

71st Lecture at the Gramsci Monument, The Bronx, NYC: 9th September 2013

Marcus Steinweg

1. Theodor W. Adorno quotes the passage from Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* where the latter says of the artist that, "as a free subject," he seeks to "strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness," impressing on it "the seal of his interiority" in order to "enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself."¹
2. The "effort to do away with foreignness,"² Adorno writes, touches upon the fundamental operation of enlightenment, which renders commensurable to man what remains incommensurable.
3. The dialectic of commensurability and incommensurability pervades the concept and the history (it is not yet concluded and is not even coherent in its inconclusiveness) of enlightenment itself, which—a sort of negative dialectics—enacts the conflict of two elements that defy speculative conciliation.
4. Because the incommensurable remains incommensurable, foreign and unfamiliar, it must appear as such in the work of art; to this end, the latter must not merely accept but in fact actively articulate its irreducibility to the known and familiar.
5. That is the point of the word *appearance*—Adorno speaks of an *apparition* κατ' ἐξοχήν, what "appear[s] empirically yet [is] liberated from the burden of the empirical"³—which names the emergence of the incommensurable from the field of commensurable fact; we might also speak of the *event* that interrupts the order of being with its uncontrolled manifestation.
6. In any case, the incommensurable presents itself as a rift in the structure of reality without marking the impact of an absolute outside.
7. It articulates the truth of reality as something that—excluded from it—evokes its fundamental trait; a non-integral element to which pre-rational

consciousness or what Adorno calls the “pre-artistic stratum of art” affords access, whereas it has no immediacy at all to it, coming to negative apparency only by virtue of the mediation of the artifact the work of art is.

8. We might speak of an aporetic organization of the work of art, an organization to which every sentence of the *Aesthetic Theory* labors to be adequate.
9. Adorno begins with an affirmation, he concludes the thought in a critical register; where a sentence begins with a negative, delimiting, or subversive turn, it ultimately opens up in affirmation to what it had dismissed.
10. The same is true of the work of art, which Adorno defines in numerous such sentences.
11. It is affirmative and subversive at once.
12. It confirms and negates.
13. It is empirical and yet not.
14. It captivates, but not from the outside.
15. It seduces, but to reflection. It reflects, yet blindly; etc.
16. The work is aporetic because it draws its intensity from its opening-up toward a boundary it affirms rather than crossing it.
17. Its artificiality transmits what it negates, “the shudder as something unmollified and unprecedented.”
18. It surpasses “the world of things by what is thing-like in [it], [its own] artificial objectivation.”⁴

19. It remains forever committed to what is impossible, for the possible collaborates with what already exists, with power and established authorities.
20. The work, by contrast, requires the affirmation of the unknown and the pact with contingency.
21. And yet it must not dissipate its power in esotericism, in magic and the mystical obfuscation of reality.
22. The work of art includes the knowledge that such sublimity as is possible is part of reality as what is impossible to it; as its boundary and its inconsistency, as what is repressed or nameless, as the outside implicit in it, in short, as its indisponible element.

- 1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), vol. 1, 31.
- 2 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 106.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 106–7.