

## **Dissonant Reflections: Art, Aesthetics, Negation, and Social Change in Adorno's Thought**

**Martina Riedler**

Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University (Türkiye)

### **Abstract**

Theodor W. Adorno, a central figure of the Frankfurt School, offered a multifaceted and often pessimistic analysis of art's relationship to modern society. His critique of the "culture industry" targeted the commodification of art and its potential to suppress critical thought, highlighting the homogenizing tendencies of mass-produced culture. Adorno emphasized the importance of negation – art's ability to reveal contradictions and resist easy answers—as a form of resistance and explored the inherent tensions within artistic autonomy under capitalism. This article applies Adorno's theoretical framework to analyze contemporary artworks, examining how artists negotiate these tensions, seeking critique within the very systems Adorno found problematic. Adorno's enduring relevance lies in his ability to provide tools for understanding the ongoing struggle for art's transformative power in our ever-changing cultural landscape. Additionally, the article explores convergences and divergences between Adorno's views and those of other Frankfurt School members, enriching the analysis of art's complex and challenging role within society.

**Keywords:** Adorno, Frankfurt school, art theory, aesthetics, negation, aesthetic autonomy, mimesis, commodification, contemporary art, culture industry

\* Martina Riedler is Associate Professor of Art Education at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University (Türkiye). She earned her PhD in Art Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA) where she was also a Fulbright Scholar and received a masters' degree in Art Education and Studio Art from the University of Fine Arts Vienna (Austria). Dr. Martina Riedler's current research focuses on visual arts research, cultural heritage, museum representations/ memory institutions and collective national identities, critical museum studies, the hidden curriculum of informal learning sites, qualitative research methods in art education, and teacher education and she has presented on these subjects at national and international conferences. ORCID: 0000-0001-5207-9644

**Correspondence:** riedler@comu.edu.tr

## Introduction

Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), a central figure of the Frankfurt School, offered a multifaceted and often contradictory analysis of art's role within modern society. A philosopher, sociologist, musicologist, and cultural critic, his work compels us to confront the complexities of artistic expression under the influence of mass culture, consumerism, and power structures. Adorno's theoretical perspectives, while critical of much popular culture, have become surprisingly useful in analyzing contemporary art that often blurs distinctions between 'high' and 'low' forms (O'Connor, 2000, Comay, 2017). This unexpected applicability raises intriguing questions: Can the very tools he offered for critiquing popular art help us understand today's artistic landscape, one deeply immersed in the elements he warned against? Does this engagement with mass culture signify a surrender to its homogenizing forces, or do contemporary artists utilize Adorno's ideas of negation and critique in unforeseen ways? Exploring these tensions is crucial for understanding the ongoing relevance of Adorno's work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Adorno's analysis is defined by contradictions, making his perspectives all the more fascinating. His focus on negation and resistance clashes directly with his pessimistic view of mass culture's co-opting power (Osborne, 2004). Examining these contradictions within his own writings provides fertile ground for analyzing art in a world Adorno would have found both troubling and a compelling confirmation of his concerns.

This article explores these key themes of Adorno's aesthetic theory while highlighting their relevance in understanding the 21<sup>st</sup> century's cultural dynamics. Adorno's thought provides tools for critically examining the interplay between art, technology, mass culture, and social transformation. Integrating discussions of contemporary artworks alongside Adorno's theoretical framework demonstrates his work's ongoing significance and potential to ignite further debate surrounding the role of art in our changing world.

## The Culture Industry: Critique and Complication

Adorno's relentless critique of the "culture industry" was a defining feature of his work. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-written with Max Horkheimer, Adorno argued that modern mass culture, driven by capitalist forces, produces standardized and homogenized products designed for easy consumption (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). This culture industry, according to Adorno, undermines critical thinking and reinforces existing power structures. He elaborated on this theme in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, where he portrayed cultural products as reinforcing conformity and perpetuating a cycle of passive consumption (Adorno, 1991).

While primarily focused on his era, Adorno's criticisms resonate powerfully today. The increasing dominance of digital platforms, streaming services, and social media algorithms raises concerns about the homogenization of content and the manipulation of audiences for commercial gain. One can see Adorno's warnings reflected in debates about the impact of filter bubbles and the erosion of attention spans in the digital age.

A potent contemporary example is Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* (2010). At first glance, the piece—an installation of millions of individually handcrafted and painted porcelain seeds filling a vast museum hall—seems to be a direct commentary on the individual's place within the mass and the tension between standardized outputs and unique expression. However, a deeper Adornian reading reveals a profound paradox. The work was created through the painstaking labor of hundreds of artisans, subverting the idea of industrial mass production. Yet, it leverages a mass-produced *aesthetic* to lodge its critique, and it exists within the institutional framework of the international art market and major museums—core components of the modern culture industry.

This complexity challenges a frequent criticism of Adorno: that his culture industry thesis is too monolithic and fails to account for audience agency. While Adorno feared mass culture diluted an artwork's critical power, Ai Weiwei's work does the opposite. The piece is a perfect example of

Adorno's concept of *negation*; its genuine artistic expression lies in its refusal to conform (Osborne, 2004). By using the tools of the culture industry (spectacle, scale) against itself, the artwork performs a dialectical maneuver. It does not simply pacify the audience but implicates them, stimulating critical reflection by presenting the contradictions of reality and offering glimpses of alternative possibilities (Adorno, 1970).

### **Art as Mimesis and Negation**

Adorno (1966) rejected the notion of art as simple imitation or mimesis. Instead, he emphasized its capacity for negation, as detailed in his work *Negative Dialectics*. True art, for Adorno, captures what society suppresses or excludes. Peter Osborne (2004), in his exploration of Adorno's theory in *In Search of the Lost Subject: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, further unpacks this concept. Osborne argues that artistic expression reveals the hidden absences and contradictions within dominant ideologies, offering a powerful form of critique.

This perspective challenges notions of art as purely decorative or escapist. Adorno's view aligns with artistic movements that deliberately provoke and disorient viewers. For instance, Dadaist and Surrealist works aimed to shock audiences out of complacency, revealing repressed aspects of the psyche and social order. This legacy continues in works like Kara Walker's installations. Kara Walker demonstrates how negation can be both formally sophisticated and broadly resonant. Walker employs the seemingly quaint 18<sup>th</sup>-century art of the cut-paper silhouette to stage brutal, panoramic scenes of racial and sexual violence from the era of American slavery.

The negation here is multifold. The genteel, decorative form is used to represent its own repressed historical foundation of brutality. The aesthetic pleasure of the stark, beautiful black-and-white forms clashes violently with the horror of the content. This creates a profound discomfort in the viewer, preventing any easy moral or aesthetic resolution. As Adorno argued, the work refuses to conform. It does not offer a clear narrative of redemption but rather confronts the viewer with the unresolved trauma embedded within American history. Walker's art, while challenging, is not merely an intellectual puzzle; its power is visceral and affective. It shows that negation, as an artistic strategy, can provoke a powerful critical consciousness in a wide audience, challenging the idea that such art is inherently elitist or inaccessible.

Doris Salcedo similarly employs the mimetic negativity Adorno theorized, imbuing everyday objects with a haunting presence that forces us to acknowledge absence and concealed trauma (Comay, 2017).

Adorno's rejection of simplistic mimesis extends to his broader critique of a society obsessed with surface appearances and the reproduction of the status quo. Art that merely reflects reality risks inadvertently reinforcing existing power structures. True artistic expression, in Adorno's view, challenges these dominant narratives. Artists may employ techniques such as distortion, fragmentation, or the juxtaposition of jarring elements to disrupt the viewer's complacency and expose the constructed nature of seemingly 'natural' social orders (Osborne, 2004).

Negation, for Adorno, is not purely destructive. By refusing to affirm or neatly resolve social contradictions, art opens up a space for critical reflection and the possibility of imagining something different. This echoes the work of avant-garde artists who aimed to shock the bourgeoisie out of their comfortable worldviews, paving the way for potential social transformation. This dialectical approach holds that even within negation lies the possibility of a creative impulse, demonstrating the complex and paradoxical relationship between art, society, and the search for transformative potential.

### **The Paradox of Aesthetic Autonomy and Social Practice**

Adorno wrestled with the paradox of aesthetic autonomy. He argued that art must remain autonomous—separate from direct political or social instrumentality—to preserve its critical power; if it becomes mere propaganda, it loses its unique ability to critique (Adorno, 1970). Yet, he also knew

art was inevitably entangled in its social and historical context (O'Connor, 2000). This tension remains central to contemporary debates: should art engage directly in activism, or does it risk being co-opted?

Some critics argue that Adorno's focus on negation and autonomy can lead to political quietism (Rancière, 2004; Allerkamp, Genel & Hazoume, 2019). However, the work of contemporary artists engaged in "social practice" suggests an evolution of this idea. Theaster Gates, for example, blurs the line between artist, urban planner, and community activist. His projects, such as the *Rebuild Foundation* in Chicago, transform abandoned buildings into vibrant cultural hubs, directly engaging communities in actions that blend aesthetics with social activism.

From an Adornian perspective, Gates's work negates the concept of the art object as a useless commodity destined for a gallery. But it moves beyond a simple refusal. It channels the critical energy of negation into constructive, tangible social change. This practice challenges the strict separation between art and life that a rigid reading of Adorno's autonomy might imply. It suggests a way to resolve Adorno's paradox: art can maintain its critical autonomy not by remaining aloof from the world, but by redesigning a small part of it according to its own aesthetic and ethical logic, thus offering a "glimpse of alternative possibilities" in a direct and material way (Adorno, 1970).

### **The Constellatory Approach: Understanding Adorno's Fragmented Perspective**

The constellatory approach refers to a way of interpreting Theodor W. Adorno's work that acknowledges its complex, fragmented, and often contradictory nature. Instead of searching for a singular, unified theory, this approach emphasizes (Jarvis, 2009):

**Multiplicity:** Adorno's writings encompass diverse topics, engage with various thinkers, and often present opposing viewpoints within the same text. The constellation metaphor signifies this interconnectedness and lack of a single, central message. Additionally, contemporary artists often embody this fragmented and open-ended approach. Consider Gerhard Richter's diverse body of work, which ranges from photorealistic paintings to abstract compositions. His refusal to adhere to a singular style reflects Adorno's emphasis on multifaceted perspectives and resistance to a unified artistic vision.

**Tension and Contradiction:** Adorno deliberately constructs tension within his arguments, exploring opposing ideas from multiple angles. He embraces ambiguity and resists simplistic conclusions, reflecting the complexities of modern society and art. Similarly, artists like Kara Walker or Ai Weiwei deliberately juxtapose elements within their works that evoke both beauty and discomfort, power and vulnerability. These contradictions mirror Adorno's approach, which aimed to highlight social tensions rather than resolve them through idealized representations.

**Openness to Interpretation:** Rather than offering definitive answers, Adorno's work invites readers to actively engage, draw connections, and develop their own interpretations. The constellation allows for multiple perspectives and interpretations without privileging one over another. This non-hierarchical approach aligns with conceptual art practices like those of Tino Sehgal or Yoko Ono, where instructions or open-ended situations invite viewer participation and individual meaning-making, a rejection of a singular authorial interpretation.

**Importance of Context:** Analyzing Adorno's ideas requires considering their historical and philosophical context. Understanding the intellectual discourse he interacted with helps illuminate the meanings and intentions behind his writings. The current wave of institutional critique within contemporary art, where artists interrogate the very structures of museums, galleries, and the art market, speaks to a continued grappling with the context of art, much like Adorno analyzed the ways in which artistic expression is both shaped by and reacts against the social and economic systems it exists within.

Adorno's fragmented and multifaceted perspective, open to interpretation within its historical context, offers valuable tools for navigating the complexities of contemporary art (Jarvis, 2009). While his emphasis on critique and negativity might seem bleak, it also compels us to look beyond the

surface and seek art's potential for resistance and social transformation. This critical function resonates particularly within the realm of music, where artists continue to grapple with societal contradictions and search for new forms of expression. In the following section, I will explore how Adorno viewed music's capacity for the dialectic of hope, even amidst a world shaped by mass culture and social inequalities.

### **Music and the Dialectic of Hope**

Despite his focus on negativity, Adorno found a glimmer of hope within music. His *Philosophy of Music* (2009) offers a complex analysis of its potential for expression and resistance. Christopher Butler, in *Adorno on Music* (2002), further elaborates on Adorno's view that avant-garde and atonal musical forms embody a particularly acute awareness of societal contradictions. By defying conventional harmonies and expectations, such music reflects a fractured reality while gesturing towards the possibility of something different.

This critical function is powerfully evident in Kendrick Lamar's album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015). The album functions as a stunning example of Adornian negation in a sonic form; its jarring shifts between dissonant free-jazz, funk, and spoken-word poetry refuse the standardized structures of mainstream hip-hop. Tracks use unsettling chord progressions and layered, conflicting vocals to create a sound that is difficult and demanding. This formal complexity forces the listener into a critical, active engagement, mirroring the unresolved social and racial contradictions the lyrics explore. The album thus denies the listener easy pleasure, instead using its "difficult" form to reveal uncomfortable truths—a perfect execution of the critical task Adorno assigned to authentic art.

Interestingly, Adorno was famously critical of jazz, which he often viewed as standardized and commercial. The use of jazz in *To Pimp a Butterfly* as a tool for radical critique thus provides a fascinating challenge, suggesting that even a form Adorno dismissed can be re-appropriated for profound artistic negation. This complex use of aesthetic elements, which might draw an audience in only to disrupt their expectations, aligns with Adorno's broader emphasis on the dialectic of hope, even within a predominantly negative analysis (Witkin, 1998).

### **Adorno and the Frankfurt School: Convergences and Divergences**

While Adorno shared the core critical stance of the Frankfurt School, his views on art diverged subtly yet significantly from some of his colleagues.

Adorno and Walter Benjamin both critiqued the effects of mass culture on art. They recognized the dangers of standardization and the ways commodification could strip artworks of their unique significance. However, their perspectives on its transformative potential diverged significantly.

Benjamin (1935), while acknowledging the risks, held a degree of optimism about the democratization of art through mass reproduction. He argued that the loss of the 'aura'—the uniqueness associated with an original artwork—could challenge traditional hierarchies and create new possibilities for collective engagement. The proliferation of copies, he believed, could enable new modes of viewing and interpretation, fostering a more critical relationship to cultural products.

Adorno took a far more pessimistic view. He feared that mass reproduction primarily served the culture industry's goals of pacifying audiences and reinforcing the status quo. The replication and standardization of artworks, he argued, diluted their critical power and transformed them into easily consumable commodities. Where Benjamin saw the potential for disruption, Adorno saw the increasing dominance of commercial interests and the decline of the artwork's capacity to resist.

Both Adorno and Herbert Marcuse offered deep critiques of modern consumer society, highlighting the manipulation of desires and the suppression of critical dissent. They viewed the culture industry as a powerful tool for maintaining social control, generating false needs and distractions designed to quell potential revolutionary impulses.

Despite this shared critique, Marcuse (1964) held a stronger belief in the capacity for liberation than Adorno. He viewed the working class as a potential source of resistance. While the culture industry sought to pacify and integrate laborers into the capitalist system, Marcuse believed the contradictions and exploitation inherent within it could serve as catalysts for a revolutionary consciousness.

Adorno, deeply impacted by the rise of fascism and the failures of past social movements, held a more pessimistic view. He doubted the possibility of a radical working-class consciousness emerging from within a culture so deeply saturated by commodification and propaganda. While Marcuse saw hope in the potential for organized resistance, Adorno focused more on the ways dominant ideologies were ingrained in everyday life and the resulting difficulties for achieving true social transformation.

Jürgen Habermas and Adorno shared concerns about the manipulation of public opinion and the stifling of critical thought. However, they proposed different paths toward a more just society. Habermas (1989) emphasized the importance of open, rational-critical debate within a healthy public sphere as the foundation for a democratic and participatory system.

Adorno, while valuing reasoned discourse, believed the very structure of mass culture undermined genuine public debate. He focused on the ways media, driven by commercial imperatives, distorted communication and manipulated audiences. Adorno was more interested in the ways art, through its negation and refusal to offer simple answers, could reveal hidden social contradictions and provoke independent thought. Where Habermas (1989) emphasized the role of communication in achieving social change, Adorno looked to art's disruptive potential to highlight cracks in the dominant system and stimulate resistance from within.

Adorno's focus on the unique power of negativity in art, the inherent contradictions of aesthetic autonomy, and his more pessimistic stance regarding transformative potential distinguish his perspective within the broader critical project of the Frankfurt School.

### **Implications for Progressive Education**

The critical framework Adorno provides has profound implications for progressive education, particularly in an era dominated by digital media. His critique of the "culture industry" serves as a powerful theoretical foundation for critical media literacy. Progressive educators can use Adorno's concepts to design curricula that teach students to deconstruct the cultural products they consume daily—from streaming content and social media trends to advertising and news. The goal is to cultivate a student who is not a passive consumer absorbing standardized messages, but an active, critical citizen capable of recognizing and questioning the ideologies embedded in modern culture, thereby resisting the conformity the culture industry promotes.

Furthermore, Adorno's emphasis on negation and the value of "difficult" art offers a potent pedagogical strategy. By engaging students with artworks that refuse easy interpretation—such as the unsettling historical tableaux of Kara Walker or the haunting installations of Doris Salcedo—educators can foster a classroom environment where students learn to grapple with ambiguity, discomfort, and complexity. This process is central to developing the critical consciousness that progressive education champions. The educator's role shifts from a purveyor of knowledge to a facilitator of critical inquiry, guiding students through the dissonant experience of the artwork. The aim is not for students to simply "like" contemporary arts, but to be provoked by it into a deeper, more critical reflection on society, history, and their place within them.

### **Conclusion**

Theodor Adorno's uncompromising analysis of art, despite his pessimism, remains profoundly relevant, and his insistence on the role of art in exposing societal contradictions continues to be a vital point of discussion (Cook, 1996). As this discussion has shown, his framework is not a static set of pronouncements but a dynamic critical method. When read against the critiques of his work and through the lens of contemporary practice, his ideas are illuminated and strengthened.

Artists like Ai Weiwei and Kara Walker do not simply fit into Adornian categories; their work embodies the very contradictions Adorno identified. They operate from within the culture industry to critique it, using beauty and spectacle to provoke discomfort and critical thought as the line between entertainment and commentary blurs (Morgan, 2009). They demonstrate that negation is not an end in itself but a potent strategy for forcing a confrontation with uncomfortable truths. Their work affirms Adorno's core belief that even in a thoroughly commodified world, art retains a fragile but essential power: the power to reflect our society's dissonances back at us, reminding us that the world as it is, is not the only way it can be.

The ongoing struggle of these artists mirrors the tension within Adorno's own thought, highlighting the enduring challenge and necessity of carving out spaces for critical reflection in our ever-changing cultural landscape.

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