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Art or Propaganda? Dewey and Adorno on the Relationship between Politics and Art

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Almost every person—even if they seldom articulate or act on this belief—believes that art is good in an “enriching” type of way, making us better people and promoting a healthy and free society. Conversely, most people believe that propaganda is bad because it “impoverishes” our experience, reducing our selves and our society to one-dimensionality and reducing our freedom. In addition, almost everybody believes that they can distinguish between art and propaganda. If it is indeed the case that art enriches our experience and propaganda impoverishes it, then establishing criteria that will allow us to make a distinction between the two would seem a worthwhile exercise, one whose ramifications could affect the quality of our educational, cultural, political, and spiritual lives. However, there is a problem with making these necessary and potentially beneficial distinctions and this problem belies the common notion that the difference between propaganda and art is easily visible. When we actually attempt to consider a specific work or body of works in its integrity, according to its form and content, distinguishing between that which is art and that which is propaganda is often troublingly difficult.

As an example of this problem, consider the classic “propaganda” film, *Triumph of the Will* (1934), directed by Leni Riefenstahl. After numerous screenings in the “Philosophy and Film” course I regularly teach, I have noticed that my students evince two nearly incommensurable reactions to this documentary of the National Socialist Party Congress at Nürnberg. One of these reactions is that of aesthetic arousal and enjoyment. The geometric patterns formed by columns of soldiers, the close-ups in which these soldiers appear as statuary, the minutiae conveyed by faces in the crowd: all of these masterful shots involve the film’s viewer in an aesthetic experience that is neither banal nor gratuitous but satisfying and inspirational. *Triumph of the Will*—perceived in this first way as involving the viewer in an experience that is cathartic, fulfilling, and memorable—is enjoyed and experienced as a work of art.

The other response of my students to a screening of *Triumph of the Will* is that of visceral revulsion. It is the feeling inspired by a morally repugnant piece of propaganda. The events depicted in the film—Hitler’s descent from the sky, the *volks* parade, the rhythmic and fevered cries of “*Sig Heil*”—all these engagingly filmed actions appear absolutely repellent to those whose knowledge of history demands that they be seen as seeds of World War II and of the Holocaust. Because *Triumph of the Will* is so artfully executed, the viewers’ feelings of revulsion towards the film are made even more intense than they would have been were the picture poorly made.

Even noting these intense feelings of revulsion, there remains my students’ other yet simultaneous reaction to the film: specifically, that it is a great film and that it can be seen as a work of art. This feeling, and from this feeling the reasonably unavoidable contention that *Triumph of the Will* is indeed a work of art (it is beautiful in its execution, arouses sentiment, provokes contemplation, and offers meaning), stands in uneasy tension with its effectiveness as a piece of propaganda. Always there remains the question: “How can I be appreciating something that, as a propaganda piece for Nazi ideology, should be and is loathsome and repellent to me?”

Almost since its debut, critics have been wrestling with the tension caused by the ambivalent response the film provokes. Most have resolved this tension by arguing decisively for viewing the film either exclusively as propaganda or exclusively as art. Critics like Susan Sontag and Siegfried Kracauer contend that the film is an abhorrent propaganda piece with nice cinematography, whereas analysts like David Hinton and Andrew Sarris emphasize Riefenstahl’s relative autonomy from the Nazi propaganda machine and concentrate on the film as a piece of documentary art.¹

This tendency to unequivocally categorize *Triumph of the Will*—or for that matter any creative work—as either propaganda or art is not, however, a productive, revealing, or honest analysis. With such easy categorization the critic makes two mistakes, both of which lead to the same result. The first is that of ignoring their original reaction to the work when it appeared singularly neither as propaganda nor as art but simultaneously as capable of producing aesthetic awe as well as revulsion. The second mistake follows from the first; it is that of denying the film’s inherent tensions in order that the piece be derided as propaganda or championed as art. Both of these mistakes close off inquiry and thereby reify the work as exclusively a work of art or exclusively a work of propaganda. Once this reification occurs, the possibilities and the problems suggested by the film’s disclosure that art and propaganda are not in their appearances very far apart is denied or concealed.

Saying that art and propaganda are akin does not, however, erase the difference between them. Doing so would once again shut off inquiry into the basis and, indeed, possibility of distinguishing between art and propaganda. Much is at stake in keeping such questions open, not the least of which is a principled

defense of the traditional distinction between art and propaganda; as well as maintaining the power commensurate with this distinction of dignifying and choosing certain cultural expressions over and against others in terms of their artistic and cultural worth. Also, if it is the case that good art is productive, or at least indicative of a good and open society, and that propaganda promotes or denotes the contrary, then we should seek to distinguish between the two such that the former be encouraged and the latter discouraged.

Perhaps at this point, it is a good idea to abandon *Triumph of the Will* as an example of the difficulty faced in determining the status of a certain work. In many ways, the discourse surrounding this picture already has overdetermined it as propaganda.² But what of those works that we routinely categorize as art such as the busts of Roman emperors seen in the Metropolitan Museum of Art or Ingres' *Napoleon I on his Imperial Throne*? At their creation, these works were designed to be seen as monumental representations of imperial power. They were, in our modern understanding of the term, propaganda pieces. Their appearance has not changed significantly. Do they now, as museum pieces, appear still as propaganda—the capitalist order's laudatory monologue about itself having replaced its imperial models—or do they somehow transcend this category and qualify as art objects? When we extend our discussion about the status of creative works to those phenomena such as television programs, baseball games, popular music, and fictions, objects which are dignified as art neither by their institutional standing nor by their respective media, the questions about how and in what way these cultural expressions should be understood and classified become even more complex and difficult. One is faced not only with ontological questions about a work's status but also with critical questions about the way in which the work actually functions in culture.

In the twentieth century, various attempts have been made to fashion an aesthetics capable of differentiating between art and propaganda. Certainly the need for such an aesthetics has been demonstrated over and over again, and not only by the examples of fascist or so-called totalitarian states. The twin dogmas of the free market and liberal democracy have been disseminated even more effectively than the messages of Nationalist Socialism or State Communism. In this sense, *Saving Private Ryan* might be seen as bookending a cinematic/propagandistic history of World War II in which *Triumph of the Will* stands as the first volume.³

And so the question remains of how to differentiate between those cultural expressions that serve to reinforce the dominant political landscape (whether this landscape is fascist or liberal democratic) and those suggesting alternative and better possibilities for social organization. In seeking to answer this question, it may be helpful to look at the work of two philosophers who have thought extensively about this issue: the German Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno and the American Pragmatist John Dewey. Anybody who has read these philosophers sees marked differences between them in terms of orientation and atti-

tude: Dewey is known as a populist, a pluralist, and a guarded optimist, while Adorno is notorious for his elitism, his dialectical rigor, and his pessimism. Despite these differences, there is at least one point of convergence: both wish to make a distinction between real art and “art” that only serves to reify the dominant political landscape. Further, with the aid of this distinction, both hope to suggest that real art is the vehicle by which positive political and cultural change in the direction of true democracy may be occasioned.

What I wish to do, then, through this paper is to articulate the similarities and differences between Adorno’s and Dewey’s aesthetics, showing the way in which these theories juxtapose real art against other forms of cultural expression that, in their duplication and strengthening of existing modes of culture, may be seen as progressively closing off the possibilities for the realization of true democracy or (what may be the same thing) the end of alienation. Basically, and as the title of this paper suggests, I want to examine how each distinguishes between art and propaganda and to show that, despite obvious differences between their philosophies taken as a whole, they are not so far apart in their aesthetic judgments of what the art object is and what effect it has or may have on individuals and society. Furthermore, though sympathetic to the main thrust of Adorno’s and Dewey’s aesthetics and wishing to acknowledge as correct and useful both the distinction they make between art and propaganda and the judgment they make about the potential effects of each type of production on society, I wish to distance my own consideration of the relationship between art and politics from the conclusion that each draws from their respective analyses: that art is or can be productive of democracy. Specifically, this will take the form of a critique of Dewey’s faith in the ability of art to reach a mass audience and to allow real public opinion. Similarly, it will involve a critique of Adorno’s argument that art’s autonomy from culture is potentially emancipative and productive of democratic practices. The positive part of this articulation of my own view of the relation between art and politics will, I am afraid, not in fact be very positive. I will argue against both Dewey and Adorno that even were genuine or real artistic expressions to appear, there is no way in which these might sustain themselves otherwise than as private pleasures or as products whose potential powers to change and open the political realm have been vitiated by their commodification.

So that “real art” and its effects on the political/cultural sphere might be better understood, it is perhaps best to start out with a comparison between Adorno’s and Dewey’s analyses of what they each believe to be the relation between subjects and cultural productions: that is, between people and art. Heirs to Hegel, each philosopher acknowledges that subjects are products of the culture they inhabit. For Adorno, however, the cultural production of subjects is understood to be much more monolithic than it is for Dewey. This is so even if Adorno’s critique of identity and sophisticated understanding of dialectic disallows an easy reductionism.⁴ In this, Adorno is—for the most part—willing to

follow Marx in maintaining that all cultural formations (including subjects) are the result of specific modes of production (Adorno 1997a, 10). For his part, Dewey does not totally reject Marx's insight and in fact does argue that a culture's mode of production has much to do with the form that that culture and its subjects take (Dewey 1939, 13). However, he also believes that humans as naturally evolved, conscious, intelligent beings capable of moral choice have some control in determining the way in which they and their cultural institutions are formed. For Dewey, the richness of experience and of human nature is difficult to hide, even under the cover of ideology.

Dewey presents the world as ontologically rich and as capable of intelligent appreciation and even direction despite the presence of forces—economic and otherwise—that tend to encourage slavishness, discipline, and uniformity in the subjects that are affected by them (Dewey 1927, 49). However, insofar as these forces create subjects who are incapable of participating in the democratic process for lack of real and useful knowledge, he also believes that these forces are a very real problem and that they are detrimental—if not totally anathema—to the project of democracy.

A large part of these external forces' efficacy, Dewey points out, is predicated on their ability to control a culture's communication and, thereby, the individual subject's understanding, including self-understanding. This control of communication in the service of dominant interests is identifiable by its narrowing of possible discourses and its offering up of the "same few and relatively simple beliefs asseverated to be 'Truths' as the whole truth of experience" (Dewey 1939, 44). This narrow and one-dimensional communication, which occludes the ontological richness of our experience, Dewey terms "propaganda." He argues that the production and dissemination of such material is itself constitutive of mass opinion, an opinion that is necessarily as dogmatic as its inspiration (Dewey 1939, 38; 1927, 181). As the dissemination of propaganda becomes more and more the norm and mass opinion usurps or precludes the possibility of rich, diverse, and free public opinion, Dewey contends that the chances for the realization of democratic subjects and democratic culture are progressively being ceded to the easy and horrible promise of totalitarianism (Dewey 1939, 10).

Unlike Dewey, for whom there exists a rich world and a potentially rich culture that is in the process of being eclipsed by propaganda and mass opinion, there is no outside to the banal culture that Adorno identifies as the product of late capitalism. If there is one dominant theme in Adorno's work in relation to "mass culture" or the "culture industry," it is that the culture industry—which constitutes the whole of contemporary American culture—creates its own ontology (Adorno 1989a, 10). The culture industry and the products or "artworks" that it develops then must be understood as a part of this closed system. The subjects who inhabit the landscape defined by the culture industry are constituted by and in relation to the products it produces for them. Its boundaries determine what they are able to know, desire, and experience. As Adorno ex-

plains this relationship, the culture industry “tolerates no deviation and incessantly drills in the same formulas of behavior ... [and it] arouses a feeling of well-being that the world is precisely in that order suggested by the culture industry” (134). The individuals of the culture industry are then not so much subjects as they are the objects of economic interests. They are consumers, compelled and controlled by a force that is outside of them. And, just as Dewey points out that the force of propaganda progressively impoverishes its subjects and makes them unfit for democracy, Adorno points out that the culture industry “impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide for themselves, [qualities that] would be the precondition for a democratic society” (135).

For both Dewey and Adorno, real art is contrasted with propaganda. In addition, real art is seen by both as catalyst and vehicle for the realization of a much richer and democratic political life. This is not to say that Dewey’s and Adorno’s ideas of what art is and what its effects may be are exactly the same. Given the differences between their accounts of the relationship among world, economic-political system and subjects illustrated above, this simply could not be the case. However, at the level of its effects, each holds out art as hope and promise, even if this promise is proffered from two very different perspectives.

For Dewey, art is understood to put us into and to make us more fully aware of the richness of our relationships with life and culture, thereby rendering us more capable of informed choice and ameliorative political action. For Adorno, art suggests an alternative to the banal culture that we now inhabit and promises new forms of freedom. Allow me to start with Adorno to illustrate and then to somewhat complicate this point. Adorno maintains that all art, including real art and banal art, is a cultural production and that we can read culture through it (Adorno 1997b, 17). The great majority of artistic productions, though, can only be seen as artifacts: as objects that merely reproduce, in a quite vulgar way, the dominant mode of production. This is as true of folk art objects from the past as it is of the products of today’s culture industry (Adorno 1978, 204). The culture industry might attempt to disguise this relation—even going so far as to dress up its creations as real art—but it is only because this disguise allows it to push more product (207). Good examples of this strategy can be found in any IKEA catalog where mass-produced objects designed to meet a manufactured need are attributed to a single, named designer and limited in their production runs so as to stimulate consumption.

The great majority of a culture’s productions, Adorno argues, are artifacts. Artifactual status is thus not limited to Swedish furniture but extends all the way from Dale Earnhardt *memento mori* to *The Matrix: Reloaded*. However, even given the fact that almost all artistic productions in late modernity are artifacts and thus are essentially reproductive, Adorno acknowledges that real art objects can still be produced. The principal difference between these exceedingly rare art objects and artifacts is that, unlike artifacts that exist merely to

satisfy the artificially produced desires of the consumer, art objects actually resist the consumer's or subject's consumption of them (Adorno 1997b, 10). Real artworks stand as autonomous objects, disrupting their would-be consumer's desire to devour them as commodities.⁵ By stating that the work of art stand as an autonomous object, Adorno is not aligning himself exactly with Kant. Yes, he does insist upon the radical autonomy of the art object; but he also insists that this object—just like any other product of human technique—is the product and result of culture and of history; it was not originally without interest. As Adorno explains it, the art object is different from the artifact because it has a dialectical quality. The art object is, on the one hand, “a product of social labor” (5) and thus cannot escape its relation to the organization of society (Adorno 1978, 214). On the other hand, the art object must be seen as autonomous because its form cannot be reduced to an expression of a culture's mode of production but is, instead, something unique to and controlling of itself.

This, then, is the dual status of the artwork: it is, like the artifact, a product of culture but it is also, in its integrity, different from the culture that produced it. However, to fully understand the art object dialectically is to understand it in terms of its concept. For Adorno, this means understanding it in history. It is true, he maintains, that art objects did not always possess the autonomy they now enjoy. However, coincident with the Enlightenment's progressive emancipation of the subject, the artwork likewise gained in autonomy. Though art is social because of its relation to the mode of production, it is also (and much more importantly) social because of its opposition to society: real art is ruled by its own form, not by that of society (Adorno 1997b, 225). Art's journey to autonomy is too complex to treat here. However, this dual nature of the art object—that it is simultaneously product of society and opposed to society in its autonomy—is that which gives it, for Adorno, its revolutionary potential. Real art, as opposed to the culture industry's productions (of which propaganda is one instance), does not merely replicate the form of the dominant mode of production in which every thing is “heteronomously defined” and accepted immediately as fitting into the commodified landscape. Instead, real art is ruled by its own internal definition, which is different (and better) than the culture industry's. Because it is created in and as freedom, it asserts its own identity and particularity. As Adorno puts it in dialectic doublespeak: “art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society” (225).

It is in its asociality that art is seen as potentially liberatory: because it exists as a different and better order than the dominant order it is able to suggest a different order to its audience. However, this asociality and its commensurate power are identified by Adorno as possessed only by a very small percentage of artistic products. True art must be new—that is, different from the productions of the culture industry and the traditions that the culture industry has co-opted—but it must not be new in the sense of fashion in which only the outward appearance is changed. Thus neoclassical and fickle avant-garde gestures are

immediately excluded from Adorno's realm of real art. Likewise, following Benjamin, tradition's liberatory potential is seriously cast into doubt. What remains for Adorno is "genuine modern art," art measured by its negativity, by its "ever more complex rejections" of the dominant modes of expression" (Adorno 1973, 10). The hope for this real art is that, in its autonomy and complexity of form, it might serve as an example of another, better and potentially utopian way in which life may be lived (Adorno 1997b, 9). This will be a life that is not constituted and fulfilled by the vacuous demands of the culture industry. Art for Adorno is the outside and negation of the banal ontology of capitalism and its incessant and accelerating reproduction.

As was pointed out above, Dewey's social ontology is much richer than Adorno's. Whereas Adorno thinks that the way in which we know the world is almost totally informed by our culture's modes of production, Dewey is sure that we can enjoy a much richer experience of the world and that, through science and art, this richness can be revealed. Further, his hope is that, through this revelation, we can see our way to the creation of truly democratic institutions that are both reflective and productive of this understanding. A brief exposition of what art objects are for Dewey, how they transcend the status of propaganda, and the way in which their status relates to the unleashing of democratic potential may serve to clarify this point. For Dewey, art objects are a special class of aesthetic expressions. An aesthetic object is a specific ordering of experience that is appreciated for and gives pleasure by its perceived status as a summation of lived experience. The aesthetic object functions by representing an explicit and achieved equilibrium between an individual or a culture and the world, which is able to be understood and appreciated by the object's spectator. It is sedimented and interpreted experience. Not in contrast but in addition to its aesthetic functioning, the art object goes beyond merely representing the consummatory and ordered, and succeeds in representing the whole process of this achievement. As Dewey writes: "art, in its form, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy that makes an experience to be an experience" (Dewey 1934, 48).

The difference between the aesthetic and the artistic can be likened to the distinction that Adorno makes between the products of the culture industry and real art: it is the difference between monological and dialectical objects. In aesthetic experience "an object interpenetrated with meanings is given, [in it] tendencies are sensed as brought to fruition" (Dewey 1958, 374). Being a singular voice that speaks a truth about the conclusion of a particular series of events, the given, formed, and final aesthetic object is like a statement. It is raw experience digested and formed; it is perceived as a terminus and communicated as a monologue. As a beautiful cup or a well-designed chair represent solutions to certain problems of experience, those of thirst and repose, each is such a monologue. In that they also express certain crafted solutions to problems of experience, Nazi propaganda films like *Triumph of the Will* are also aesthetic objects.

The artistic object, in that it is also an aesthetic object, is a terminus. However, it is not a final terminus. Instead, art represents the conclusion and interpretation of an experience while simultaneously communicating suggestions about new experience. Art “grasps tendencies as possibilities.” Because the art object is never an ultimate statement but instead extends an invitation to the creation and achievement of further meanings, its existence and effect is dialogical and is never finished (374). The dialogical function of art—its role as translator between experience and experiencer—is what makes it productive of new perceptions and new meanings. Excellent art thus reveals the full richness of an experience and points forward to the next one.

Because Dewey’s real art, as opposed to merely aesthetic objects, exceeds the consummatory and yields the causally productive, it can, like Adorno’s real art, inform and liberate subsequent action. Given the ability of art to give form to past experience as well as its capacity to suggest multiple possibilities for future action, art, as Dewey says, does appear to be an ideal communicative vehicle, one that could inform a democratic and free public if only its appearances could be recognized and encouraged. As such, the existence of art provides a real alternative to propaganda if it could succeed in touching and informing subjects at a deeper level. And, indeed, Dewey does believe that art can reach this deeper level because, if done well, it “breaks through the crust of conventionalized consciousness” (Dewey 1927, 183) and allows real and relevant information about our experience—in all its richness—to be revealed.

Art, because it communicates instead of just dictates, presents itself for Dewey as a solution to the problem of how to present information that exceeds the “asseverated Truths” proffered by propaganda, by aesthetic productions that endlessly repeat the same and thereby reinforce existing structures. Art for Dewey is not just the ideal vehicle for communication, it is the ideal of communication. It allows one to communicate one’s lived experience fully and to suggest new possibilities for experience. Further, art understood as an ideal of communication informs the very possibility of a community’s self-awareness. The existence of an artistic culture is thus the necessary prerequisite for a democratic and free culture to come into its own. As Dewey writes, “the arts are not adornments of culture but things in whose enjoyment all should partake if democracy is to be a reality” (Dewey 1939, 9).

At least as Dewey conceptualizes democracy from the standpoint of society as the “liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common [to it],” his argument that art must be understood as a basic requirement for democratic culture is, I think, a valid one (Dewey 1927, 147). This is true insofar as meaningful communication—of the sort only art can convey—is a prerequisite for any such community to understand its common interests (152). With some reservation, I might even follow Dewey and grant his exceptional claim that true art—inasmuch as it is the reflection of experience—demands democracy. However, I am reluctant to

do so because I recognize that Adorno is much more accurate than Dewey in his depiction of late capitalist culture as something that endlessly reproduces itself and whose products, demanding less work on the part of their consumer than real art, are the only way in which the culture knows itself and its possibilities (or lack thereof). Difficult messages—those that are both consummatory and revelatory—simply cannot be digested and understood by the overwhelming majority of the population. Most seek and desire only the consummatory and these are supplied in abundance by the culture industry. That which does not provide immediate fulfillment of partially articulated desires is rejected. “Conventionalized consciousness,” Dewey’s derisory phrase for the great mass of human being’s superficial opinions and judgments, is comfortable consciousness; and it may indeed be an illusion that masks a deeper underlying ontological richness. However, as long as there is no immediate need, as long as the world can be kept at a distance, artworks that portray an occluded or merely different world will also be kept at a distance. The work of creating real public opinion through the creation and dissemination of art is not ever entertained as an option.

In the above critique, I place my own views closer to those of Adorno regarding the relationship between art and politics than I do to those of Dewey. However, what I wrote in the last paragraph probably does not deserve the status of critique because I fundamentally agree with Dewey about what art should be and only disagree with him about its potential. In point of fact, I do not even think that there is that great a difference between Adorno’s and Dewey’s definitions of real art nor between the distinction that can be made, using these definitions, between art and propaganda. What seems their chief disparity—Adorno’s art object’s radical autonomy from culture and experience versus Dewey’s insistence that the art object be seen as revelatory of experience—is collapsed by the realization that the autonomy of which Adorno speaks for the art object just means that it is different from the hollow forms created by the culture industry. In this difference it (just like Dewey’s art object) reveals something richer than an easily digestible lie that comfortably fits into the crust of conventionalized consciousness. So then, I would argue that both philosophers are narrowly correct in their identification of what art is or what art might be: art is human fashioned objects that point to new ways of relating to our selves, our society, and our world and that do not repeat or compound the problems of late modernity. Propaganda, by way of contrast, is artistic products that limit the ways in which we relate to our selves, our society, and our world.

In that most objects produced today circumscribe our experience rather than enrich it or suggest new modes of experiencing, the great majority of contemporary human production may rightly be placed in the latter category. Despite, then, my fundamental agreement with both philosophers about what true art is and how it can be distinguished from propaganda, I tend to place my own views more fully on Adorno’s side in regard to the potential effect of art on

politics because of his insistence that real art is difficult and that it is not easily communicated. But even difficult art, Adorno would insist, is possibly liberatory and productive of democracy. Given his own terms and protests to the contrary, though, I do not understand how this could be the case. Adorno fervently wishes to believe that art is a “determinate negation,” that it reveals a different order than that produced by the culture industry (Adorno and Horkheimer 1994, 24, 18). As such, it promises to be a real move away from the culture industry and toward real freedom and real democracy (Adorno 1989a, 135). However, a move to novelty is not necessarily a move to democracy and does not guarantee freedom. Art, Adorno maintains, is specifically not for everybody; it is difficult and it requires leisure and intelligence to be able to understand it. If one was to take Adorno’s idea of perfect form, newness, and autonomy and to, say, apply it to the city of Paris, one might end up with something like Le Corbusier’s *Plan Voisin*: a rational construct that little satisfies the needs of a real public and the creation would require that tremendous violence be visited on that public for its realization. I realize that this is all in line with a certain tradition of Marxism but it does not necessarily seem compatible with democracy understood as rule by the many for the common good or freedom understood as self-determination of individuals and communities.

Yet I am still drawn to Adorno’s aesthetics, especially as it is presented in his later works. In these, he marks out a space for art that does not make of it a vulgar vehicle for democratic enlightenment. Instead, he confines it to a very elite, if not strictly personal, sphere. This tendency is particularly evident in *Minima Moralia*, but is perhaps more accessible through his writings on jazz. Many seem to revile these texts (Nye 1998, 69–73), but I find them particularly illuminative of the status of art in late capitalism. Though he may overstate his case out of ignorance of the variety of forms that jazz took at the middle of the twentieth century, Adorno correctly specifies that most jazz and other popular musical forms only act out the drama of individuality and freedom to sell a product (Adorno 1989b, 201). For this, he rightfully castigates it. Adorno, however, demands more of art than just seeming to be free: he demands that it *be* free. He thus dismisses jazz as art because the jazz of which he was aware was formulaic in both production and consumption. However, according to him, so was most classical music, the difference between the two genres being that classical music follows traditional formulas and jazz formulates false novelty.

But what about Lester Young, Albert Ayler, or Ornette Coleman? Mustn’t these musicians in their innovation and integrity at least represent true jazz and real art? Well, they probably do achieve this level and if you had a few spare minutes and could convince Adorno to come over to your apartment to listen to some records you could probably convince him that what he was hearing was indeed art, that it does more than repeat and reinforce cultural norms. It is even possible that he might derive some pleasure from this listening and recognize that the music in its autonomy and radical freedom represents the possibility of

liberation from the vulgar ontology of the culture industry. However, it is also true that, insofar as these or any other true artistic expressions become popular and become commodified, the tensions inherent in the work are ignored and lost.⁶ Think of the transitions from Malcom X's rhetoric to Malcom X baseball caps, from Schönberg's *Farben* in 1911 as Adorno heard it to the *Farben* one hears as transition music during National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." It may be possible to recover novelty and tension in a great work, but this takes effort. It is so much easier to consume it like a philistine. This makes it functionally no better than propaganda, though at a formal level—as I have argued—such a distinction can be made. Dewey's point that the world is rich and that it demands art that is able to explain and embody this richness may be a correct one. That such art might exist I may even grant. Its liberatory and progressive political potential, however, I would cast into doubt. The contemporary palate has been fed so long on pabulum that it cannot stomach difficult works except as commodities that have been vetted and digested for them in advance.

Notes

1. See Sontag 1975; Kracauer 1947, 29; Hinton 1978; and Sarris 1996, 45.
2. It is hard now not to see Leni Riefenstahl's film as the first half of a double bill with Alan Resnais' *Night and Fog* rounding out the matinee. Observe, for instance, that Ray Müller chose in his documentary *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (Germany, 1993) to splice concentration camp footage into his interviews with Riefenstahl and clips of her films.
3. For insights regarding the audience reception of *Triumph of the Will* and other films mentioned in this article, I am indebted to students in my "Philosophy and Film" courses at The Pennsylvania State and Georgetown Universities. Instrumental also in shaping the final form of the piece were professors at Skidmore College who heard this paper presented in their spring 2000 series of colloquia; and John Stuhr and Vincent Colapietro, who made suggestions about the paper in its various drafts.
4. For Adorno's critique of identity see Dews 1989, 1–22. On this critique's relation to subjectivity and politics, see Schoolman 1997, 57–92.
5. For extended considerations of the autonomy of the art object, see Harding 1992, 83–195; Hohendahl 1981, 133–48.
6. Adorno certainly notices this problem. For instance, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* he notes that the "use value" of art (that which it actually does by virtue of its autonomy) is lost and replaced by its exchange value (that which it can sell for) because it was previously valued in culture (Adorno and Horkheimer 1994, 158).

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