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ADORNO AND PRACTICALLY USELESS ART, OR AUTONOMY INSTEAD OF AVANT-GARDE

Abstract: Adorno's aesthetic theory allows us to treat him as an anti-theorist of the avant-garde. We can find in his work many accurate observations grasping the essence of the changes that were introduced by this artistic formation. Adorno himself used the term "avant-garde" in a slightly different meaning – as denoting artistic production going against the traditional aesthetic tastes, but also resistance to commercialization and reification. In the context of Adorno's whole philosophy such resistance is illusory. The mechanisms governing the sphere of culture are total and efficiently pacify any aesthetic rebellions. Therefore, it is not in the formal experiments that Adorno saw the rebellion of art against the existing system. According to the German philosopher, the critical function of art – its main vocation – is realized in the antithetic attitude to reality and is due to the so-called "ideal of transformation". And those are only conditioned by the autonomy of art. In the present paper I discuss the points in Adorno's aesthetic theory at which he shows art as autonomous.

Keywords: Adorno, autonomy, logic of art, content of art.

The aesthetic heritage of Theodor W. Adorno is discussed from many different interpretative perspectives. So, for example, especially the English-speaking authors often place it somewhere between the subjective aesthetics of Kant and the objective aesthetics of Hegel.¹ This interesting approach requires that the binding notional distinctions in the traditional paradigm of aesthetics are respected. However, the main intention of Adorno was not so much to go beyond this paradigm, as to lift it. Probably for this reason a far more widely used strategy is to place him in the context of the discussion on avant-garde art and to treat him as its theoretician,² especially in the area of the theory of music he had been involved in since the

¹ See: S. Jarvis, *Adorno. A Critical Introduction*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 90-123; and also R. Wilson, *Aesthetics*, in: *Theodor Adorno. Key Concepts*, (red.) D. Cook, Cromwell Press 2008, pp. 147-160

² Adorno's aesthetic theory is one of the main points Peter Bürger is referring to in his *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974). In the Polish literature this perspective is present, among others, in Liliana Bieszczad in *Kryzys pojęcia sztuki* (2003); and also in Beata Frydryczak in *Estetyka oporu* (1995).

earliest years of his career in music journalism. By the age of thirty he had to his name nearly a hundred articles mostly devoted to musical criticism, published in recognized professional journals (*Zeitschrift für Musik*, *Die Musik*, *Pult und Taktstock*, and *Musikblätter des Anbruch*, among others).³

Lucia Sziborsky claims that the key musicological categories, whose theory was developed by Adorno – especially the category of ‘musical material’, and also the question of the relation between the subject and the object in music – are perfect for the description and interpretation of the works of the musical avant-garde created by the members of the so-called second Vienna school represented by three composers: Arnold Schönberg, Anton Webern and Alban Berg. On the other hand, Günter Anders describes Adorno as “undoubtedly the most outstanding and competent philosopher of music since the Pythagorean metaphysicians”.⁴

However, it seems that the “undoubtedness” of this opinion is a bit too far-reaching, as it has its outstanding opponents. Carl Dahlhaus, for example, claimed that although the theory of Adorno’s “new music” had some impact on the development of 20th century composition, it only lasted for a short time. Also Arnold Schönberg questioned the theoretical interpretations that the philosopher of music proposed for his works.⁵

Because of my lack of musical competence, I admit that I am not able to settle this controversy. However, the aesthetic theory of Adorno cannot be restricted to the area of music only. It constitutes a general theory of art and thus it can be applied to the description and interpretation of the whole area of creative activity, including that of the historical avant-garde. Adorno’s theory of artworks matches the avant-garde concept of the non-organic work of art, which was convincingly shown by Peter Bürger.⁶

On the nearly 700 pages of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, the term “avant-garde” appears only eight times, in its most ordinary sense – as an antonym to ‘the traditional, backward, obscure, and regressive’. Adorno definitely values avant-garde art positively, but he gives this name only to the art that meets the slightly different criteria than those defined by the theoreticians researching the avant-garde as a specific artistic historical formation. His concept of a non-organic artwork, resulting from the more general research strategy – the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, concerns not only the formal issues. It introduces the perception of art as a critique of the existing reality. This strategy may be applied to the whole domain of art: to art created not only in a particular historical period, but throughout the ages.

³ R. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School. Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, transl. M. Robertson, Polity Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 70.

⁴ See: L. Sziborsky, *Teoria estetyczna Adorna – teoria awangardy?*, in: „Sztuka i Filozofia” 1994, no 8, 1994, p. 19-40.

⁵ See K. Sauerland, *Dahlhaus a Adorno*, in: *Muzykalia II - 2008 - Materiały konferencyjne 2*, website: demusica.pl (27.07.2017).

⁶ P. Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt 1974.

The leading motif of Adorno's aesthetics is the principal question of truth in art. His *Aesthetic theory* shows art in the historical process of having to reach for increasingly dissonant and formally disharmonious materials.⁷ This obviously makes it easier to associate it with the artistic avant-garde, one of whose intentions was to go against the aesthetic tastes of the bourgeois audience. For Adorno this process is, most of all, an about-face performed by art to free itself from the increasingly tight grip of the cultural industry, degrading it to the status of a commodity, and thus forcing it to reproduce the ruling ideology masking the oppressive mechanisms controlling the social reality. This is the diagnosis that Adorno and Horkheimer gave in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* to contemporary culture, writing about the "administered" and "reified" world, dominated by "instrumental reason" and "the exchange principle."⁸ In order to avoid the degradation to commerce and to protect its status of the last bastion of truth about the external reality, art had to renounce beauty – understood as a harmonious set of sensory elements. In other words, what was smooth, harmonious and easy in consumption has been replaced with the rough, shapeless and resistant.

Already in his *Philosophy of New Music* Adorno, citing Clement Greenberg, wrote that art has split into kitsch and the avant-garde, adding that

(...) kitsch – the dictatorship of profit over art – has long since subjugated the particular, socially reserved sphere of art. This is why reflections on the development of truth in aesthetic objectivity must be confined uniquely to the avant-garde, which is excluded from official culture.⁹

Let us note, however, that defining kitsch as "dictatorship of profit over culture" we do not say anything about the properties of a given kitsch item, but only about its functioning in its cultural setting. The avant-garde, considered here as an inverse of kitsch, is reduced to the sphere of artistic activity that cannot find its place in the official culture. It cannot find its place there because it was expelled from it or managed to escape it. It seemed that art would be able to escape from the official culture by renouncing its "culinary" aspect – being prone to consumption. However, even in the late 1940s Adorno's writings already reveal his conviction that avant-garde's formal revolutions will not protect art from subordination to the logic of the market. Thus the avant-garde – and all art – is dying, inevitably turning into an object of consumption, and ultimately losing its emancipative functions.

⁷ I have discussed this process more broadly elsewhere. See: *Duch sztuki i obietnica nie do spełnienia. W poszukiwaniu pozytywnych konkluzji „Teorii estetycznej” Adorna*, in: „Sztuka i filozofia” 2006, no 28, pp. 151-163.

⁸ See, Th. W. Adorno, with M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated E. Jephcott, Stanford UP 2002.

⁹ Th.W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, translated and edited Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 13.

It does not lose such potential, however. Given an appropriate theory, it may play the functions expected by Adorno – reveal the truth about the social reality and break free from “the administered world”, dominated by instrumental rationality. This can be achieved by art only when it becomes autonomous. Dubbed “the last mandarin of modernism”, Adorno owes this label not only to his elitist expectations of highest-quality artistic craftsmanship, but also, or perhaps primarily, to the fact that he was one of the last so influential defenders of the thesis of the autonomy of art.¹⁰ This thesis assumes that, by setting its own rules, art secures for itself a space free from the determinants of the reality that we know from our everyday experience.

In order to explain Adorno’s construction of the category of autonomy I propose to start with the general assumption which – as I have argued elsewhere – makes the core of his whole philosophy of art.¹¹ Nearly all of his writings on aesthetics reveal the underlying belief that the social character and the social role of art consists in its antithetical stance towards the external reality. Art becomes an antithesis to the world by distancing itself from it, drifting away from reality. How does art achieve this distance? What makes artworks recognizable as antithetical to the existing social reality? The shortest answer to this question is: art’s distance from and antitheticality to the world is determined by its substance, or content. The German philosopher claims that every artwork has its own individual objective content independent of the recipient. Thus the readings of the work and the interpretations it is given do not modify its content. Adorno equates this objective content with the logic of art, which he describes as a certain obscure consistency characterizing the individual creations, similar to the logic of dreams. When we recount our dreams after awakening, sometimes they seem absurd even to ourselves, as contradictory to the logical sequencing of events that we experience in our daily life. However, despite this contradiction, the events we have dreamed of appear to us to be convincingly embedded in their temporal context. The logic of art also provides us with a seemingly wider palette of solutions; i.e. there is no simple entailment that is typical for the classical logic.

Abandoning the ambition to generate unequivocal entailments and precise specifications makes the logic of art somewhat loose. This does not yet mean that it is completely deprived of any power of determination. For example, the logic of art defines and determines the objectiveness of its creations. Owing to the logic of art, artworks are what they are; it constitutes a work as an exceptional and specific one. It is thanks to the logic of art that artworks become “a second nature” or “a second world”, as Adorno has called them – the same, but also different.¹² The

¹⁰ See: *Adorno: między moderną a postmoderną*, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska (ed.), Warszawa-Poznań 1991.

¹¹ See: R. Czekaj, *Krytyczna teoria sztuki Th. W. Adorna*, Kraków 2013.

¹² Th.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated and edited Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 138.

same – because certain formal categories of art, such as time, space, or causality are also the categories of the empirical world. But it is already a different world, because in the empirical world those categories occur as forms of dominance, as everything is embedded and administered in time and space. Everything is also precisely regulated by the laws of causation. However, in artworks, these laws, or forms of dominance – as they are called by Adorno – undergo modification. Art exposes us to a different world.

This seems quite obvious. Let us take the category of time. In reality, time passes relentlessly and it strictly determines the order of events. But in art time can be freely modified: it can be condensed, stretched, or completely stopped. In the real world, time, space and causality occur as something inevitable and irreversible. But – as Adorno puts it – art can revoke the inevitable. Art is completely free to use those forms. Adorno writes that the world constituted by art is admittedly composed of elements coming from the empirical world, external to art, but this does not involve a simple transfer or mapping. “There is nothing in art that does not derive from the world; and yet all that thus enters art is transformed.”¹³ When it comes to the “forms of dominance”, their transfer to art results in their subordination to its special logic and, as a consequence, these forms lose their apodictic character and cease to be what they were in the external world – they are no longer forms of dominance. In this sense, an artwork is a second world, but at the same time one with a negative attitude towards the original.

Such an approach is extremely valuable to Adorno, as it allows him to treat art as a kind of an agent playing against what the philosopher contended with in all of his writings: the dominance of instrumental reason. The modifications of the forms of dominance in art are not confined only to them; they also extend to the principle that controls and uses them. Such forms as time, space, and causality are consistent with the model of instrumental rationality predominating in the world, and when art revokes their inevitability and undermines their assertiveness, it also seems to revoke the rationality that rules over those forms.

The logic of art differs from the logic of instrumental rationality, and if an artwork is able to embody this difference, it demonstrates the existence of a logic different from that obtaining in our everyday experience, and of a rationality different from what we take for granted in everyday life. This difference rests on the freedom from the tyranny of instrumental rationality in our personal and perhaps primarily social life. The difference cannot, however, be rendered in art in terms of a simple analogy. We would be dealing with analogy if coercion and dominance were simply mapped in art, and if an artwork communicated them directly. In this case, the artwork would be only replicating what it should contest. Imitative art would have to absorb these forms of dominance such as they really

¹³ Ibid.

are; they would not undergo any modifications – their assertiveness and inevitability would not be revoked. In consequence, coercion and dominance would not be eliminated from the second world, and without such elimination the very existence of such world – a different reality – would not be even possible to imagine. This is one of the reasons why Adorno claims that the content of an “authentic artwork”, which makes the artwork antithetical to the external reality, cannot be expressed literally and directly; it cannot be reduced to the “plot” of the work, i.e. the story it is telling; if treated in this way, art would be degraded to the status of “a clattering machinery demonstrating world views”.¹⁴

One may point out three factors ensuring the autonomy of art within Adorno’s theory of aesthetics. First, autonomous art does not copy the mechanisms governing the external reality (cf. Adorno’s criticism of literal expression in art presented above). This comes down to the often quoted principle, which Adorno formulates as follows: “the communication of artworks with what is external to them (...) occurs through noncommunication.”¹⁵ He rated so highly the work of Samuel Beckett and Arnold Schönberg precisely because they rejected communicative language – narrative prose and tonal music, respectively – as the medium of art. Secondly, art is competent to set its own rules. It is autonomous when it acts on this competence, although it does not draw these rules out of nothing – *ex nihilo*, but modifies the ones that obtain in the world external to art. This is the so-called “ideal of transformation”, coming down to the already cited statement that there is nothing in art that does not come from the world, but at the same time everything is transformed. Thirdly, autonomy means independence from the rules external to it.

This last requirement seems at the first glance rather problematic. For art to prove its autonomy, it has to extract itself from the social conditioning to which it is nevertheless subordinated, and which it can never really escape. Here we come to Adorno’s philosophical method which, in short, consists in constructing constellations out of pairs of antithetical concepts. It does not seem possible to talk about beauty without talking about its antithesis – ugliness. It is the same with autonomy. Talking about autonomy – and what is more – wishing to view it as a condition of the social role of art, Adorno must talk about art as heteronomous at the same time. In *Aesthetic Theory* he describes an artwork as “something for itself”, but, at the same time, as a “social fact”. One seems to exclude the other, as Adorno perfectly realized, writing that “their double character is manifest at every point; they change and contradict themselves”.¹⁶

¹⁴ Th.W. Adorno, *Trying to Understand “Engage”*, in: “New German Critique”, No. 26, Spring-Summer, 1982, p. 120: this opposition towards expressing specific thesis and messages in art situates Adorno in the opposition to such proponents of political and social engagement of an artist as, at least, Sartre or earlier Brecht.

¹⁵ Th.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory...*, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

In order to better observe this interdependence between the social role of art and its autonomy and heteronomy, I propose to consider Adorno's claim that in the context of advanced capitalism the autonomy of art has undergone fetishization. The accusation is directed mainly at aestheticism and "the pure art" – or "art for art's sake" – concept it promotes. Such criticism has been raised by the proponents of so-called socially useful art, and Adorno supports this stance. He claims that the critics are correct in noting that the "fetishization" of the concept of "pure artwork" makes the artworks, which are in fact social products, close themselves up against their social background and the reality they belong to. In this way they only simulate their independence from the modes and mechanisms of the external world. Thus, every piece of "pure art" may be accused of spreading false consciousness and criticized for its ideological bias. The *l'art pour l'art* slogan promoted the ideal of beauty in opposition to society that is of little interest to aestheticism. It took the form of an antithesis: the beauty of art on the one side and the ugliness of the society on the other. But – rather paradoxically – this neo-Romantic autarchy of beauty, its exalted declarative resentment towards the social made art an easy target of market mechanisms. There are no aesthetic rebellions that would not burn in the hell of the pop culture. This says a lot about the aporetic situation of art. If it derogates from its autonomy, i.e. it renounces its competence to set its own rules, then it dooms itself to the replication of the external mechanisms responsible for the contemporary world, whose pivotal moment was the barbarity of WW II. But on the other hand, when art is clinging to its autonomy, when it shuts itself off from the world and remains something for itself only, there is no guarantee that it will not be integrated into the existing system as yet another tame craft, harmless for the system, becoming a silent accomplice for the mechanisms it should contest.

Accusing art of absolutizing its own autonomy, however, has its reverse side. Although the charge was correct when art was faulted for reinforcing the ideological character of its works and leaving the world to itself, in a sense it is also misguided: it is precisely art's fetishized autonomy, its closure against the world that allows us to see the important truth about art. This truth comes down to the constataion that an artwork, being something "only for itself" is, at the same time, an antithesis of "being for something else". This "being for something else" is the realization of the exchange principle – one of the hidden forms of the dominance of instrumental reason. An artwork *feigning* its own autonomy, or *simulating* its being only for itself, goes against this principle. Of course, it is hard to negotiate the fact that art is a part of reality, the reality in which all relations are defined by the rules of market economy. Art is produced, distributed and consumed like any other commodity, but the difference is that an artwork seems to be living its own life. Its form creates an enclave free from the rules and principles that govern and determine the social reality. I believe that such is the sense of Adorno's statement often quoted in the discussion on the relations between art and society: he claims

that “insofar as a social function can be predicted for artworks, it is their functionlessness.”¹⁷ The “functionlessness” of art is understood pragmatically. Adorno regards as authentic only those artworks which seem to have no clear purpose. Their practical uselessness is manifested in their autonomy.

Adorno can thus be said to have reached a kind of rotten compromise with the claims of the radical aestheticism. He needs it, as under the reign of instrumental rationality, this uselessness of artworks renders them as islands of irrationality in the ocean of the rational world – if I can use such a metaphor. In other words, the practical uselessness of art undermines the monopoly and hegemony of the instrumental reason. An artwork understood in this way – as a thing among other things – appears as a slightly *Wallenrodian*¹⁸ saboteur:

the more the artwork's own organization assimilates itself to a logical order by virtue of its inner exactitude, the more obviously the difference between the artwork's logicity and the logicity that governs empirically becomes the parody of the latter; the more reasonable the work becomes in terms of its formal constitution, the more ridiculous it becomes according to the standard of empirical reason. Its ridiculousness is, however, also part of a condemnation of empirical rationality; it accuses the rationality of social praxis of having become an end in itself and as such the irrational and mad reversal of means into ends.¹⁹

Let us remember the diagnosis that Adorno gave to the contemporary culture. We are living in the world where everything is meant for something. It seems unthinkable that something with no application could exist: something that could not be used as a tool and a means for a certain purpose. By consolidating itself as autonomous, art becomes a broken link in the endless chain of means and purposes along which our instrumental reason makes us follow. An artwork displays a world in which the tools, the forms of dominance, and the procedures of instrumental rationality are suspended. An artwork creates a space in which the rules governing the external reality are presented as arbitrary. As arbitrary, they may be liable to reconfiguration. Therefore, art suggests to us that it is possible to change the existing conditions.

Autonomous art – viewed from such perspective – does not convey any positive messages, generate any positive programme or opt for any specific position. Adorno denies art the right to such practices in order to whip it away from the magic circle

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁸ Konrad Wallenrod – a character from a poem by the Polish literary prophet, Adam Mickiewicz. Wallenrod, as a Lithuanian child found himself under the care of the Teutonic knights. Under their protection he reached the position of the Grand Master of the Order. Simulating loyalty to his adopted homeland, he actually realized a pro-Lithuanian political agenda.

¹⁹ Th.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory...*, p. 119.

of communication. Each positive performance, each positive statement requires the use of formulaic and formatted means of communication, which precludes going beyond the established order. Only the art that rejects communication, by the very fact of being art, is able to delineate the space free from the dominance of instrumental reason and rationality of aims.

The lack of a positive program in the content of art is also reflected in the model of its social engagement. Art is deprived of the chance to conduct a dialogue on concrete issues. On the other hand, however, this is how it preserves its “purity” – in its constitution an artwork remains independent and free from the external reality. However, remaining “a thing among other things” it is still subjected to the laws and mechanisms of the market. It is in this hybrid of autonomy and heteronomy that Adorno locates the social function of art. In the world where every-thing exists for something, something exists just for itself: a broken link in the rationality of purposes, whose omnipotence is limited by the “practically useless” art.

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ADORNO I PRAKTYCZNIE BEZUŻYTECZNA SZTUKA, CZYLI AUTONOMIA ZAMIAST AWANGARDY (streszczenie)

Teoria estetyczna Adorna pozwala na traktowanie go jako teoretyka awangardy. Znajdziemy u niego wiele trafnych analiz dotyczących istoty zmian, jakie wprowadziła ze sobą ta formacja artystyczna. Sam Adorno jednak używał terminu „awangarda” w nieco szerszym znaczeniu – jako produkcja artystyczna, która nie tylko łamie tradycyjne gusta estetyczne, ale także stawia opór komercjalizacji i reifikacji. W kontekście całej filozofii Adorna taki opór jest jednak iluzoryczny. Mechanizmy rządzące sferą kultury są totalne i skutecznie pacyfikują wszelkie bunty estetyczne. Dlatego to nie w formalnych eksperymentach Adorno widział rebelię sztuki przeciwko panującemu systemowi. Funkcja krytyczna sztuki – wedle frankfurczyka naczelne jej powołanie – spełnia się w antytecznym stosunku do rzeczywistości i dzięki tzw. ideałowi przetworzenia. Ich warunkiem z kolei jest autonomia sztuki. W niniejszym tekście przedstawiam te momenty teorii estetycznej Adorna, w których ukazuje on sztukę jako autonomiczną właśnie.

Słowa kluczowe: Adorno, autonomia, logika sztuki, treść sztuki.