

Adorno and the Role of Sublimation in Artistic Creativity and Cultural Redemption

Martin Jay

“Artists do not sublimate,” Theodor W. Adorno insisted in *Minima Moralia*; “that they neither satisfy nor repress their desires, but translate them into socially desirable achievements, their works, is a psycho-analytic illusion. . . . Their lot is rather a hysterically excessive lack of inhibition over every conceivable fear; narcissism taken to its paranoiac limit. To anything sublimated they oppose idiosyncrasies.”¹ However much he may have embraced the Frankfurt School’s hope that Marxism could be enriched through insights from psychoanalysis, here and elsewhere in his work Adorno challenged Sigmund’s Freud’s theory of sublimation to explain artistic creation.² What were his objections, and how plausible were they? And for all his explicit condemnation, did he also express a more-nuanced appreciation of aesthetic sublimation understood dialectically? To answer these questions requires moving beyond Freud’s analysis of sublimation in the act of artistic creation to consider the posterior sublimation of once-potent cultural phenomena—especially

1. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 212–13 (hereafter cited as *MM*). On the value of idiosyncrasy for Critical Theory, see Honneth, “Idiosyncrasy as a Tool of Knowledge.” For a discussion of its contradictory implications as a concept that signifies resistance to conceptuality, see Plug, “Idiosyncrasies: of Anti-Semitism.”

2. For an account of the Frankfurt School’s integration of Karl Marx and Freud, see Jay, “‘In Psychoanalysis Nothing Is True but the Exaggerations.’” For a discussion of Adorno’s particular response, see Dahmer, “Adorno’s View of Psychoanalysis.”

objects that served devotional, magical, or cultic purposes—which are rescued by resituating them in aesthetic contexts.

Although Freud never used the term *sublimation* with perfect consistency after he introduced it in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905, he typically defined it as “a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct directing itself towards an aim other than, and removed from, that of sexual satisfaction.”³ Based on a hydraulic model of flow, pressure, blockage, and release and applied to innate, somatically generated instincts or drives, it assumed that at least the libido or erotic drive was plastic in terms of its object choice. According to Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *sublimation* borrowed some of its meaning from the aesthetic term “sublime . . . to qualify works that are grand and uplifting,” as well as the chemical process of causing a body to pass directly from solid to gaseous state, which implied the spiritualization of materiality.⁴ In its most general terms applied to artistic creation, it can be called the transformation of private emotion into cultural meaning, subjective desire into artworks with enduring communal value.

Although apparently unfazed by the elitist and misogynist implications that have often troubled other critics of Freud’s theory of aesthetic sublimation, Adorno had three major complaints against it.⁵ First, he charged that by claiming that the artist’s transgressive impulses can be successfully channeled into culturally admirable works of art in lieu of being directly expressed or ascetically repressed, the theory of sublimation tacitly invited acceptance of what the Frankfurt School had called since the 1930s the “affirmative character of cul-

3. Freud, “On Narcissism,” 94. Many commentators have noted the underdeveloped, and even at times contradictory, quality of Freud’s theory of sublimation. For a trenchant account, see Goebel, *Beyond Discontent*, chap. 4. Goebel also insightfully analyzes what he calls “Adorno’s dialectical understanding of the concept of sublimation” (61).

4. Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psychoanalysis*, 432. They concede that the theory of sublimation in Freud is never fully coherent.

5. Freud’s elitism is evident in his observation that “mastering [the sexual drive] by sublimation, by deflecting the sexual instinctual forces away from their sexual aim to higher cultural aims, can be achieved by a minority and then only intermittently” (“‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness,” 193). His gender bias is evident, inter alia, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where he wrote, “Women represent the interests of the family and of sexual life. The work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men, it confronts them with the ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimations of which women are little capable” (50); and in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, where he wrote, “We also regard women as weaker in their social interests and as having less capacity for sublimating their instincts than men” (134). Feminists, in response, have sometimes sought to affirm women’s more direct connections with their bodies in defiance of the norm of conventional sublimation. See, e.g., Kahane, “Freud’s Sublimation.”

ture.”⁶ The unfulfilled yearnings of men and women in a still-unfree society are said to be transfigured through sublimation into an allegedly “higher” realm of beauty, a realm of disinterested transcendence beyond base needs. But in fact, such a transfiguration offers only weak consolation for the oppressive social conditions that thwart real emancipation, which would honor the validity of those needs.⁷ Negation is only negated in sublimation by premature, conformist positivity, and contradiction falsely overcome by ideological reconciliation. “If successful sublimation and integration are made the end-all and be-all of the artwork,” Adorno argued in *Aesthetic Theory*, “it loses the force by which it exceeds the given, which it renounces by its mere existence.”⁸

For all its alleged distinction from repression, sublimation is, according to certain psychoanalytic theorists, no less of a defense mechanism against the immediate realization of desire and thus hard to distinguish from symptom formation as such.⁹ There is in Freudian theory, Adorno charged, “a total lack of adequate criteria for distinguishing ‘positive’ from ‘negative’ ego-functions, above all, sublimation from repression.”¹⁰ Or, if there is such a criterion, it is external to psychological processes and located entirely in the society. The model of psychological “health” or “normality” underlying the ideal of cultural sublimation is thus based on a conformist adaptability to society. The logic of affirmative adaptation was even clearer, Adorno contended, in the work of so-called neorevisionist analysts, such as Karen Horney and his erstwhile colleague Erich Fromm, who wrongly discarded Freud’s libido theory as inherently biologicistic.¹¹ If there can be no fully realized individual psychological health in a pathological society, there is concomitantly no aesthetic compensation for the discontents of at least this civilization.¹²

6. The classic account is Marcuse, “Affirmative Character of Culture.”

7. Adorno was not alone in lamenting the renunciation inherent in sublimation. In *Life against Death*, Norman O. Brown would charge that “sublimation is the search for lost life; it presupposes and perpetuates the loss of life and cannot be the mode in which life itself is lived. Sublimation is the mode of an organism which must discover life rather than live, must know rather than be” (171).

8. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 12 (hereafter cited as *AT*).

9. The inclusion of sublimation along with repression as a defense mechanism was made by Anna Freud in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*. Some analysts distinguish between repression as an unsuccessful defense mechanism and sublimation as a successful one, since the latter finds a nonsexual outlet through a cathexis of a substitute object. See, e.g., Fenichel, *Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*.

10. Adorno, “Sociology and Psychology,” 86.

11. Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis.”

12. On the theme of social pathology in Critical Theory, see Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason*. Adorno’s hostility to the therapeutic function of psychoanalysis, which is evident throughout *Minima Moralia*, can be explained by its dependence on a kind of sublimation. As Philip Rieff noted, “The psychoanalytic resolutions of conflict are embodied in a dialectical therapy which is itself a kind of subli-

Second, according to Adorno, sublimation transfigures the corporeal desires unmet in the current world through spiritualization, producing an idealist pseudosolution to the material injuries produced by capitalism. Sublimation may be seen to feed the inner soul, but it ignores the legitimate demands of the desiring body. To be sure, Freud registered the corporeal origins of art in a way that Immanuel Kant, who is pitted against him in *Aesthetic Theory*, did not. “The psychoanalytic theory of art is superior to idealist aesthetics in that it brings to light what is internal to art and not itself artistic. It helps free art from the spell of absolute spirit. . . . But psychoanalysis too,” Adorno then added, “casts a spell related to idealism, that of an absolutely subjective sign system denoting individual instinctual impulses” (*AT*, 8–9). The alleged sublimation of baser desires into higher works of art parallels the dubious distinction often made between “culture” and “civilization”—the former understood as the realm of noble ideas and beautiful forms, the latter as the locus of technological improvements, superficial social interactions, and political machinations—that was a standard trope of reactionary antimodernism. Rather than serving as a placeholder for genuine happiness in the future, that *promesse du bonheur* the Frankfurt School so often evoked, art understood in terms of sublimation was reduced to a surrogate pleasure in the present, scarcely less ideological in function than the popular entertainment provided by the culture industry. In contrast, Adorno argued in *Minima Moralia*, “he alone who could situate utopia in blind somatic pleasure, which, satisfying the ultimate intention, is intentionless, has a stable and valid idea of truth. In Freud’s work, however, the dual hostility towards mind and pleasure, whose common root psychoanalysis has given us the means for discovering, is unintentionally reproduced” (*MM*, 61).

Finally, the theory of sublimation fails, for Adorno, to take into account the crucial distinction between the artwork and the artist who created it. It hurries past the former, which it reduces to a mere document of displaced neurosis, to decode what it takes to be the deeper motives of the latter. It repeats the errors of what has been damned for more than a century as “psychologism,” reducing the validity of an idea or artwork to its genesis, a fallacy that had been the bugaboo of the modernist aesthetics in which Adorno had been steeped since his musical training in the 1920s.¹³ “Psychoanalysis treats art-

mation, a transferring of the patient’s conflicts to ‘higher levels,’ a new ‘battlefield’ where the forces contending for his mind must meet” (*Freud*, 69).

13. For an account of the modernist critique of psychologism, see Jay, “Modernism and the Specter of Psychologism.” Adorno, to be sure, never went as far as, say, Kant in denying the inevitable entan-

works as nothing but facts,” Adorno wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*, “yet it neglects their own objectivity, their inner consistency, their level of form, their critical impulse, their relation to nonpsychical reality, and, finally, their idea of truth” (*AT*, 9). Stressing the subjective production of artworks as projective day-dreaming rather than their integrity as such, it fails to register their resistance to the domination of the production principle, the elevation of labor over play,¹⁴ as well as their refusal to reduce happiness to an effect of praxis alone. Instead of preserving the nonidentity of the artwork and the artist, it collapses one into the other. Because of its dogged adherence to an anti-utopian understanding of the reality principle, which validates the status quo, psychoanalysis reduces imagination to mere escapism and fails to appreciate its ability to envisage an alternate reality. “If art has psychoanalytic roots, then they are the roots of fantasy in the fantasy of omnipotence,” Adorno argued. “This fantasy includes the wish to bring about a better world. This frees the total dialectic, whereas the view of art as a merely subjective language of the unconscious does not even touch it” (*AT*, 317–19). Paradoxically, it is only by reminding the subject of the object world’s resistance to the narcissistic fantasy of omnipotence that artworks can foreshadow a better world in which subjective domination will be overcome.

The damage done by the ideology of aesthetic sublimation, Adorno argued in *Aesthetic Theory*, had in fact already begun as early as Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Whatever contribution it may have made to the progress of civilization and art itself, the implicit ideal of sublimation found there “entrusts art with the task of providing aesthetic semblance as a substitute satisfaction for the bodily satisfaction of the targeted public’s instincts and needs” (*AT*, 238). No better example of this failing was Aristotle’s claim that catharsis is inherent to an audience’s experience of tragic drama. Producing a surrogate, false satisfaction, cathartic release purges rather than validates the affects and is thus tacitly allied with renunciation and repression. “The doctrine of catharsis,” Adorno charged, “imputes to art the principle that ultimately the culture industry appropriates and administers. The index of its untruth is the well-founded doubt whether the salutary Aristotelian effect ever occurred; substitute gratification may well have spawned repressed instincts” (*AT*, 238). Catharsis

gment of validity and genesis, but he was always anxious to avoid simply reducing the former to the latter.

14. Although Adorno was critical of the traditional Marxist heroization of labor and production, he did not simply turn to play as the alternative, as his critical remarks on Friedrich Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education* and Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* make clear. See *AT*, 317–19.

depends on the logic of sacrifice, which was so much a part of the problematic dialectic of enlightenment.¹⁵

For all these reasons, Adorno disdained theories of artistic creation that drew on a reductive notion of sublimated desire. Yet, as was typical of his relentlessly dialectical method, he also acknowledged the critical potential in the concept as well. Thus he could say, building on his analysis of the contradictory implications of the idea of “progress,” that “the ambiguity of ‘sublimation’ is the psychological symbol of social progress.”¹⁶ Defenders of Freud’s notion of sublimation against his critics, such as Joel Whitebook, have therefore perhaps gone too far in identifying Adorno’s attitude entirely with unalloyed disdain.¹⁷ One indication of the complexity of his position appeared in Adorno’s critique of its apparent opposite, desublimation, in the contemporary world. If sublimation could function affirmatively in an unfree society, providing spiritualized consolations for unfulfilled desires, he never conceptualized a truly emancipatory alternative as their immediate, direct gratification under current social conditions. What Herbert Marcuse had famously condemned as “repressive desublimation” in *One-Dimensional Man*¹⁸ was echoed in *Aesthetic Theory*, where Adorno argued that “the desublimation, the immediate and momentary gain of pleasure that is demanded of art, is inner-aesthetically beneath art; in real terms, however, that momentary pleasure is unable to grant what is expected of it” (*AT*, 319). Or as he put it in *Minima Moralia*, “Ascetic ideals constitute today a more solid bulwark against the madness of the profit-economy than did the hedonistic life sixty years ago against liberal repression” (97).

Until such a time as “blind somatic pleasure” could be enjoyed in a society that allowed all of its members equal opportunity to do so—or in other words, until the realization of utopia—the nonrepressive potential in sublimation must also be acknowledged. In *Minima Moralia* Adorno allowed us a glimpse of what this might mean. “Talent,” he conjectured, “is perhaps nothing other than successfully sublimated rage, the capacity to convert energies once intensified beyond measure to destroy recalcitrant objects, into the concentra-

15. Horkheimer and Adorno, “Excursus I.”

16. Adorno, “Progress”; Adorno, *Prisms*, 85 (hereafter cited as *P*).

17. Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia*, 258–62. He argues that Adorno tacitly assumes a positive notion of the noncoercive integration of ego and drives in order to challenge the dissociation of the self in the modern world and the pseudoreconciliations that compensate for it. Drawing on the analyst Hans Loewald’s *Sublimation*, Whitebook supports a notion of sublimation that “does not envision a transcendence of inner nature but a fully embodied integration of the ego and drives” (258).

18. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 75–78.

tion of patient observation, so keeping a tight hold on the secret of things, as one had earlier when finding no peace until the quavering voice had been wrenched from the mutilated toy” (*MM*, 109). In a passage in his later essay “Resignation,” in which Adorno defended himself against the charge that he had retreated into pure theory and neglected radical praxis, he employed a similar argument: “Whoever thinks is without anger in all criticism; thinking sublimates anger. Because the thinking person does not have to inflict anger upon himself, he furthermore has no desire to inflict it upon others.”¹⁹

By foregrounding in these remarks the sublimation of rage he identified in both talent and thought, Adorno went beyond Freud’s most frequent equation of the term with the cultural transcendence and spiritual channeling of libido. Although Freud sometimes acknowledged that aggressive instinctual behavior could also be sublimated, when it came to its aesthetic expression, as classically demonstrated in his 1910 study of Leonardo da Vinci, the sexual drive predominated.²⁰ In the passages just quoted from *Minima Moralia* and “Resignation,” however, the emotion that is sublimated, according to Adorno, is not libidinal desire but the fury at being thwarted by the present order. The result is anything but the sublime elevation of desire, to recall the words of Laplanche and Pontalis, into something “grand and uplifting.”²¹ For even in a more just and happier society than our own, Adorno soberly cautioned, art will remain the commemorative repository of past suffering, which can never be rendered beautiful, let alone redeemed or justified. *Aesthetic Theory*, in fact, ends with the defiant words “It would be preferable that some fine day art vanish altogether than that it forget the suffering that is its expression and in which form has its substance. This suffering is the humane content that unfreedom counterfeits as positivity. . . . what would art be, as the writing of history, if it shook off the memory of accumulated suffering” (*AT*, 260–61).

In so arguing, Adorno was also tacitly restating his insistence on the autonomous artwork as more than a symptomatic expression of the artist’s desires, for it was through its stubborn irreducibility, the block it provides to consoling idealist metaphysics, that the aesthetic object resists the total domi-

19. Adorno, “Resignation,” 175.

20. Freud, “Leonardo da Vinci.” Adorno, however, was not alone in applying the idea of sublimation to more than libidinal desire. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, wrote of the sublimation of cruelty in his genealogy of morality. See the discussions in Goebel, *Beyond Discontent*, chap. 3; and Gemes, “Better Self.”

21. It would, of course, be necessary to parse all the meanings of “the sublime” to illuminate its links with sublimation. For a discussion of its importance for Adorno, see Wellmer, “Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime.”

nation of the subject who created it. That is, the suffering it remembers is not only that of the damaged lives of humankind but also that of the natural environment. As a placeholder for the suffering of the material world resulting from that domination of nature against which Max Horkheimer and Adorno had railed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, artworks turned one kind of sublimation into another. Rather than the sublimation of subjective desire, they could also be understood as expressing the sublimation of the suffering of nature, both within and outside the human being. And as such, they managed, to repeat the words from *Minima Moralia* just quoted, to “convert energies once intensified beyond measure to destroy recalcitrant objects, into the concentration of patient observation, so keeping a tight hold on the secret of things.”

There is, I want to suggest, also a second way to wrest a more positive reading of sublimation from Adorno’s critique of its conventional Freudian reduction. Instead of focusing on the creative artist, whose desires are channeled into culturally acceptable forms, or the thoughtful person of talent who does the same with his or her rage against suffering, it examines the collective aesthetic transfiguration of prior cultural expressions that have lost their efficacy or experienced decline. Here the emphasis is not on production or creation but on reception and aesthetic experience. “When an experience of beauty takes place,” Adorno wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*, “they [drive energies] are not repressed, suppressed, or diverted by force but rather, to use the psychological term, ‘sublimated’: this means they are retained and preserved in a certain sense” (AT, 34). In addition to informing an individual experience of beauty, sublimation can also be a retrospective, rescuing operation, communal in nature, in which historically exhausted cultural phenomena can endure, even find new life, in different discursive and institutional contexts. Going beyond the function of release Freud himself had identified in his account of aesthetic reception when he wrote that “our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds,”²² Adorno argued in typically Hegelian manner that sublimations both transcend and preserve what they transfigure. As he put it in *Aesthetic Theory*, “No sublimation succeeds that does not guard in itself what it sublimates” (94). Although drawing on prior sublimations, second-order aesthetic redescriptions can still retain some of the displaced instinctual energy whose traces they bear, perhaps in the way that contemporary “affect theory” understands the impersonal—or better put, interpersonal—residues of subjective emotions.

22. Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” 153. This interpretation is developed by Goebel, “On Being Shaken,” 161.

Cultural sublimation in this sense can take many forms, but perhaps two are worth singling out as significant for our argument. The first is the redefinition of devotional religious art from within the Western tradition in aesthetic terms or as examples of cultural patrimony. The second is the redefinition of so-called primitive objects or practices, which once served religious, magical, or other purposes, as also valuable in purely formal terms and capable of being appreciated as such when extracted from their functional context. In other words, it has been possible to rescue and revalorize objects that appeared to have had outlived their devotional or cultic functions and turn them into what aesthetic theory since Kant had called embodiments of “purposiveness without purpose.” Another way to characterize the change is to say that objects and practices that once had potent performative powers could be revalued after their ability to do something in the world had waned by turning them into objects or practices of aesthetic contemplation. Or to give the transformation one more twist, objects and practices that were once embedded in liturgical or cultic practices and interpreted as such by theological or ethnological discourses could be resituated as aesthetically valuable in the discourse of art history. Here sublimation is not of the artist’s libidinal desires or rage at suffering but of the prior works that may have once resulted from them. Here new meaning is derived from the waning, but still meaningful, sublimation of prior emotional drives.

The iconoclastic smashing of what were considered dangerous idols has been a frequent practice of both intrareligious iconoclastic movements, such as those in the Byzantine Church during the eighth and ninth centuries and the European Reformation in the sixteenth century, and self-proclaimed virtuous political movements, such as those arising during the French Revolution.²³ Taken as more than harmless symbolic representations or mimetic images, idols were understood by their foes as variously fetishistic embodiments of false gods, dubious intercessors between the human and the divine, and remnants of irrational superstition.²⁴ In addition to problematic religious functions, they also were often understood as legitimating hierarchical political power. For the critics of the ancien régime who dreamed of a new republic of virtue, “the arts were a result of luxury and vice, that . . . flourished only in decadent, over-civilized societies and provided opiates for the subjects of tyrannical rulers.”²⁵

23. The iconoclastic impulse in religion and politics has had many interpreters and attracted many historians. For a useful overview, see Besançon, *Forbidden Image*.

24. For an excellent analysis of the stakes involved in the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy, see Alloa, “Visual Studies in Byzantium.”

25. Idzerda, “Iconoclasm in the French Revolution,” 19 (hereafter cited as IFR).

The impulse to smash idols led to the actual destruction of many objects whose performative potency was seen as either literally or symbolically nefarious. Attempts to save them thus had to disrupt their power to make something happen (or at least neutralize the belief that they had that power) and then re-describe them as objects of disinterested aesthetic contemplation. The needed change was more than merely taxonomic or categorical, as something of the aura that had informed their ability to enable devotional respect had to be retained to secure their new value. Here what might be called aesthetic sublimation avoided the lamentable effects of outright cultural repression. Churches might be stripped of their excessive ornamentation, but altarpieces, statues, and the like could find new sanctuaries on or within the walls of secular museums. In Europe, a crucial turning point in the visual arts, often acknowledged by cultural historians, came during the de-Christianizing fervor of the French Revolution. As Stanley Idzerda noted in his pioneering study of revolutionary iconoclasm:

The sale of many church buildings to private individuals raised fears that the mosaics, stained-glass windows, statues, and paintings in these buildings would be either destroyed or dispersed. To avoid the danger of such an artistic loss to the nation, the Constituent Assembly in 1790 created a Monuments Commission composed of members of several royal academies. The chief duty of this group was to inventory and collect in various depots those works of art thought worthy of preservation by the state. (IFR, 14)

The transformation of the Louvre in Paris from a royal palace into a repository of the people's cultural patrimony was the capstone of these efforts. It was inaugurated on August 10, 1793, the first anniversary of the expulsion of Louis XVI, and marked by the placement of a large plaque announcing the transformation over the entrance to the Gallery of Apollo, a royal reception hall originally dedicated to the Sun King, Louis XIV. Although the iconoclastic impulse was slow to disappear, the effect of the transformation was profound. Again, according to Idzerda,

while many *sans-culottes* admired symbols of "royalty, feudalism, and superstition" inside the museum, they continued to engage in iconoclastic activities outside of it. This paradoxical activity need not imply a contradiction in attitudes. It seems probable that when these works were seen in the museum, torn out of their cultural context, they were regarded only as "art"; their significance as tokens, symbols, or *mana* had been drained away because of their placement in an artificial situation, a strange milieu. (IFR, 24)

By disentangling the sacred or political function of works from their aesthetic value and distinguishing between corrupt luxury, the emblem of aristocratic privilege, and disinterested beauty available for appreciation by all, it was possible to allow them to earn a different kind of respect in the semisacred space of a public museum. By the 1820s G. W. F. Hegel could confidently say that in front of formerly devotional images, “we bow the knee no longer.”²⁶ To be sure, such treasures could now be called “ornaments of the State” (quoted in IFR, 23) and gain economic value in the more profane space of the capitalist art market. But they could also serve as embodiments of aesthetic value in an immanent realm of art for its own sake. As such, they drew on a kind of cultural sublimation, which could produce a collective version of the receptive pleasure that Freud saw derived “from a liberation of tensions in our minds.”

A similar story, although one less marked by the threat of puritanical or revolutionary violence, has often been told of the aesthetic transformation of sacred music. Here the emblematic case is the history of Johann Sebastian Bach’s great oratorio *St. Matthew’s Passion*, written in 1727 to present a musical version of the Passion of Christ for Good Friday vesper services in the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig. A little more than a century later Felix Mendelssohn conducted a somewhat streamlined version of it for a secular audience at the Sing-Akademie in Berlin, the first time it had been moved from the sacred space of a church to the secular confines of a concert hall. Here it no longer served liturgical purposes for a religious congregation but could instead function for a general audience as an exemplar of what soon would be called “absolute music.” As Celia Applegate has shown, the concert was instrumental in creating the national image of Germans as the people of music and launching a revival of interest in Bach, whose reputation had been languishing, that has continued to this day.²⁷

Although other examples can be adduced of the aesthetic sublimation of Western religious material, such as reading the Bible as literature,²⁸ the second major example is the redescription of so-called primitive artifacts in purely formal terms or as exemplars of universal archetypes. After being grouped under the generic category of primitive, their performative functions as literal instruments of magic or objects of religious worship were then sublimated into the metaphorical magic of autotelic works of art commanding a different kind of devotion. In fact, the literal transfer of those artifacts from natural history or

26. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 103.

27. See Applegate, *Bach in Berlin*.

28. See Norton, *History of the English Bible as Literature*.

ethnographic museums, where they served as “documents” of exotic cultures, to art museums, where they became “artworks” in their own right, gathered momentum in the early twentieth century. Celebrating “noble savages” as the antidote to exhausted Western civilization had, of course, already enjoyed a long history,²⁹ but modernist artists were more inspired by the formal properties of the objects they had produced, which had hitherto been of interest only to anthropologists or collectors of exotic curiosities.³⁰ Although anticipated by Paul Gauguin’s fascination for the South Seas, the canonical turning point is often said to be the inspiration of African masks at the Trocadéro Museum in Paris in Pablo Picasso’s *Les demoiselles d’Avignon* in 1907.

Much has been made by postmodernist and postcolonial theorists, and justly so, of the costs of this aesthetic recoding and displacement, whose entanglement with the European imperialist appropriation of the material wealth of exotic cultures has not gone unremarked.³¹ The elevation of so-called primitive objects with originally ritual, decorative, apotropaic, or magical functions into works of high art, theorists point out, may have been inspired by formalist intentions, but also led to the insertion of works into the art market as commodities, a fate already suffered by aesthetically sublimated religious objects rescued from iconoclastic destruction. Ironically, so-called primitive objects were stripped of one fetishistic function only to be endowed with another. In addition, when read as instances of species-wide mythic or psychological archetypes, their irreducible otherness was subsumed under a dubious notion of ahistorical universality or alleged common “affinity,”³² which tacitly imposed Western values on them. They were turned into fungible exemplars of the vapid humanism of “the family of man” ethos, notoriously expressed in the photographic exhibition organized by Edward Steichen in the 1950s.³³ Thus, although as in the case of Western religious artifacts, they may have

29. See, e.g., Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*.

30. The classic account is Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*. See also Rubin, “Primitivism” in *Twentieth-Century Art*; and Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*. In literature as well, primitivism had its lure. See, e.g., Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*; Pan, *Primitive Renaissance*; and Etherington, *Literary Primitivism*.

31. See, e.g., Foster, “Primitive Unconscious of Modern Art”; and Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*.

32. This frequently used term, as Clifford points out (*Predicament of Culture*, 190), suggests a natural kinship relationship beyond mere resemblance.

33. Interestingly, Horkheimer wrote an admiring introduction to Steichen’s exhibition *The Family of Man* when it came to Frankfurt in 1958. For an account of the ambiguities of his defense, see Jay, “Max Horkheimer and *The Family of Man*.” This collection aims to resurrect the reputation of the exhibition against its legions of detractors.

gained something by being taken seriously as objects of the highest aesthetic value, it was not without a cost.

How, we now have to ask, does Adorno's dialectical critique of sublimation comport with the posterior aesthetic redemption of traditional religious or "primitive" objects, with all its ambiguities? Does his hostility to the claim that artists sublimate their desires extend to sublimation understood in this very different sense? Does his more positive claim that talent and thought can be understood as sublimations of rage at suffering, both of humans and of nature, translate into a more generous attitude toward the aesthetic sublimation of religious or cultic objects in the modern world? Does it extend beyond the sublimation of subjective desires to the spiritual transfiguration of the material world, the world of a nature that is more than dominated or repressed in the name of human self-preservation?

Although there are few explicit answers to these questions, we can find hints of Adorno's likely position in several of his related arguments. Although rarely commenting on the visual arts, he did ponder the implications of the sequestration of artworks in museums in an essay he wrote pitting Paul Valéry's stress on the priority of aesthetic objects against Marcel Proust's on subjective experience. In it Adorno argued that

works of art can fully embody the *promesse du bonheur* only when they have been uprooted from their native soil and have set out along the path to their own destruction. . . . The procedure which today relegates every work of art to the museum, even Picasso's most recent sculpture, is irreversible. It is not solely reprehensible, however, for it presages a situation in which art, having completed its estrangement from human ends, returns, in Novalis' words, to life. (*P*, 185)³⁴

A similar argument informed his defense in 1951 of Bach against his contemporary devotees, who wanted to find in him the Pietist believer, whose music expressed the revelation "of time-honored bounds of tradition, of the spirit of medieval polyphony, of the theologically vaulted cosmos" (*P*, 135).³⁵ Those who insisted on playing Bach's music only with original instruments and in sacred settings, hoping to restore its "authenticity," were betraying, so Adorno charged, his compositional innovations, which still resonate today: "They have

34. Adorno's appeal to Stendhal's phrase *promesse du bonheur*—incorrectly cited by Nietzsche and then Marcuse as *promesse de bonheur*—is discussed in Finlayson, "Artwork and the *Promesse du Bonheur* in Adorno."

35. For discussions of his attitude toward Bach, see Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, 225–32; and Berry, "Romantic Modernism."

made him into a composer for organ festivals in well-preserved Baroque towns, into ideology” (*P*, 136). Despite their historicist pretensions, they are more like purveyors of an allegedly timeless ontology, who fail to acknowledge the movement of history, which compels form to develop with variations rather than remain static. “No matter how it is done in the Church of St. Thomas, a performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*, for instance, done with meagre means sounds pale and indecisive to the present-day ear. . . . such a performance thereby contradicts the intrinsic essence of Bach’s music. The only adequate interpretation of the dynamic objectively embedded in his work is one which realizes it” (*P*, 144). Artworks transcend not only the context out of which they are created but also their performance history, which manifests only some of the ways in which they can be realized. To be true to Bach’s genius, Adorno concluded, is to recognize the inspiration he provided to modernist music. “Justice is done Bach . . . solely through the most advanced composition, which in turn converges with the level of Bach’s continually unfolding work. . . . his heritage has passed on to composition, which is loyal to him in being disloyal; it calls his music by name in producing it anew” (*P*, 146).

When religious impulses apparently inspired later works, such as Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*, which Adorno called his “alienated masterpiece,” it did so only in ways that betrayed the impossibility of reversing the transition from the devotional to the aesthetic. “The religiosity of the *Missa*, if one can speak unconditionally of such a thing,” Adorno wrote, “is neither that of one secure in belief nor that of a world religion of such an idealist nature that it would require no effort of its adherent to believe in it. . . . In its aesthetic form the work asks what and how one may sing of the absolute without deceit, and because of this, there occurs the compression which alienates it and causes it to approach incomprehension.”³⁶ Here aesthetic sublimation meant the opposite of affirmative reconciliation, as the work expressed the impossibility—at this moment of historical development—of an organic totality unifying subject and object that had been achieved in Beethoven’s earlier symphonies. Instead, in the *Missa* “he exposed the classical as classicizing. He rejected the affirmative, that which uncritically endorsed Being in the idea of the classically symphonic.”³⁷

If there is a later equivalent of Christ’s Passion, which had once been capable of musical expression with still-sacred intent by Bach, it appeared, so Adorno argued in 1929, in Alban Berg’s human-all-too-human opera *Wozzeck*. The very character of the work, Adorno wrote,

36. Adorno, “Alienated Masterpiece,” 120.

37. Adorno, “Alienated Masterpiece,” 122.

is *Passion*. The music does not suffer within the human being, does not, itself, participate in its actions and emotions. It suffers over him; only for this reason is it able, like the music of the old passion plays, to represent every emotion without ever having to assume the mask of one of the characters of the tragic drama. The music lays the suffering that is dictated by the stars above bodily onto the shoulders of the human being, the individual.³⁸

Suffering rather than desire, Adorno implied, can be understood as the affect that fuels aesthetic sublimation in a secular world, which transcends the emotional life of the creative subject.

Did a similar attitude inform Adorno's response to the modernist appropriation of so-called primitive culture? To provide a detailed answer would require parsing his subtle and complicated analysis of related terms such as *archaic* and *barbaric* in works such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but a few basic points can be ventured. In *Aesthetic Theory*, while arguing against an ahistorical definition of art, Adorno noted that "much that was not art—cultic works, for instance—has over the course of history metamorphosed into art; and much that once was art is that no longer" (*AT*, 3). If "art" defied easy definition, no less dubious was the search for its origins in some primeval need. Nonetheless, Adorno did hazard a speculation about one element in its ur-history that still echoed in the art of today: "It is doubtless that art did not begin with works, whether they were primarily magical or already aesthetic. The cave drawings are stages of a process and in no way an early one. The first images must have been preceded by mimetic comportment—the assimilation of self to its other—that does not fully coincide with the superstition of direct magical influence" (*AT*, 329). The residue of such benign mimesis, which Adorno often contrasted with the subjective domination of nature serving self-preservation, meant that "aesthetic comportment contains what has been belligerently excised from civilization and repressed, as well as the human suffering under the loss, a suffering already expressed in the earliest forms of mimesis" (*AT*, 330). Although such a residue might be called irrational from the viewpoint of the instrumental rationality pervading the modern world, it was actually an indication of a more profound and emancipatory ideal of reason preserved in art. Here the relevant sublimation was not of libidinal desire or the memory of suffering but of the mimetic faculty that had been sacrificed—with the exception of children's play³⁹—to the demands of instrumental ratio-

38. Adorno, "Opera *Wozzeck*," 625.

39. For a critique of Adorno's appeal to childhood experience in his treatment of sublimation, see Connell, "Childhood Experience and the Image of Utopia."

nality and the domination of nature. As Peter Uwe Hohendahl has put it, “By remaining attached to the primitive, for Adorno the advanced artwork resists the process of Enlightenment. . . . Adorno recognizes the ambiguity of the modern artwork, its tendency to return to the logic of mimesis.”⁴⁰

There was, to be sure, also a regressive potential in the modernist exaltation of the primitive or even more generally the “pre-capitalist,” against whose dangerous political implications Adorno warned in an aphorism in *Minima Moralia* called “Savages are not more noble” (52–53). In aesthetic terms, Adorno most explicitly discerned it in his relentless critique of the music of Igor Stravinsky, which he invidiously compared with Arnold Schoenberg’s atonal alternative in *Philosophy of New Music*. Likening *The Rite of Spring* to the visual modernists’ discovery of African sculpture, Adorno wrote: “It belongs to the years in which ‘savages’ were first called ‘primitives,’ to the world of Sir James Frazier, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. . . . When the avant-garde avowed its attachment to African sculpture, the reactionary aim of the movement was still entirely hidden.”⁴¹ It was, however, on full display in Stravinsky’s embrace of the sacrifice of the individual to the collective, which is enacted without protest in *The Rite of Spring* with its brutal rhythms and convulsive shocks, anticipating the slaughter of World War I.

But unlike postcolonial and postmodernist critics, Adorno refused to advocate the reembedding of what came to be called primitive artifacts in their allegedly “authentic” contexts of origin, de-aestheticizing them to restore cultic wholeness. In *The Jargon of Authenticity* and elsewhere, he was highly suspicious of attempts to grant priority to the original over the copy, the genuine over the derived, the pure over the impure. As in his insistence on distinguishing between artworks and the psychology of their creators, he refused to reduce the validity of aesthetic objects to their genetic matrix.⁴² Whatever the limits of aesthetic sublimation, it was superior to the repressive desublimation that sought to reverse the historical process and regain some sort of libidinal immediacy, a caution that extended to naive attempts to return to a pristine version of nature before its domination.⁴³ Adorno’s much-derided hostility to jazz can be at least partly understood in these terms, for, so he claimed, “jazz is the false liquidation of art—instead of utopia becoming reality it disappears from the picture” (*P*, 132). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* he and Horkheimer could

40. Hohendahl, *Fleeting Promise of Art*, 96.

41. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 111–12.

42. Adorno, *Jargon of Authenticity*; see also Jay, “Taking on the Stigma of Authenticity.”

43. See Cook, *Adorno on Nature*.

in contrast define “the secret of aesthetic sublimation” as the ability “to present fulfillment in its brokenness,” something denied to the culture industry, which “does not sublimate: it suppresses.”⁴⁴

Thus, despite the reservations Adorno expressed against the Freudian reduction of artistic creation to sublimated desire, he could say in *Aesthetic Theory* that “by re-enacting the spell of reality, by sublimating it as an image, art at the same time liberates itself from it; sublimation and freedom mutually accord” (AT, 130). Even Stravinsky’s appropriation of primitivism had to be understood dialectically as a placeholder for a more emancipatory liquidation. For despite its regressive dangers, it also expresses “the longing to abolish social appearances, the urge for truth behind bourgeois mediations and its masks of violence. The heritage of the bourgeois revolution is active in this disposition of mind” (AT, 112). It is for this reason that Stravinsky’s music was denounced by fascists, who preferred the restoration of classical kitsch in their art and literal barbarism in their violent actions. “In the Third Reich of countless human sacrifice,” Adorno noted, “*The Rite of Spring* would not have been performable” (AT, 112).

In light of the three objections Adorno made to Freud’s theory of aesthetic sublimation when it was used reductively to explain artistic creativity, a somewhat more complicated picture emerges. As in the case of Marcuse, who had defended “nonrepressive sublimation” in *Eros and Civilization*, Adorno distinguished between versions in terms of their affirmative or critical potential.⁴⁵ Rather than adapt to the status quo and seamlessly channel the transgressive idiosyncrasies of artists into culturally uplifting consolations for the renunciation of desires, sublimation can also mean preserving the potential of past sources of dissatisfaction with the present, such as religious yearning and the primitivist disdain for contemporary civilization, for future appropriation. This is why it presents “fulfillment in its brokenness,” rather than as fully realized. Not only are the memory of past suffering and the rage against its continuation in the present preserved, but traces of the mimetic impulse that inspired art in the first place are kept alive. Thus Adorno can define successful sublimating as guarding in itself “what it sublimates.”

This survival also means that despite Adorno’s fear that the theory of sublimation can spiritualize what was originally a corporeal or material interest,

44. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 111. For a critique of the distinction between culture and the culture industry in these terms, see Huhn, “Sublimation of Culture in Adorno’s Aesthetics.”

45. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 190.

the second of his complaints against psychoanalytic reductionism, he never endorsed a simple reversal of that hierarchy. Art, indeed culture in general, did involve a certain renunciation of bodily desires or at least their immediate realization. And as a result civilization did, as Freud memorably argued, bring with it inevitable discontents. But the alternative was certainly not a simple restoration of dominated nature or the unmediated desublimation of instinctual desire. Instead, it was necessary to heal the wound with the weapon that had caused it. As Eckart Goebel notes:

Adorno moves beyond the antithesis of sublimation and the drives. Only false sublimation, with adaptation and integration (in Freud: narcissistic idealization) as its aim, reproduces the archaic desires of the drives as they once were, because they were never changed. Aesthetic experience as conceived by Adorno differentiates instinctual desire by comprehending sublimation both as differentiation and as a protest against the world under “the rule of brutal self-preservation,” which corresponds to the identical, rigid self.⁴⁶

Finally, because the sublimation of reception rather than production, the posterior rescue of exhausted cultural traces of prior sublimations, focuses on the artworks rather than the artists, it avoids the dangers of excessive subjectivism. Instead, it acknowledges the primacy of the object, the resistance that the world, both natural and cultural, presents to the domination implied in the quest for self-preservation at all costs. What is sublimated need not be reduced to the libidinal needs of the thwarted subject but can be understood as the delicate mixture of spiritual and corporeal, rational and sensual, formal and substantive that humankind has come to call art. Against any narcissistic regression, it posits an encounter with otherness that honors the nonidentity of subject and object.

An example of what Adorno may mean is presented in *The Freudian Body*, Leo Bersani’s discussion of psychoanalysis and art. Imaginatively reading Stéphane Mallarmé’s “L’après-midi d’un faune” as less a transcendence of desire than its active extension, Bersani argues that “the sublimating conscious described by the faun operates on what might be called a principle of accelerating supplementarity. . . . Mallarmé encourages us to view sublimation not as a mechanism by which desire is denied, but rather as a self-reflexive activity by which desire multiplies and diversifies its representations.”⁴⁷ With a certain

46. Goebel, *Beyond Discontent*, 224.

47. Bersani, *Freudian Body*, 48–49. For another suggestive reading of sublimation, which draws on the work of Julia Kristeva, see Russell, “Strange New Beauty.”

irony, the faun's desire is neither realized nor repressed; rather, it proliferates, which works to undermine his bounded, integral selfhood. The "blind somatic pleasure" that Adorno identified with utopia turns out to be less the restoration of primary narcissistic oneness than an open-ended play of mimetic repetition and displacement. Rather than a defense mechanism or a version of symptom formation, sublimation in this larger sense draws on the legacy of past cultural creation to enable a future in which happiness may, against all odds, still be achieved.

Martin Jay is Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, Berkeley.

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