

## Art, Romanticism & Metaphysics 7

Gadamer, Adorno, Lyotard

Gadamer: art as the paradigm of extra-scientific truth; the error of 'aesthetic differentiation'. Adorno: the negative metaphysical truth-content of avant-garde art. Lyotard: avant-garde/postmodern art as the 'presentation of the unrepresentable'.

### Main reading

- H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd & revised edn. (1st edn. 1975, 2nd edn. 1989), trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall (Shed & Ward: London, 1993), pp. xxi-xxxviii, and Part I, 'The question of truth as it emerges in the experience of art', esp. pp. 81-121.
- T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). For a short introduction, see the extracts from ch. 12 reprinted in chapter 14 of *The Adorno Reader*, ed. B. O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). If possible read the following sections from *Aesthetic Theory* {chapter and sections refer to the translation by C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); page numbers refer to the translation by R. Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), which is faithful to Adorno's text}:
  - ch. 1 / pp. 1-15 (art, society, aesthetics)
  - ch. 2 sect. 4 / pp. 18-19 (art and suffering)
  - ch. 7 sects. 3-16 / pp. 119-36 (enigmaticalness, truth-content, metaphysics)
  - ch. 8 / pp. 136-63 (coherence and meaning: logicality, purposiveness, form)
  - ch. 12 / pp. 225-61 (society).
  - Draft introduction: Appendix III / pp. 332-59 (the possibility and task of aesthetics)
- J.-F. Lyotard, 'Answering the question: what is postmodernism?' (1982), Appendix to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

### Further reading

- H. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward A Critique Of Marxist Aesthetics* (1977) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978). Another Frankfurt School work, echoing some of Adorno's ideas.
- J.-F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1988), trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), chs. 6-9. Fuller account of Lyotard's aesthetics.
- A. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, ch. 1. On the ontological status of works of art, with specific reference to the puzzle of avant-garde works.

### Commentary on Gadamer:

- P. Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, ch. 2.

### Commentary on Adorno:

- ? R. Geuss, review of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, *Journal of Philosophy* 83, 1986, 732-41.
- ? R. Geuss, 'Art and criticism in Adorno's aesthetics', *European Journal of Philosophy* 6, 1998, 297-317.
- ? M. Jay, *Adorno*, ch. 4.
- ? S. Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, chs. 4-5.
- D. Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*, ch. 3. Introduction to the aesthetics of the Frankfurt school.
- ? A. Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, Conclusion.
- A. Savile, 'Beauty and truth', in R. Shusterman ed., *Analytic Aesthetics*.

- P. Bürger, *Theory of The Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw, chs. 3-5. Argument that Adorno has misunderstood the purpose of avant-garde art.
- A. Wellmer, 'Truth, semblance, reconciliation: Adorno's aesthetic redemption of modernity', *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism*.
- A. Wellmer, 'Metaphysics at the moment of its fall', pp. 35-41, in P. Collier and H. Geyer-Ryan eds., *Literary Theory Today*. Compressed but authoritative statement of Adorno's relation to metaphysics.
- T. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, ch. 13.
- J. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, chs. 4-5.
- P. Hohendahl, *Reappraisals*, ch. 3. (Ch. 2, a comparison of Adorno with Lukàcs, is also relevant.)

### Essay questions

- Discuss critically Adorno's account of the truth-content of art.

### Gadamer, Truth and Method

- '[T]he following investigation starts with a critique of aesthetic consciousness in order to defend the experience of truth that comes to us through the work of art', viz. of a 'mode of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science'.
- 'It is a question of recognizing in it [experience of art] an experience of truth that not only needs to be justified philosophically, but which is itself a way of doing philosophy.'
- 'The sovereignty of aesthetic consciousness consists in its capacity to make this aesthetic differentiation everywhere and to see everything "aesthetically" ... through "aesthetic differentiation" the work loses its place and the world to which it belongs insofar as it belongs instead to aesthetic consciousness.'
- 'the aesthetic myth of imagination and the invention of genius is ... an exaggeration that does not stand up to reality'; 'For a cultured society that has fallen away from its religious traditions expects more from art than aesthetic consciousness and the "the standpoint of art" can deliver.'
- 'how one can do justice to the truth of aesthetic experience [Erfahrung] and overcome the radical subjectivization of the aesthetic that began with Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgement ... [The post-Kantian] demand for aesthetic abstraction ran into indissoluble contradiction with the true experience of art.'
- 'Is there to be no knowledge in art? Does not the experience of art contain a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science, but just as certainly not inferior to it? And is not the task of aesthetics precisely to ground the fact that the experience of art is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind ... If we want to justify art as a way of truth in its own right, then we must fully realize what truth means here ... we hope to better understand what kind of truth it is that encounters us there.'
- 'understanding [of art] is never a subjective relation to a given "object" but to the history of its effect; in other words, understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood ... understanding belongs to the encounter with the work of art itself, and so this belonging can be illuminated only on the basis of the mode of being of the work of art itself'
- 'I select an idea that has played a major role in aesthetics: the concept of play. I wish to free this concept of the subjective meaning that it has in Kant and Schiller ... When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself.'
- 'I call this change, in which human play comes to its true consummation in being art, transformation into

structure ... transformation means that something is suddenly and as a whole something else, that this other transformed thing it has become is its true being, in comparison with which its earlier being is nil ... The transformation is a transformation into the true. It is not enchantment in the sense of bewitchment ... rather, it is itself redemption ... The world of the work of art, in which play expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact a wholly transformed world. In and through it everyone recognises that that is how things are ... From this viewpoint [of transformation] "reality" is defined as what is untransformed, and art as the raising up (Aufhebung) of this reality into its truth.'

– 'Thus imitation ... has a special cognitive function. For this reason, the concept of imitation sufficed for the theory of art as long as the cognitive significance of art went unquestioned ... By contrast, for nominalistic modern science and its idea of reality, from which Kant drew agnostic consequences for aesthetics, the concept of mimesis has lost its aesthetic force. Once the aporias of this subjective turn in aesthetics have become evident to us, we are forced to return to the older tradition.'

– 'The world that appears in the play of presentation does not stand like a copy next to the real world, but is that world in the heightened truth of its being ... The concept of mimesis ... did not mean a copy so much as the appearance of what is presented. Without being imitated in the work, the world does not exist as it exists in the work. It is not there as it is there in the work ... The ontological interwovenness of original and reproduced being ...'

### T. W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory

Rejection of hedonic conceptions of art: 'What ordinary language and conformist aesthetics have termed enjoyment of art, on analogy with real enjoyment, has probably never existed and will probably never exist ... If we must discuss attitudes to works of art at all, it is probably correct to say that the traditional attitude was not one of enjoyment, but of admiration ... What the viewer noticed in them and what enraptured him was their truth.'

Rejection of empiricism in aesthetics: 'the effort, under the pressure of the nominalist situation [of modern science], to make a transition to what has been called empirical aesthetics, is in vain ... the results would be incomparably meager when compared with the substantive and incisive categories of the speculative systems ... All aesthetic questions terminate in those of the truth content of artworks: Is the spirit that that a work objectively bears in its specific form true? For empiricism this is, as superstition, anathema. For it, artworks are mere bundles of indeterminate stimuli ... As a result, the actual object of aesthetics escapes study.'

Psychoanalytic approach to art: 'If art is sanctioned exclusively as sublimation, as a means for the maintenance of psychic economy, its truth content is contravened and art lingers on only as a pious deception.'

Aesthetic subjectivism as ideological: 'industry ... cultivates art as a natural reserve for irrationalism, from which thought is to be excluded. It thereby allies itself with the platitude – a bowdlerized theorem of aesthetics – that art must be a direct object of pleasure ... The result of this mentality is a bloated concept of naïveté. In the domain of pure feeling ... a taboo is placed on anything akin to logicity ... Feeling thus becomes its own opposite: it is reified ... Art without reflection is the retrospective fantasy of a reflexive age.'

– 'Even a university-certified schoolmaster would hesitate to apply to prose such as Kafka's *Metamorphosis* or *The Penal Colony*, in which the secure aesthetic distance to the object is shockingly undermined, a sanctioned criterion such as that of disinterested satisfaction.'

Abandonment of Kant's standpoint: 'aesthetics is obliged to renounce the concept of taste, in which the

claim of art to truth is in danger of coming to a miserable end. The guilt lies with previous aesthetics that, by virtue of taking its starting point in the subjective judgement of taste, peremptorily deprived art of its claim to truth'; 'Artistic experience accordingly demands a comprehending rather than emotional relation to the works.'

The truth content of avant-garde art: 'art allies itself with repressed and dominated nature in the progressively rationalized and integrated society'.

– 'Art negates the conceptualization foisted on the real world.'

– 'Only as spirit is art the opposite of empirical reality, which [qua this opposite] becomes the determinate negation of the existing world order.'

– 'After the collapse of the general thesis of Idealism, however, spirit is strictly one aspect of artworks ... it is not in any way present without what is opposed to it [i.e. non-spirit]. Constitutively, the spirit of artworks is not pure.'

– 'Art thereby participates in the suffering that ... finds its way to language [art's language] rather than disappearing.'

– 'rational cognition has one critical limit, which is its inability to cope with suffering. Reason can subsume suffering under concepts; it can furnish means to alleviate suffering; but it can never express suffering in the medium of concepts ... Therefore, even when it is understood, suffering remains mute and inconsequential ... What recommends itself, then, is the idea that art may be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering. As the real world is growing dark, the irrationality of art is becoming rational ... the negativity of modern art is the epitome of all that has been repressed by established culture.'

– 'By cathecting the repressed, art internalizes the repressing principle, i.e. the unredeemed condition of the world (Unheil), instead of merely airing futile protests against it. Art identifies and expresses that condition, thus anticipating its overcoming. It is this, and not the photographic rendition of the unredeemed state or a false sense of beatitude, that defines the position of modern art towards a gloomy objectivity. Everything else is worthless mawkishness.'

– 'He who was first to envision the end of art [Hegel] named the most compelling reason for its continuation: the continuation of needs, mute in themselves, that await the expression that artworks fulfill by proxy.'

– 'Their affinity with the world lies in a principle that is conceived to be a contrast to that world but is in fact no different from the principle whereby spirit has dominated the world.'

– 'The metaphysics of art [e.g. Hegel's] has become the court of judgement that rules over art's continued existence. The absence of theological meaning, however modified [i.e. in German idealism], culminates in art as the crisis of its own meaning.'

– 'The truth content of an artwork requires philosophy.'

– 'The truth content of works must be rigorously distinguished from all philosophy that is pumped into them by authors or theorists; the difference between the two, it must be suspected, has for close to two hundred years been unbridgeable.'

The task of philosophical aesthetics: 'In the age of the irreconcilability of traditional aesthetics and contemporary art, the philosophical theory of art has no choice but ... by determinate negation to think the categories that are in decline as categories of transition. The elucidated and concrete dissolution of conventional aesthetic categories is the only remaining form aesthetics can take.'

Enigmaticalness as inherent to art: 'all art works are riddles; indeed, art as a whole is a riddle. Another way of putting this is to say that art expresses something while at the same time hiding it. The enigmatic quality grimaces like a clown ... Trying to grasp a rainbow is the surest way of making it vanish. The same goes for

the enigmatic quality in art. Music is the prototypical example: it is at once altogether enigmatic and altogether self-evident. Music's enigma cannot be solved ... Understanding does not cancel the enigmatic quality.'

The methodological priority of modern art: 'The principle of method here is that 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 ... the most authentic works are critiques of past works. Aesthetics becomes normative by articulating such criticism. This, however, has retroactive force, and from it alone is it possible to expect what general aesthetics offered merely as a hope and a sham [viz., enlightenment].'

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, chs. 6-9, and 'Answering the question: what is postmodernism?'

- 'The sublime is perhaps the only mode of artistic sensibility to characterize the modern.'
- The mission of romantic, i.e. modern, art is to 'present the unrepresentable': the 'fundamental task' of 'romantic art' is that of 'bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible'.
- 'The art-lover does not experience a simple pleasure, or derive some ethical benefit from his contact with art, but expects an intensification of his conceptual and emotional capacity, an ambivalent enjoyment. Intensity is associated with an ontological dislocation. The art-object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that there is an unrepresentable.'
- 'at the dawn of romanticism ... the aesthetics of the sublime [of Burke and Kant] ... outlined a world of possibilities for artistic experiments in which the avant-gardes would later trace out their paths'.
- 'What is at stake in this dialectic is the question, 'What is painting?', and what keeps the dialectic moving is the refutation of what has been done or has just been done: no, that wasn't indispensable to painting either. Painting thus becomes a philosophical activity.'
- 'These [modern] painters discover that they have to present that there is something that is not presentable according to the legitimate construction. They begin to overturn the supposed 'givens' of the visible so as to make visible the fact that the visual field hides and requires invisibilities, that it does not simply belong to the eye ... but to the (wandering) mind.'
- 'this displacement in which consists perhaps the whole of the difference between romanticism and the modern avant-garde ... [the sublime is] not elsewhere, not up there or over there, not earlier or later, not once upon a time. But as here, now, it happens that, ... and it's this painting. Here and now there is this painting, rather than nothing, and that's what is sublime.'
- 'The enigma of the Is it happening? is ... the task of painting, that there is something which is not determinable, the There is [Il y a] itself ... The occurrence, the Ereignis ...'.
- In this 'it happens' nothing 'is destined for' us, there is a 'loss of destiny'. Compare 'the beautiful forms with their destination, our own destiny'. The sublime evokes an 'ontological melancholy'. Modern-romantic art involves a kind of 'nostalgia': it tries to 'find the unrepresentable at a great distance, as a lost origin or end'.
- The distinction of modern-romantic vs. avant-garde = the distinction of modern vs. postmodern art: 'Here, then, lies the difference: modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognisable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure ... The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste that would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable ... A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher.'

Essay questions for this part of the course:

1. In what sense, if any, can truth be ascribed to works of art?
2. 'Where philosophy stops, there art begins.' Can this view be justified?
3. Elucidate Schelling's claim that the 'philosophy of art is a necessary goal of the philosopher, who in art views the inner essence of his own discipline'.
4. 'The true significance of tragedy is not moral but metaphysical.' Discuss.
5. Discuss critically Heidegger's conception of the truth of art.
6. Elucidate and assess Merleau-Ponty's conception of the shared task of art and philosophy.
7. Discuss critically Adorno's account of the truth-content of art.