of the origin of the work of art.

In a section of *Minima Moralia* located just a few pages before "Toy Shop," Adorno speaks of the artist in terms very similar to that of his description of the child at play, albeit in a somewhat more sinister register. The adult artist displays the same unconscious intransigence towards the goals and norms of contemporary society as the child does towards the culture of fungibility in his parodic/mimetic use of toys:

> Artists do not sublimate. That they neither satisfy nor repress their desires, but transform them into socially desirable achievements, their works, is a psychoanalytical illusion […]. Rather, artists display violent instincts, free-floating and yet colliding with reality, marked by neurosis […]. Their lot is rather a hysterically excessive lack of inhibition over every conceivable fear; narcissism taken to its paranoiac limit. (MM 212–13)

Whatever the polemical exaggerations and debts to the crudely romantic notion of the tortured genius contained here, the important thing to note is that the artist appears as someone wholly unchecked by instrumental rationality; the artist is subject to nothing but his or her own desire—the "natural man" of Hegelian anthropology—but in that subjection, however, the freedom of the artwork (n.b. *not* of the artist) is born. In both cases it is precisely the following of irresponsible and almost unrecognized desires (and in the case of the child in particular, the "joy" of both mimicry and useless games)

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that leads to a creative activity that stands against administration through the maintaining of its internal freedoms.

How is this to be reconciled, then—if it is not indeed an outright contradiction—with more stereotypically Adornian dictates such as "Only radically spiritualized art is still possible, all other art is childish; inexorably, however, the childish seems to contaminate the whole existence of art" (AT 92)? Art must renounce play, it seems, in its encounter with society, i.e., in its own version of disenchantment to which it must respond—be "responsible"—lest it risk irrelevance or worse. Yet childish pleasure in the aesthetic is not eradicable, nor in the end is it desirable to eradicate it:

> What can, without stirring up the musty odors of idealism, justly be called *serious* in art is the pathos of an objectivity that confronts the individual with what is more and other than he is in his historically imperative insufficiency [...]. This seriousness is relativized, however, in that aesthetic autonomy remains external to suffering, of which the work is an image and from which the work draws its seriousness. The artwork is not only the echo of suffering, it diminishes it; form, the organon of its seriousness, is at the same time the organon of the neutralization of suffering. Art thereby falls into an unsolvable aporia. The demand for complete responsibility on the part of artworks increases the burden of their guilt; therefore this demand is to be set in counterpoint with the antithetical demand for irresponsibility. The latter is reminiscent of the element of play, without which there is no more possibility of art than of theory [...]. The art of absolute responsibility terminates in sterility, whose breath can be felt on almost all consistently developed artworks; absolute irresponsibility degrades art to *fun*; a synthesis of responsibility and irresponsibility is precluded by the concept itself. (AT 38–39)

In this relatively concise summary of art's ethical aporia according to Adorno, what is particularly striking is the mention of the "demand for irresponsibility" in art. What Adorno actually means by "The art of absolute responsibility" is not made explicit here, but almost the whole of *Aesthetic Theory* is devoted to it (in a bias that makes it easy to overlook the acknowledgment of art's opposite polarity). Indeed, the paragraph directly following the one quoted above begins with the famous lines: "To survive reality at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality. Radical art today is synonymous with dark art; its primary color is black" (AT 39). Adorno means this more as a formal claim than as a claim about content: artworks that aim to deliver a pessimistic or melancholic *message* are almost every bit as affirmative as the most pneumatic starlets and the most square-jawed steelworkers. In the strictest sense (which Adorno himself does not always hold to), art's "blackness" is its refusal of meaning, its refusal, in other words, to be grasped by cognition at all *except* perhaps as something cognitively ungraspable. In terms of periodization and historical context, the fact that yesterday's formal alterations and

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antagonisms become today's mental habit and commodified artifact means that art must perpetually beat the retreat into its internal fragmentation, into its refusal of sensuousness and the pleasures of mimesis (which is its "guilt"), and, ultimately, into its silence. This for Adorno is the only historically responsible stance. But this process requires, indeed cannot do without, a corresponding "absolute irresponsibility" "reminiscent of the element of play, without which," Adorno stresses, "there is no more possibility of art than of theory" (AT 39). To restate this aporia too simply: if artworks decide to be serious, they immediately become unserious (because "communicating") or else they take their own oppositionist claims literally and refuse to *be* at all. Only if artworks claim the privilege of their unseriousness through something like the mobilization of play do they have a chance of retaining their "expressivity," their aesthetic fecundity which is paradoxically the only element of seriousness allotted to them.

If the seriousness of art ultimately crashes on the rocks of its own tendency towards either engagement or self-annihilation, the unseriousness of art risks getting sucked into a whirlpool of narcissistic pleasure that, for Adorno, similarly compromises the very purpose and grounds of art. Adorno's description of the culture industry as the infinite deferral of pleasure through the narcotizing power of spectacle is in many respects merely a more sophisticated version of the old "bread and circuses" argument, albeit ratcheted up for a historical situation in which entertainment does not only serve as a means of political control, but also feeds into and reinforces the existing political order in its capacity as "big business." Still, to anyone who has ever attended a commercial sporting event, read a celebrity magazine, seen a blockbuster movie, or noted the populist marketing strategies of "high culture" institutions, it is apparent to what extent "the culture industry" indeed aims to reassure, to soothe, to distract, and to provide an escape valve for personal and sociopolitical tensions of all kinds. (Whether this is done with sinister motivations or not is a different question: for his part, Adorno would utterly dismiss the notion that such operations are innocent attempts to satisfy real desires, i.e., "giving the customers what they want.") What is more interesting, and far more problematic, in terms of Adorno's aesthetics is how closely Adorno's description of the culture industry's mechanisms of control *resembles* the processes of autonomous art which is ostensibly the culture industry's very counter-image. If art has a function, for Adorno, it is to lay bare the tension between semblance and reality. In this way the artwork claims its autonomy, hence its freedom, precisely from its own sensuous particularity and singularity of existence, and moreover in a way that is not (and quite possibly never will be) available to the acting subject: "Aesthetic experience is that of something that spirit may find neither in the world nor in itself; it is possibility promised by its impossibility. Art is the ever broken promise of happiness" (AT 135–36).[8]

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Again, this necessary disappointment seems to be not just similar to but identical with the culture industry's "illusory" promise that "actually confirms [...] that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu" (DE 139). While the difference in metaphor between these two passages is obviously significant—"spirit" versus "the diner"—the movement described is the same: an image of happiness is presented, only to be snatched away, not by something other than itself, but *by* itself, precisely insofar as it is an image. Adorno himself does not fail to notice this correlation:

> Stendhal's dictum of art as the *promesse du bonheur* implies that art does its part for existence by accentuating what in it prefigures utopia. But this utopic element is constantly decreasing, while existence increasingly becomes merely self-equivalent. For this reason art is ever less able to make itself like existence. Because all happiness found in the status quo is an ersatz and false, art must break its promise in order to stay true to it. But the consciousness of people, especially that of the masses who in an antagonistic society are separated by cultural privilege from consciousness of such a dialectic, hold fast to the promise of happiness; rightfully so, but in its immediate, material form. This provides the opening for the culture industry, which plans for and exploits the need for happiness. The culture industry has its element of truth in its fulfillment of a need that originates in the ever increasing renunciation demanded by society; but the sort of concessions it provides renders it absolutely false. (AT 311)

In this passage, it is the "constantly decreasing" possibility of utopia that makes the difference between the promise (made by both art and the culture industry) and the necessity of breaking the promise (which is implicit in the culture industry's products, but explicit in artworks). Nevertheless, since utopia is always only "prefigured" (and by definition), and since for Adorno popular culture and fine art alike ultimately fail to bring about the reconciliations they point towards, the difference between the two forms of falsehood remains unclear. The similarities between the salivating diner of the culture industry and the wandering spirit of art become even stronger if one notes the etymology of Stendhal's "bonheur," which Adorno often quotes in the original French. Happiness is "la bonne heure": luck (viz., "*Glück*," as well as the English "hap"), the good hour, or, even, "a good time." Art promises a good time.[9]

But this "good time"—here perhaps emphasizing the ephemeral duration, the mere hour of happiness—is also precisely what "serious" art forbids and forecloses. The promise of happiness that art makes *must* remain "ever broken," lest it compromise that promise in the immediacy of a happiness which is anyway already irresponsible, illusory, or impossible. To actually "have fun"—were such a thing attainable—renders the aesthetic experience null and void. And yet it is a striking inconsistency or at least overdetermination within Adorno's terminology that "fun" does not just signify the socially mandated and mass-psychology-conditioned pseudo-pleasure of the culture

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industry; at times "fun" also signifies something that might (cautiously) be called real pleasure, uncritical and affirming though this pleasure may be. In these cases, "fun" is the collapse of aesthetic distance, the total integration of the spectacle and life. For this reason, Adorno also derides what is for him the sub- or pseudo-artistic genre of the "happening" (AT 103): as an attempt to blur the boundaries between art and life, the "happening" (conceptual art, performance art, dadaist or situationist hijinks, what have you) eliminates precisely the semblance character of art which constitutes its saving negativity and moves it dangerously into the sphere of affirmation. If life becomes artistic, nothing will be left to deliver the protest against life—which is at once art's privilege and its only justification for existence.

But besides the obvious objection that the happening, as a discrete created moment (and despite its own pretensions to the contrary), does in fact partake of the semblance character of art every bit as much as other, more material, artworks whose media Adorno is able to recognize, one wonders at this point what Adorno's vision of utopia actually *is*, if *not* the freedom of artworks transferred to the everyday. And yet it seems unlikely that Adorno would sanction the unification of art and life under any circumstance, even the most "utopic." For despite his own debts to and dependencies on idealist philosophy, Adorno's denunciation of "fun" as the primary mode of the culture industry in its most go-go-go aspect *also* functions as an implicit critique of idealist aesthetics, in both its Hegelian and Marxist forms. For Hegel, as is well known, the progress of society towards its spiritualization means that the particular and the universal coalesce so well that the particular loses its very particularity: the real *is* not, but *becomes* the ideal, and vice versa. This famously results in the disappearance of art, or at least its disappearance as an essential or historically significant phenomenon. But in this development it is not that art becomes irrelevant to life so much as that the universality to which the artwork always pointed through its particularity has finally become manifest in life itself. Life has become artistic, insofar as art is a kind of striving (albeit ultimately an inadequate one) for the universal. Similarly, the cruder doctrines of socialist realism argue for a tensionless, affirmative (to use Adorno's terminology) mimeticism precisely because under socialism, life has been, or will imminently be, perfectly reconciled with the universal will—in this case not of spirit but of the proletariat. Art's only function is then as a didactic tool oriented towards the consumer, unimportant in itself as an aesthetic object. Here, too, art and life are one, with the artwork (supposedly) a faithful repetition of a perfected world.

In one way, both of these theories are the precise inverse of the case of "fun": whereas Hegelian idealism and Marxist utopianism deemphasize the artwork in light of a reconciled world, i.e., the aestheticization or enjoyability of reality, "fun" is the reality of aestheticization, presenting itself as itself the locus of a total seamless reconciliation, albeit only a temporary one. In all

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cases, however, the "negativity" of art—art's tensely dialectical relationship with the given world—has disappeared. (Closely tied to this is the presumably historically antecedent phase of "the infantile fun of imitating external reality" which modern artists have necessarily "learned to forgo" [MM 214].) For Adorno, the disappearance of art's negativity vis-à-vis the world is always a sign, and even a cause, of "philistinism": the abandonment of the capacity for critique in aesthetics and politics alike, and the consequent corruption of subjectivity into a debased *Massenpsychologie*. And for all his evocation of the idea of utopia, he explicitly rejects the idea that an affirmative art could be a valid counterpart to an ideal society and a non-alienated subjectivity, even if such a society and a subjectivity were likely. Adorno ends *Aesthetic Theory* on a pathetic note with precisely this question in mind:

> In truth, there is nothing to overcome; the world itself is *index falsi*. There is no denying that the antagonistic situation, what the young Marx called alienation and self-alienation, was not the weakest agency in the constitution of modern art. But modern art was certainly no copy, not the reproduction of that situation. In denouncing it, transposing it into the image, this situation became its other and as free as the situation denies the living to be. If today art has become the ideological complement of a world not at peace, it is possible that the art of the past will someday devolve upon society at peace; it would, however, amount to the sacrifice of its freedom were new art to return to peace and order, to affirmative replication and harmony [...]. If in fulfillment of the wish a future art were once again to become positive, then the suspicion that negativity were in actuality persisting would become acute; this suspicion is ever present, regression threatens unremittingly, and freedom—surely freedom from the principle of possession—cannot be possessed. But then what would art be, as the writing of history, if it shook off the memory of accumulated suffering. (AT 260–61)

Even in a world without social violence, alienation, inequity, etc. (and for Adorno, Marxian by profession and humanist by default, these criteria are by and large not subject to debate), art would maintain its negative stance if nothing else in remembrance of barbarisms past. To hope to do otherwise would anyway be to set the dialectic in motion once again, and have the pretenses of an affirmative art shown up by a temporality that refuses to be reconciled, and above all, by the logical impossibility of owning one's own freedom from the compulsion of ownership. The rejection of fun is then a preservation of the aesthetic sphere *per se*, in which such freedom is allowed at least a virtual status, the "as if" allotted to it by Kant, but an "as if" that also significantly retains its conditional and illusory status within itself. If "fun" is unreadable for Adorno in terms of his aesthetic theory, it is because it is in fact not an aesthetic category at all, not even a bad or irresponsible one. "Fun"—along with its close correlates, affirmative art and enjoyment—is rather "the deaestheticization of art" (AT 16): the collapse of the aesthetic into

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the real, and consequently, the loss of critical possibility as a whole. All the world's a Disneyland. "Fun" is the limit of aesthetics as such.

But even the use of the term "fun" in this restricted yet fundamental sense is problematic. First, of course, it assumes that one is on board with Adorno's political stance: that the world is *essentially* a world of horror and unfreedom (political, ontological, etc.) against which constant resistance must be maintained. Second, and more fundamentally, it presupposes that art's primary function is indeed to *be* autonomous. This in turn is problematic for several reasons. As James Harding and many others have pointed out, Adorno's historicized account of autonomous art's social function nevertheless elides the material conditions of the development of art's autonomy, which are contemporaneous with the entrenchment of the bourgeoisie as a political and cultural power. Adorno is obviously aware of this fact, yet at moments he speaks of art as if its autonomy has always been able to be taken for granted, which is manifestly not the case. Thus, in speaking within the discourse of autonomous art, Adorno leaves himself wide open to his own critique of having merely reified the status quo. Such a theory similarly means that the boundaries between "art" and "not art" are drawn not aesthetically at all but ideologically; in Harding's words, "by articulating the consequences of negation rather than the structural conditions leading to it, the account comes dangerously close to the formulation of immutable criteria which artifacts must meet in order to be art. At the very least, the account of the consequences of negation cultivates registers with which a critic/reader can search for that which appears to correspond to preconceived results. It borders on begging the question."[10] Adorno's by now cliché—and subsequently retracted—condemnation of poetry after Auschwitz[11] has usually been objected to on the grounds of the need to memorialize, think through, or traumatically react to historical horror. Or else it has been countered according to Adorno's own argument that artworks provide the only force capable of saying no to such horror on a structural or theoretical level. But the further objection to make is that the role Adorno assigns to art ultimately reverts to the very thing that he is attempting to defend art against, that is, the instrumentalization of art for conceptual thinking. Again, Adorno's emphasis on the "suffering countenance" (AT 111) of the artwork should of course not be taken literally as a mandate for the representation of pain (even if Adorno himself often seems to ask for such an interpretation just as often as he explicitly rejects it). But his attempt to stake out a special place and a role for art through its formal woundings and its resistances to a suspect and easily commodifiable pleasure is not only insufficient as a description of what art has been and could be; it also retreats from the complexity of many of his own statements on spontaneity and play, and ultimately cancels itself out through its own logical contradictions. Strictly speaking, one cannot hope to quarantine the sensuous particularity of the artwork and *at the same time* elaborate it within a concep-

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tual framework. In terms of Adorno's own categories, an "aesthetic theory" is an oxymoron.

Adorno is obviously aware of this fact, a situation to which the restless point-counterpoint structure of *Aesthetic Theory* amply attests. And while "fun" may be anathema to Adorno's aesthetics, it is by no means ignored. For if art is the "remainder" of society for Adorno, "the result of the exclusions which allowed enlightened rationality and an autonomous economy to centre themselves without the encumbrances of the claims of sensuousness or teleology,"[12] fun is perhaps the remainder of the remainder, what art has had to cast uneasily aside in order to become "art." Adorno says as much:

> The ridiculous, as a barbaric residuum of something alien to form, misfires in art if art fails to reflect and shape it. If it remains on the level of the childish and is taken for such, it merges with the calculated *fun* of the culture industry. By its very concept, art implies kitsch, just as by the obligation it imposes of sublimating the ridiculous it presupposes educational privilege and class structure; *fun* is art's punishment for this. All the same, the ridiculous elements in artworks are most akin to their intentionless levels and therefore, in great works, also closest to their secret. (AT 119)

As we have seen, "fun" is the "punishment" of art because it takes away art's identity: it turns art into non-art or kitsch as revenge for art's affinity to both nonsense and mimesis (counterintuitively conflated in this paragraph). The greatness of "great works" resides in the delicately maintained tension between reflection and ridiculousness, abnegation and enjoyment, responsibility and irresponsibility. But besides eliciting wonder at the negative valence of Adorno's implied class war (with a *lumpenproletarisch* "fun" rising up against the sublimating powers of "educational privilege and class structure"), and besides repeating Adorno's reluctant acknowledgment that ridiculousness or irrationality is in fact the basic substrate of art, this passage reveals the fissures in Adorno's prohibition against fun in its very evocations of "residuum" and "punishment." For not only does the residuum always remain to threaten the coherence of the system, but—and importantly so in the argument of *Aesthetic Theory*—a system *without* such a residuum necessarily degenerates into the seamless non-art of kitsch and affirmation. Thus Adorno finds himself in the awkward position of arguing that only fun in art protects art against fun. This argument—which seems to us absolutely correct in its paradoxicality—places many of Adorno's more unequivocal slurs on fun under suspicion. At the same time, it elevates "fun" to a position of primacy (all the more so because repressed) within Adorno's philosophical project as a whole.

So are we having fun yet? We should remain wary of what we mean by this. Catherine Liu has provided a neo-Adornian critique of the automatic conflation of "fun" with that art which "revels in its flirtation with the culture industry and its sometimes cuddly, sometimes shiny supplements."[13] It would be crude, she argues, to assume that such art—familiar at least since

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Warhol—provides a democratized, unmediated pleasure merely because it makes certain forms of pleasure its (ironic) theme. Indeed, such art ("post-modern" if you will) serves to reveal, even more than the Adorno-beloved artifacts of high modernism (and sometimes to the point where its representative works themselves approach a schematic didacticism), that Adorno's aesthetic theory is in fact essentially a theory of art's *a priori* ironicalness. Art's defining feature is that it maintains universal and particular in a state of perpetual non-reconciliation, in which every attempt at a reconciliation, moreover, results in a corresponding widening of this split. Like Adorno's emphasis, however reluctantly put, on artistic play, this ironizing dynamic brings Adorno more in line with the deconstructionist camp than either one would easily admit.[14] Nevertheless, it would be just as crude an argument (crudely sophisticated, perhaps) to ignore the element of "fun" content in such works and focus only on the acid aftertaste of their saccharine coating, in the same way as it is mistaken to elide the use of humor and silliness in Beckett or Klee. Nor is imitation of the culture industry and its products the only possibility for amusement or joyousness in artworks.

What remains to be discussed is what "fun," or anyway enjoyment, would actually be, both as applied to art and in general. When one "has fun" going to the museum or listening to music, is this the same kind of fun as one has in other situations? The pleasure one might experience in viewing a work of visual art, *even if* one's gaze is "pornographic" or "culinary" rather than critical, is ultimately different from the pleasure one experiences while reading a novel, for example, which is in turn different from the pleasure one experiences while eating, having sexual intercourse, dancing, engaging in conversation, writing a novel, fighting in battle, organizing a general strike, shooting heroin, solving a math problem, etc., etc., etc. (Not to mention the equally obvious fact that different people in different moments can have wildly differing reactions to all these experiences.) Neither a catalog nor a phenomenology of pleasure is within the scope of this essay; but it is worth asking why joy is postponed until the advent of utopia for Adorno,[15] as well as whether "fun"—at least as a pure conflation of aesthetic cognition with other activities—really can be said to exist at all.

Indeed, Adorno already asks the latter question, and perhaps also answers it, when he maintains that even the golden promises of the culture industry ultimately fail to be delivered upon. By definition, even the crudest and most "affirmative" of artworks would retain the semblance character that distinguishes the experience of them from other forms of experience. (We note in passing the myriad theories—notably Lacan, Derrida—that posit *all* experience as something differential to *itself*. These theories do not necessarily refute Adorno's claims for art, but indicate perhaps that his insistence on art's exceptionalism is vastly overstated. This in turn threatens to exposes his own

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theories as either precious aestheticism or over-generalizeable mush—or, on the other hand, to elevate them to the status of a quasi-ontology.)

In any case, if aesthetic differentiality—between art and history, between "semblance" and "reality," even between play and praxis—is the crux of Adorno's argument, what this means is that the burden of the artwork ultimately falls not upon the artist, nor even upon the artwork, but upon the *critic*. Despite Adorno's own insistence on differentiating himself from subject-oriented theories of art (notably those of Freud and Kant [see AT 11]), *Aesthetic Theory is* reception theory, if perhaps not in a way either Adorno or most reception theorists would accept. Merely to proscribe "fun" is to admit that there are various ways of experiencing the artwork, ways which have something to do with the "objectivity" of the artwork as such, but more to do with the way it is experienced in its relationship to other phenomena and especially to the historical situation. Adorno's arguments about the inevitable refamiliarization of new art forms—the melancholy chestnut of avant-gardists everywhere—as well as the possibility of defamiliarizing, and thus rehabilitating, the most seemingly affirmative works of art, only bear out this point.[16] For this reason, Adorno's controversial statements about "black art"—including many of his own interpretations of artworks within this framework[17]—can be historicized and to a large extent put aside. Just as the autonomy of art upon which so much of Adorno's theories rest is already a phenomenon socially determined in the extreme, both the historical situation and the situation of art are different now than they were in 1969; clearly, in almost all media, art has both assimilated and moved away from many of the forms to which Adorno gave his stamp of approval. One does not need to engage in a triumphalist historiography to note that yesterday's political and cultural concerns are not necessarily today's. Simply put, the challenges are different now. If we take Adorno at his word, it could not be otherwise. For if subjectivity is historically conditioned, and (as we have been arguing) the subjective stance one takes toward the artwork is, much more than the artwork itself, the determining factor of art's negativity, then artworks and art criticism are infinitely variable, *even if* the system itself were to remain—which it cannot remain—a closed system without energy loss.

It is perhaps concerns such as these that provide the possibility for something like a redemption of "fun" for aesthetics. For again, despite Adorno's claims that the intransigence of art's sensuous particularity is what totally—if not without complications—precludes its subsumption by categories, and thus stands in permanent opposition to instrumentalizing thought and all that this entails,[18] the obvious objection remains that Adorno's very statement of this dynamic risks reducing the art work to the category of this opposition. In other words: art's lack of concept becomes its concept. Such an interpretation of the artwork is every bit as reductive and as polemical as the romantic ontology for which Adorno takes Heidegger, among others, to task.

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Fun—like magic, communication, or engagement—does indeed threaten art's autonomy with the guilty admission that one might "concretely enjoy" the artwork; art is then potentially merely a tool for pleasure, a drug like any other. But while fun in art may stand in absolute opposition to artistic autonomy as a critical moment, it does not, however, stand in opposition to *art*. As we have seen, at various times throughout his œuvre Adorno himself even implies that something like enjoyment may be the origin of the art-making activity. This primitive art-making activity—the mimesis of transporting commodities!—*is* opposed to the adult world of appropriation and exchange value—i.e., conceptual thought—but it is *also* a distinct pleasure, done "just for the fun of it." Art-making is of course not the same thing as art-cognizing or art-consuming, but this does not necessarily compromise the possible mitigation of the prohibition against aesthetic fun, or the acknowledgment that the pleasure principle is more than just a tool (internalized or otherwise) of domination.

To question the taboo against fun is to question the assumptions that have grounded art's autonomy and the autonomy of artistic judgment since at least Kant. This is not the same thing, at least so we firmly hope, as the banally reassuring conviction that life contains both joys and sorrows, that there are, after all, other things in this world besides Auschwitz. Still less is it a claim that one should "get over it," or abandon an insistence upon social justice as a political goal. Without a doubt, reintroducing the possibility of fun in artistic cognition calls up other, possibly intractable, problems, and Adorno is absolutely correct in implying that if art's autonomy and "disinterestedness" are suspended, it becomes impossible to rigorously distinguish between what is art and what is not art—i.e., "life." This impossibility cuts both ways: not only does art lose its exceptionality, but life becomes potentially representational or spectacular. Or, in a less Baudrillardian mode, one could say that it becomes necessary to encounter *everything* in its alterity and sensuous particularity. Such things are not necessarily to be celebrated—Eva Geulen notes that Adorno's "apocalyptic staging" of the problem of art functions as a corrective to "the genuinely ominous tendency of the culture industry to annihilate all differences."[19] It is certain that if art is no longer able to be defined solely by its resistance to interest, in Kantian terms, or reconciliation and affirmation, for Adorno (and if at the same time one does not want to abandon aesthetics to a total fatalistic relativism), different criteria must be found to determine what is worthy of contemplation and what is trash, and these criteria may have to be necessarily fluid, contextual, and subjective.[20] Nevertheless, to erect systematic taboos against this tendency may well result in the return of all that has been repressed in aesthetics—as the still-popular "jubilatory activity" of "dancing upon the grave of the Frankfurt School"[21] bears out. Geulen continues: "[but] it is precisely this apocalyptic model that precludes all possibility of any further differentiation and critical intervention; the technique of uncov-

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ering can no longer be distinguished from what is has uncovered. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* [as well as, we may add, an unproblematized *Aesthetic Theory*] is thus as totalitarian as the system it conceptualizes."[22]

We have been suggesting that "fun," defined as the abyssal moment of art, the suspicious identity of subject and object or the point at which aesthetic autonomy breaks down—and hence, in Adorno's own words, a "danger"[23] —may be one way of dismantling the totalitarianism that threatens to undermine Adorno's aesthetic theory, not as an objection *ad hoc* and *ad hominem*, but according to its own principle. If art must preserve an absolute freedom of form in order to maintain itself as art, "fun"—as well as play, pleasure, and affects of all kinds—must, however paradoxically, be allowed to be included in its repertoire. And if a "voluptuousness" of life is at all politically desirable beyond its mere promise, then art as experience may perhaps reclaim a tenuous and risky place in the study of aesthetics.

Notes

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 13. Hereafter AT.

[2] "*Spaß*," which Adorno also uses on occasion, nevertheless has a far less audible sneer to it.

[3] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 140–41. Hereafter DE. Significantly, Horkheimer and Adorno make the Hobbesian move of equating laughter with derision (see 141), though here, it is a derision of power that is not subversive *à la* Bakhtin, but instead impotent in its reassurance. The laugher imagines an escape from the networks of power, which are on the contrary strengthened by their ability to provide illusions of escape.

[4] Adorno, *The Culture Industry* 39. Hereafter CI.

[5] Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* 62. Hereafter MM.

[6] Catherine Liu 238.

[7] J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* 208.

[8] This is perhaps where Adorno diverges most from Hegel, who would see the freedom of the subject precisely in the shaking off of semblance itself. That is: for Hegel, it is the unconscious over-investment in the particular that constitutes unfreedom. For Adorno, the sources of unfreedom—at least, the more urgent sources—are, despite all his affinity with Hegel, both more concrete and more intractable. Precisely because of its semblance character, art picks at the scab of the irreconcilability of universal and particular in an administered world. Without art's semblance character—i.e., without its status as a sensory object—there is, of course, no art. But whereas for Hegel this is a sign of progress in a world already increasingly in concert with spirit, for Adorno, who has no hope of any imminent reconciliation of world and spirit, any such "overcoming" of art can only be false. The only viable option is thus precisely to retain the semblance character of art as the perpetual reminder of this lack of art's self-overcoming.

[9] Nietzsche, in a passage from *On the Genealogy of Morality* with which Adorno could not *not* have been familiar, also cites Stendhal's aphorism as the salubrious counterargument to both Kant's notion of aesthetic disinterest and Schopenhauer's

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description of art as a release from suffering. See *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Third Essay, Section 6, 74–75.

[10] James M. Harding 191–92.

[11] "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final state of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society" 34.

[12] Bernstein 211.

[13] Liu 239.

[14] Bernstein also notes a family resemblance between Derrida and Adorno, but his move is more to make Derrida into an idealist (and ahistorical) thinker and exalt Adorno's historicized dialectics as the true bearer of the challenge to identity.

[15] All the more so because utopia is not a possibility but only a conceptual horizon for Adorno—and again, even if it were not, the permanent necessity of historicization and memorialization ensure that even the best of future worlds is always already unreconcilable.

[16] See for example the passage on Stifter, also noted by Peter Uwe Hohendahl 141–42, as a prime example of Adorno's essentially historicist approach to the artwork: "Not only the conservative-restorative choice of thematic material and the *fabula docet* are ideological, but so is the objectivistic deportment of the form, which suggests a micrologically tender world, a meaningfully correct life that lends itself to narration [...]. This, however, is not the last word on Stifter, for the reconciling, conciliatory aspects, especially in his last works, are exaggerated [...]. Shimmering through the eccentricity of the average is the secret and denied suffering of the alienated subject and an unreconciled life [...]. Affirmation becomes the cipher of despair and the purest negativity of content contains [...] a grain of affirmation" (AT 233). Similarly, this kind of turnabout also insures that engaged art will always miss its mark.

[17] Most notably in such categorical judgments as "Certainly Kafka does not awaken the power of desire" (AT 12). Not only Deleuze and Guattari would have much to say on this topic. Adorno himself, moreover, notes the affinity between avant-garde art and the vaudeville acts he disdains, but can only see Beckett's vaudevillian borrowings under the sign of a bitter parody. Adorno favors *Endgame* over *Krapp's Last Tape/La Dernière Bande* (literally, "The Last Reel," or, in colloquial speech, "The Last Hard-on") for obvious reasons; with the latter, one is forced to read even finality and decrepitude as a moment of (scatological or erotic) *jouissance*. And even with the former, the apocalyptic elimination of "fun" is not so certain: that is, Adorno reads the "end" without being able to read the "game."

[18] Bernstein provides a fair elucidation of this aspect of Adorno's thought: "If works of art were real unities their syntheses would be (real) theoretical or practical products. But [...] we can only conceive of works on the basis of a logic of approximation and distance; their synthetic activity must be likened to theoretical and practical synthesis without being it. Exploding appearance underwrites works' antinomic status" (204). Another way to phrase the problem of fun according to this language is that "fun" in art drastically compromises the impossibility to think art *other than* "on the basis of a logic of approximation and distance" and instead places aesthetic judgment dangerously close to practical reason.

[19] Eva Geulen 102.

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[20] See also Andreas Huyssen's call to reexamine Adorno's notion of the culture industry while at the same time eliminating its more puritanical or simple binary aspects: "If a critique of present-day mass culture is to have any practical effect it must recognize the public's needs as legitimate and at all costs must avoid the automatic denunciation of desires for fun and entertainment" (10). There is plenty of danger in anyone's deciding what "the public's needs" are; nevertheless, Huyssen's essay helps to qualify Adorno's often caricatural descriptions of the culture industry's dynamic.

[21] Liu 217.

[22] Geulen 102–03. Geulen goes on to make the argument (through a reading of Adorno's reading of *Endgame*) that Adorno's thinking, and in particular his thinking about art, does not merely thematize the parodic but is moreover parodic in its *form*, in particular through the "excessive" (108) nature of his language. Thus Adorno's rhetoric must be read alongside and especially against his most sententious or programmatic statements. But one does not even need this parodic model, perhaps, to note that in Adorno, "negation and affirmation are [...] in balance and volatile agreement" (109). To its great credit, *Aesthetic Theory* is a constant straining at its own seams.

[23] "The shadow of art's autarchic radicalism is its harmlessness: Absolute color compositions verge on wallpaper patterns. Now that American hotels are decorated with abstract paintings *à la manière de* [...] and aesthetic radicalism has shown itself to be socially affordable, radicalism itself must pay the price that it is no longer radical. Among the dangers faced by new art, the worst is the absence of danger" (AT 29).

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