

Handout: The Concept of the Aesthetic in Benjamin and Adorno

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Key points

‘The aesthetic’ = lived, historical experience or ‘mind-world interaction’

Goal of ‘political aesthetic’ approach to Critical Theory: rendering the everyday experience of subjects in terms of their ‘real conditions of existence’, i.e., the ‘real conditioning factors’ of economic forms or principles.

Romanticism had already criticised the quantification of life and its subjection to economic power. It tended to have a one-sided view that nostalgically yearned for the restitution of lost quality, hoping to liberate ‘use value’ from ‘exchange value’, labour from commerce etc.

Critical Theory spins romantic critique in the following way: because ‘exchange’ society has colonised the sphere of culture and everyday experience, society itself has taken on ‘aesthetic’ qualities, especially ones of immediacy and spontaneity. Culture, in turn, is assigned an economic function. Its usefulness ultimately depends on its marketability. The romantic revolt against reification is itself a symptom of reification, serving to lend society a veneer of authenticity.

For Critical Theory, to understand this ‘integrated’ society, we also need to examine the lived experience of individual subjects, the management of perceptions, the formation of worldviews and the power of verbal and visual media to shape political preferences and reproduce society as a whole.

For example, though objectively speaking there are more wage-labourers or proletarians in the world than ever before, at a subjective level most individuals do not identify as working class and do not regard themselves as participants in an asymmetrical power relation. That people do not feel working class does not mean that they aren’t involved in class or property relations. Nevertheless, Adorno argues that social theory ignores this cognitive development at its own peril.

This is particularly relevant to social scientific disciplines characterised by a high degree of formalism. If (objectively conditioned) subjective experience is not embedded in the formal method itself, the discipline runs the risk of losing touch with reality, remaining stuck with a hollow framework inadequate to its object of investigation.

No matter how refined the systematic method, there are unconscious and pre-conscious aspects to social reality that cannot be grasped by disciplines that limit themselves to the conscious deliberative capacities of individual subjects. Following Hegel, Adorno argues that all conceptual systems are outstripped by the dynamic historical reality they try to grasp. This means that all approaches, critical and affirmative, ought to adopt a policy of conceptual humility and aesthetic attentiveness.

Historically speaking, ‘the aesthetic as experience’ or ‘mind-world interaction’ was seen to have implications for historical and political worldviews at the beginning of the 20th century:

- Positivism (subject-object split) → Whig view of history → Technocratic reformism
- Neoromanticism (abstract rejection of subject-object split) → historical decline → radical conservatism

Timeline of Critical Theory:

- Weimar CT (20s) — Exile in America (40s) — Federal Republic (60s) — Habermas (80s)
- ‘Aesthetic’ phase — cold war sociology — social and aesthetic theory — post-war sociology

In fact:

Not a linear progression. Different emphases. Varying practical implications. Not always ‘critical’. Varying levels of individual protagonism. No ‘clean’ appropriation of Marx’s social theory or seamless break with earlier forms of social critique (revolutionary-romantic, utopian socialist etc).