

Adorno and Heidegger: A Retrospective

When we speak of a retrospective we usually refer to exhibitions which offer an overview of the works of an artist over a longer period of time. My reference to Theodor Adorno and Martin Heidegger in the sense of a retrospective may therefore be somewhat misleading, for it is not my aim to discuss their individual *oeuvres per se* but, instead, to discuss their mutual relation *within* the historical and cultural framework of the twentieth century. So, in a way, it is the twentieth century as such that is the theme of this sketchy retrospective, but regarded through the prism offered by a brief discussion of some of the aspects of Adorno's and Heidegger's philosophy of art.

Reasons for choosing these two philosophers as somehow paradigmatic for certain aspects of twentieth century discussions within the realm of the philosophy of art are manifold. First, both Adorno and Heidegger represent not only two major but also two central philosophical figures of the previous century. Neither the work of Jean-Paul Sartre or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, nor of Jacques Derrida or Gianni Vattimo, to name but a few, would be possible as we know it without Heidegger's philosophy. This is equally true of the legacy Theodor Adorno exerted on critical thinking in the last half century. Again, without him our views concerning twentieth century culture, modernist art and music would seem insufficient, as would our methodology for it would not be able to include his negative dialectics. Again a resemblance with Heidegger is obvious, for especially in his late writings Heidegger too attempted to build into his proper discourse the self-reflexive and anti-reductive mechanisms which would prevent his thinking from being assimilated and instrumentalized. It is for this reason that in spite of existing on two different sides of the twentieth century, these two sides today nonetheless appear to be more like the banks of the same river than simple views devoid of a common denominator. Similar to Heidegger, also Adorno exercised broad influence, although it was more fragmentary and was not a cause of a "belonging" so typical for many adherents of Heidegger's thought.

Adorno and Heidegger represent two aspects of the culture of the twentieth century: that of the first is historical, critical and radical, while that of the second strives to be timeless, contemplative and anti-modern. As is true of much of twentieth century culture, there exists avant-garde and modernist art which is cosmopolitan, urban and disregards all previous norms and values, only to be complemented by that other segment of twentieth century artistic and cultural creations that are traditionalist, classical and neoclassicist, tied to the nation, tradition, the rural and to the ahistorical mythic and idealized past -- which appears today, it must be said, equally fictitious as the causes for the zealous excitement over the future and the "now" of its cosmopolitan modernist counterpart.

The hostility of Adorno towards Heidegger is well-known and is witnessed also by his *Jargon of Authenticity* from 1964, which forcefully reveals his denigration of Heidegger and of what the latter stood for. In other aspects too the paths of Adorno and Heidegger didn't cross; not so long ago even considering this would have seemed preposterous. Nonetheless, regarded from our own contemporary perspective that I have briefly sketched, it may be possible and even necessary to link these two major figures of the past century, for there appears to exist -- or, rather, there appears to have emerged -- a common denominator of these two thinkers¹ that to a large extent hinges on the theme of our common interest as philosophers of art. What I have in mind is the enormous importance both Adorno and Heidegger ascribed to art, which they both viewed as the paramount extant form of creativity, which furthermore avoids the pitfalls of alienation and untruth. According to both of them art, moreover, offers a privileged entry into truth which, at the same time, does not refer to the good -- in the case of Adorno explicitly also not to the beautiful -- hence avoiding some of the more traditionalist explanations and interpretations of art. Moreover, the proximity of the two thinkers has already attained also more concrete forms. Hence a close associate of Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, took Heidegger's writings as his main point of reference in a lecture on "Time, Language and Art"² he recently gave in Ljubljana. This should of course not make us forget that even in his last work, *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno did

¹1. One of the few authors linking Adorno and Heidegger has been Gianni Vattimo. Cf. especially Gianni Vattimo, *La fine della modernità* (Milano: Garzanti, 1985).

²2. Albrecht Wellmer, "Čas, jezik in umetnost (z ekskurzom o glasbi in času)" ("Time, Language and Art (With an Excursus on Music and Time)"), *Filozofski vestnik* (XX), no. 3 (1999), pp. 73-93.

not fail to mention that “in Heidegger, poetic language is mythologically exalted.”³ Wellmer’s choice hence perhaps symptomatically says more about those that today pursue the tradition of the Frankfurt School than about Adorno himself.

Seen from this perspective the two thinkers appear uncannily close -- which, of course, is only partly true, for enormous differences and antagonisms exist and remain between them and their writings. As already noted, they represent -- or belong to -- two main currents in the continental European philosophy of the twentieth century. What appears to unite them is not so much their work but their historical and cultural framework. This framework is that of modernism. I must be precise: the framework of modernism is not meant in the sense which would imply that both Adorno and Heidegger relate to modernist art, at least not in the traditional sense: it has long been argued that the authentic modernism is that of Schoenberg, Kandinsky, Beckett -- as Adorno himself claims -- while the poetry of Rilke and the earlier Hölderlin as exalted by Heidegger certainly does not fit into this framework.

There is something enigmatic in this evaluation of modernism and its cultural and artistic context and its voids, for there is a substantial segment of twentieth century art which falls outside of the constraints set by modernism and its theory. This applies not only to surrealism, which was denigrated both by Adorno and Habermas and only recently resuscitated by Rosalind Krauss⁴ and Hal Foster,⁵ for example, with the aim to reevaluate and hence normatively reconfigure the modernist artistic paradigm as set by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried,⁶ but also to a series of twentieth century cultural and artistic phenomena ranging from the International Style architecture to the later classical paintings by Giorgio de Chirico. Perhaps the situation with modernism can in this respect be summed up well by quoting a statement from the eighties by Wolfgang Iser concerning the relation between modernity and postmodernity: “Postmodernity is traversed by the knowledge that totality cannot arrive except by placing in the position of an absolute a certain particularity and that it is thus inevitably tied to an elimination of other particularities. (...) Postmodernity begins where totality ends.”⁷

In other words, modernism in this discussion is but a historical framework within which non-modernist tendencies, as exemplified by Rilke, Gaudí, the Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik, or Ezra Pound exist, which remain on the fringes of modernism or extrinsic to it. Of modernism that is, as that particularity which achieved totality by placing itself into the position of an absolute and accomplished this by effectively sidelining other particularities.

Perhaps this statement may appear excessive and not sufficiently supported by historical facts. Some attempts to reevaluate the history of art of the twentieth century have already been made: two of these I have already mentioned, with another one (but starting from a different philosophical framework) being that of Paul Crowther in his book *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art*.⁸

But is a radical reevaluation of twentieth century modernism really possible? Doesn’t such a revision itself become a victim of its own historical and epistemological context or framework? Isn’t it questionable whether today a totalizing view which would encompass the totality of modern art (as diagnosed and described already in 1863 by Charles Baudelaire), and hence also of twentieth century art, is really possible? Isn’t it closer to the truth to claim that the reevaluation today is not happening from a radical and totalizing modernist perspective but from a postmodern and a fragmentary one? Adorno and Heidegger appear to be unwilling accomplices of this process, the reason being the one already noted: they stand for the two dominant philosophical options offered by the time of modernism, reenacting in this way a peculiar and interchangeable “master-slave” relationship as offered by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997), p. 352.

⁴ Cf. for example Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

⁵ Cf. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).

⁶ Cf. Fried’s response to Krauss in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. p. 58.

⁷ Wolfgang Iser, “Modernité et postmodernité,” *Les cahiers de Philosophie*, 6 (Fall 1988), p. 25.

⁸ Paul Crowther, *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).

The interpretations of modernism in this epoch after modernism are acquiring different and contradictory forms. One of these is offered by a proclaimed modernist such as Charles Harrison in his anthology *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* from 1992.⁹ In the anthology, which became one of the standard references on twentieth century art theory, Charles Harrison and co-editor Paul Wood include a piece by Theodor Adorno, while Martin Heidegger appears only because of Frederic Jameson's famous discussion of Van Gogh's painting *Peasant Shoes* in his 1984 essay on postmodernism wherein Heidegger's discussion of this painting is also noted.¹⁰ It is symptomatic that Harrison considers Adorno only in his relation to Walter Benjamin's discussion of mechanical reproduction and altogether disregards Heidegger within the framework of twentieth century modernism, while Jameson, a critical postmodern writer, uses exactly Heidegger's analysis from the 1935 lecture "The Origin of the Work of Art" of this painting by Van Gogh to illustrate the distinction between Andy Warhol's presumably postmodern work and that of the modernist one by Van Gogh. Hence we may assume that for Jameson Heidegger today represents a modernist writer, which certainly could not be said of Harrison's view. In other words, for a modernist like Harrison Heidegger is a non-modernist, while for a postmodernist like Jameson, Heidegger is obviously an example of a modernist philosopher.

It may of course be true that Harrison and Wood simply were not interested in these intricate details and it certainly is true that their aim was not an anthology of twentieth century philosophy and philosophy of art, but of art theory. Yet, this cannot be altogether true, for the mentioned anthology also contains pieces by Georg Simmel, Henri Bergson and even Lenin. In this regard -- no matter for what reasons Heidegger is omitted -- the anthology simply follows the twentieth century tradition of considering Heidegger a non-modernist.

Let us now see how Jameson regards Heidegger's philosophy of art. It is well-known that it was the essay "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Modernism" published in the *New Left Review* in 1984 that catapulted Jameson onto the center stage of discussions about postmodernism. Contrary to his other Marxist, radical and leftist contemporaries -- such as Nicos Calinicos or other thinkers critical of postmodernism (Jürgen Habermas and mainly the majority of German philosophers and social thinkers), Jameson embraced postmodernism. Although he regarded it from a critical and almost weary position, he nonetheless took it as a fact. In this respect this was a replay of a similar parting of ways in the late sixties and early seventies between the humanist thought of, say, Adam Schaff or Mikel Dufrenne on one hand, and the Althusserian circle, on the other. In other words, while in early eighties most of the other radical thinkers strove very hard either to minimize postmodernism and postmodernity as an irreverent fashionable trend and notions attempting to compromise the purity of modernism and modernity, Jameson took postmodernism seriously and thus developed what was to be one of the most persuasive and far-reaching theories of postmodern culture. (The fact that we are all a bit tired of the notion of postmodernism doesn't change this view.)

In the beginning of his essay on postmodernism -- I shall be referring to the later version which was published in 1991 in the book with the same title -- Jameson compares two works: that of Van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* (also translated into English as *Peasant Shoes*) and Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*. In the former he sees a case of modernist painting, while the latter, in his view, represents a case of postmodern art for, as he writes, "Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* evidently no longer speaks to us with any of the immediacy of Van Gogh's footgear; indeed, I am tempted to say that it does not really speak to us at all. Nothing in this painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer, who confronts it at the turning of a museum corridor or gallery with all the contingency of some inexplicable natural object. On the level of the content, we have to do with what are now far more clearly fetishes, in both the Freudian and the Marxian sense (Derrida remarks, somewhere, about the Heideggerian *Paar Bauernschuhe*, that the Van Gogh footgear are a heterosexual pair, which allows neither for perversion nor for fetishization). Here, however, we have a random collection of dead objects hanging together on the canvas like so many turnips, as shorn of their earlier life world as the pile of shoes left over from Auschwitz or the remainders and tokens of some incomprehensible and tragic fire in a packed dance hall. There is therefore in Warhol no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture and restore to these oddments that whole larger lived context of the dance hall or the ball, the world of jetset fashion or glamour magazines."¹¹

⁹ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 1075-76.

¹¹ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 8-9.

Jameson offers Warhol's picture as a clear example of a postmodern work. However, when it comes to the interpretation of an earlier, i.e. a pre-postmodern ("high modernist") work, he not only chooses one by Van Gogh, but furthermore bases his arguments on Heidegger's interpretation of this painting from his lecture/essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." Jameson finds Heidegger's analysis to be "organized around the idea that the work of art emerges within the gap between Earth and World, or what I would prefer to translate as the meaningless materiality of the body and nature and the meaning endowment of history and of the social."¹² A bit further on Jameson offers another description of Heidegger's reading of Van Gogh's picture: "[I]t is *hermeneutical*, in the sense in which the work in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth."¹³

A similar idea is advanced by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*: "Artworks are understood only when their experience is brought to the level of distinguishing between true and not true or, as a preliminary stage, between correct and incorrect. (...) The comprehension of an artwork as a complex of truth brings the work into relation with its untruth, for there is no artwork that does not participate in the untruth external to it, that of the historical moment. Aesthetics that does not move within the perspective of truth fails its task; usually it is culinary."¹⁴

We could of course ask ourselves why Jameson uses Heidegger to support his analysis of a modernist work of art and not that of a well-known advocate of modernism such as Adorno, also since he has written a whole book on him.¹⁵ It furthermore has to be noted that in the same volume from 1991 Jameson, when referring to Adorno, does this, at least in relation to art, critically, pointing, in a condescending way, to the latter's erroneous interpretation of the place of Schoenberg and Stravinsky within the history of the music of the previous century.¹⁶ Does this imply that Heidegger is closer to the "authentic" spirit of twentieth century art than Adorno? The difference between the two has perhaps less to do with their affinity to art or theoretical veracity, than with the *kind of art they were preoccupied with*. In Adorno's case this was modernist elitist music and elite art in general, the very nature of which is to offer resistance to simple and pleasurable artistic experience. "The archaic -- argued Adorno -- is appropriated as the experience of what is not experiential. The boundary of experientiality, however, requires that the starting point of any such appropriation be the modern,"¹⁷ for "the light should be cast on all art from the vantage point of the most recent artworks, rather than the reverse, following the custom of historicism and philology, which, bourgeois at heart, prefers that nothing ever change."¹⁸ According to Adorno then, it is the vantage point of our contemporaneity which determines our relation to the past and its works and not vice versa. Heidegger's view is exactly the opposite: the past is the truth of our contemporaneity for it authentically offers what has, in our modern times, become forgotten, instrumentalized and devoid of its authenticity. A revisionist stance has already been taken by critical thinkers themselves. Hence Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* from 1973 already criticizes Adorno for this view, "For Adorno tends to make the historically unique break with tradition that is defined by the historical avant-garde movements the developmental principle of modern art as such."¹⁹ This authenticity is the truth which Heidegger interprets as "unconcealedness", *aletheia*: "Truth happens in Van Gogh's painting. This does not mean that something which is at hand is correctly portrayed, but rather that in the revelation of the equipmental being of the shoes beings as a whole -- world and earth in their counterplay -- attain to unconcealedness. (...) The more simply and essentially the shoes are engrossed in their essence, the more directly and engagingly do all beings attain a greater degree of being along with them. This is how self-concealing Being is illuminated. Light of this kind joins its shining to and into the work. This shining, joined in the work, is the beautiful. *Beauty is one way in which truth essentially occurs as unconcealedness.*"²⁰

Let us now take another look at Adorno's position on this question. According to him, a modern work offers "[a]rtistic experience "[which] accordingly demands a comprehending rather than an emotional relation to the

¹² Ibid., p. 7.

¹³ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), p. 347.

¹⁵ Cf. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism. Adorno, or The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990).

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁷ Adorno, op. cit., p. 349.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 359.

¹⁹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 60.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper, 1977), pp. 177-8.

works.”²¹²¹ It is for this reason, argues Adorno, that “[t]he truth content of an artwork requires philosophy.”²²²² An artwork requires comprehension and therefore it is the *interpretation* which is the precondition for the authentic artistic *experience*. The artist’s work requires theory, requires a philosopher, to explain to the artist and to the world the import of his work, which only through this interpretation acquires the status of an artwork. Nonetheless, this interpretation does not form a “message:” this would be possible only in the case of committed art and not in what Adorno sees as authentic art, that is, autonomous art. Adorno quotes Schoenberg saying that, “one paints a painting, not what it represents.”²³²³ The kind of art that Adorno exalts is art that furthermore offers resistance, that opposes the acquired aesthetic taste and which by its disruptive nature reveals the untruth of the society in which it has been created.

The question of art is the question of truth. It is thus that we could summarize the basic argument of modernist art as developed in the twentieth century. Art not only offers a privileged access to truth, but is truth in its highest form -- whether as an *ex-expression* of the human self, of the subjective truth or as the creative artistic and materialized *im-expression* of the truth of the world and its depicted fragments, each of which, be it in the form of a novel, a composition, a sculpture or a painting, represents a fragment as that romanticist miniature of the universe as a whole. Art is at least the penultimate form of creativity as opposed to industrial repetitive and serial production. It exists because of its relation to truth, which is inextricably linked to the modern society and its untruth and inauthenticity. This critique of the extant society of the previous century is yet another common feature of Adorno and Heidegger. Nonetheless, art does not criticize this society in any direct way; similarly to culture it instead offers an alternative. As a contemporary Russian philosopher had said, “culture is not a product of society, but a challenge and alternative to society.”²⁴²⁴ If art criticizes society it submits to the same rules that govern this very society; instead art purportedly offers one of the few gateways to the universe of truth, of *unconcealedness*, which Heidegger later on complemented with a philosophical discourse that emulated the semantic indeterminacy of poetry. (As did Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his late writings.) Again, in this respect Adorno’s theory is different, for his negative dialectics has nothing to do with poetry but with the internal dynamic and dialectics of our thinking. His intent is to retain within his discourse the tension which prevents us from assimilating his thought in a facile and practical way. In this respect his aim complements the one he sets for authentic art, for this one too is intended to be complex and internally conflicting in that the truth they both reveal are not the “mythical” truths Adorno ascribes to Heidegger but intellectual truths which also cause art to be in constant need of a philosophical interpretation. Within this modernist universe art appears to be the rare instance of authenticity. But why is this authenticity so important?

I could venture an answer which would be that much of the twentieth century is in fact still the epoch of industrial society. Even where and when it is not, its mental image persists as the dominant one. It is within this framework that the notions of creativity and of art carry such weight for they both represent an activity the lack of which is incessantly revealed at every moment of that suffering century of master narratives. It may thus be that modernism, instead of being viewed as the apogee of art, will be instead interpreted as an aberration within the development of the art and culture of our distant and recent past.

In the renaissance or baroque eras art was intergrated into the fabric of society; in romanticism it was limited to small aristocratic and bourgeois circles and reached broader segments of society due to its simultaneous national aspirations; it was only in modernism that it was proclaimed to be the highest norm of human existence. This view, the roots of which are usually found both in romanticism and in the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century, attains its highest point in twentieth century modernism within the framework of which both Adorno and Heidegger exist and which determines both of them. If the former represents the intellectual and elitist radical wing of this modernism, the latter represents its negation but nonetheless within the same broader framework. It is on this background that we can find the answer to the question of why it is that Jameson uses Heidegger and not Adorno as the interpreter of modernist art.

²¹21. Adorno, op. cit., p. 355.

²²22. Ibid., p. 341.

²³23. Ibid., p. 4.

²⁴24. Mikhail N. Epstein, *After the Future. The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 6.

In his recent book *L'oeuvre de l'art. La relation esthétique* Gérard Genette has noted that, “[a]s concerns the apparently incongruous reconciliation of the names of Heidegger and Adorno, I believe “[it is] justified by a symmetrical relation between these two antithetical forms of overvaluation [of art].”²⁵

It is this *overvaluation of art* that connects Adorno and Heidegger -- in spite of enormous differences and positions concerning the nature of art, of truth and the way one reveals the other. The common modernist framework causes these two thinkers to reveal their common features, the proximity of which appears to increase over time. Within this context Heidegger's views on art which in much of the previous century appeared non-modern, are today interpreted as modern and modernist, as Jameson's essay witnesses. Adorno's views and the artists he exalts appear, on the other hand, as drifting into oblivion, as a short episode in the long history of art and views on it that he so fiercely criticized. At least for the time being it appears that Adorno and his kind of aesthetic theory and the art it exalted have been discarded or marginalized, to be replaced by a meeker and surprisingly different image of modernism and the philosophical theory attached to it, i.e., that of Heidegger, for example, which not long ago seemed to be the very opposite of modernism and the ideas associated with it.

²⁵25. Gérard Genette, *L'oeuvre de l'art. La relation esthétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), p. 11.