

Art and society in Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*

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Abstract

The main theme of this text is the relations between art and society as woven by Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*, giving special emphasis, among others, to the concepts of disarticulation of art, truth content, authentic art and dissonance. To fulfill this purpose, we shall use the text of Adorno already mentioned, as well as other texts by the same author on specific issues and the support of scholars such as Rodrigo Duarte, Marc Jimenez and Marcia Tiburi, among others.

Keywords: art; society; Aesthetic Theory; Theodor Adorno; contemporary art.

Introduction

The relations between art and society have always been complex, especially regarding to the dependence or submission of one in relation to the other. If a work of art, like any other cultural production, cannot be separated from the social context in which it occurs, it cannot be summed up to it or instrumentalized by it. Contemporary aesthetic phenomena lead us to perceive, much more explicitly than could ever have been perceived in the long historical trajectory of influence between both these spheres, that when devoid of its intrinsic truth, its autonomy, when subjugated to the social context, art itself loses its character of spontaneous production and becomes ideological propaganda. Of course, it would be naive to pretend that only in the XXth century, with the mass media advent, art would have been limited or influenced, although not consciously and intentionally, by a determined network of values and conceptions, even preconceptions, supported by a specific social, economic and historical configuration, which ended up giving these art works their individuality, enabling them to differentiate from the thousands of other art works already produced. Its value as a work of art occurs as long as it relates to such a context, often breaking its links with the already culturally accepted dogmas, and it makes possible the creation of something new from itself. This autonomy sustained by the cultural creations that Adorno will call “serious art”, and which is opposed to the market subservience of cultural productions of consumption and entertainment, allows them to dialogue with the social context of its emergence. That is to say that, although a specific work of art is in profound interdependence of the time, of resources, of technique, of

the artist's possibilities, of the various contingencies that, in short, limit it as physical and concrete production, it, on the other hand, and that is what interests us most at that moment, it gives a precious testimony of such context and of the flourishing culture in such a situation.

In an attempt to deal with such reflections within Adorno's conceptual framework, we turn to the text of *Aesthetic Theory* to recompose the author's arguments about these aspects of the relationship between art and society. Based on this text, and with the use of other texts by Adorno, as well as nationally and internationally recognized scholars for their dedication to Adorno's work, we intend in this writing to provide an overview of the main argumentative points that permeate this always problematic relationship between art and society from what can be considered one of the vastest and complexes works that bequeathed Adorno's thought to us.

1. Art and society

Adorno delves, in *Aesthetic Theory*, some reflections that have already been mentioned in other writings, such as the difficulties of artistic creation symbolized by the opposition between the attitudes of Stravinsky and Schönberg which he deals with in *Philosophy of New Music* (1974, p. 15), as in the fact that music, due to its non-representative nature and its technical difficulties of fixation and reproducibility, took longer than other genres of cultural production, such as literature and visual arts, to be transformed into a consumer article. Only with sonorous cinema and with the incorporation of music into commercial advertising, this branch of art was effectively appropriated by the system of cultural goods production. It also resumes, in a way, the criticisms of the commodification of culture elaborated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (DUARTE, 2003, p. 110). That is why it is worth stating that, although the cultural industry is not the main theme of the voluminous *Aesthetic Theory* as a whole, each paragraph of this text can be appreciated in the light of reflections on the culture industry and that the author is postulating his aesthetic considerations taking into account the existence of this branch of activities that explores the human need for culture for commercial purposes and that radically contrasts with the proposal of art as an autonomous cultural activity in relation to the market.

However, the devastations that are attributed to the period without style and that are criticized on the aesthetic plane are not an expression of a spirit of *kitsch* new era, but products of an extra artistic element, of the false rationality of the industry governed by profit. By mobilizing for its ends what seems to be the irrational moments of art, capital destroys the latter. Aesthetic rationality and irrationality are also mutilated by the curse of society (ADORNO, 1982, p. 232).

The difficulties of aesthetic expression in a world completely dominated by the oppressive logic of the market are even worse than the subservience to which artists were subjected during the millennia in which they were tutored by the aristocracy, by the dominant religions and even

by the bourgeoisie rising of the beginning of the capitalist modernity. “If, before the French Revolution, artists were lackeys, they now become entertainers” (ADORNO, 1982, p. 283). If, on one hand, the artist gained freedom from forces outside his conscience, being able to choose the theme of the work, its material, its execution, on the other, he is now linked to demands of common taste, to the merchantability of his work. Thus, the freedom of creation gave way only to the uncertainties inherent in the real possibility of survival of art in the reified world, so that these goods produced by the cultural industry cannot be considered in any way as successors of traditional art.

Much more than a distraction for those who just await catastrophe, the art that Adorno proposes is the main way of demanding a better and more humane *praxis*, which is not done in the name of a state of self-justifying domination. But, instead of being the art that influences the world to improve it, in late capitalism, it is the blind and arid world of practice that ends up influencing the sphere of art and besieging its autonomy.

The work of art is the result of a process as much as that same process is at rest. As rationalist metaphysics proclaimed in its heyday as the principle of the world, it is a monad: center of forces and thing (*Ding*) at the same time. The works of art are closed to each other, they are blind and, despite everything, they represent in their hermeticism what is found outside. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 2014).

Adorno considers works of art as monads, and compares their isolation with the loneliness of the individual in the turmoil of modern life under the weight of capitalism, their withdrawal in their personality and the ideology that turns the misery of alienation into the dubious virtue of autonomy or of self-sufficiency. It is through the aspect of denouncing the ideological and commercial manipulation to which contemporary cultural productions are subjected that Adorno's aesthetic theory is affiliated with the critical theory from which it comes (JIMENEZ, 1977, p. 31). In this way, this reflection on the contemporary artistic context is both critical and philosophical, since its task is to restore art to its right of existence that is alien to the purpose and not as a consumer commodity. If both the work of art and the individual are insular in this context, the artist, who is closely linked to both, is the ultimate expression of this abandonment, as he works with what Adorno called the dialectic of loneliness. Even so, despite the isolation, social reality will always present itself in his work, whether or not he intends to discuss it in a more or less conscious way, even if he tries to avoid it.

Thus everything that works of art itself contains in form and material, in spirit and subject, has emigrated from reality (*Realität*) to works of art and divides itself of their reality in them: thus it always becomes its copy. Even the purest aesthetic determination, the apparition, is mediated in relation to reality as its determined denial. [...] If, after the beginning of modernity, art absorbed objects foreign to art that are integrated into its formal law, not entirely modified, the mimesis of art abandons itself, until the assembly, on the contrary. Art is forced to do so by social reality. Although it is opposed to society, is nevertheless able to obtain a point of

view that is external to itself; it is only able to oppose itself by identifying with that is rebelled against. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 122; p. 154).

This highlights the ambiguous character of art, namely, its unambiguous and simultaneous autonomous and deeply intermingled with social reality. But art only adequately reflects society to the extent that it becomes autonomous. The relations between art and society occur in such a way that art, as an immanent monad, represents the itself without being it. Thus, art does not become social due to a possible social origin of its contents or through the participation of social forces in its production mechanisms, but due to the possibility of this art to radically oppose the society in which it is produced and serve as an antithesis to it, so that the mere fact of its existence is a form of opposition to society, especially to the mass society we live in, preserving this art its autonomous character that makes it an unthinkable in *itself* within an economic system of total exchange where all things, as goods, are *for another*.

Even the most sublime work of art adopts a determined position in relation to the empirical reality, at the same time that it is removed from its charm, once and for all, but always concretely and unconsciously polemically against its situation regarding the historical moment. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 16).

This constant tension of the work of art between its autonomy and its dependence on the context means that art, as a concept and a limited field of knowledge, is not immune to external interferences. Each work is a specific moment in which a fragile balance develops, which means that any attentive look at it, in addition to not being restricted exclusively to its aesthetic criteria, which denounces the vacuity of any esthetician current, must be carefully directed, to recognize that far beyond answering his questions, the work is also a question that is asked of him, denying the possibility of passive and disinterested contemplation in favor of a dialectical fruition, in which both spectator and work would participate as poles of tension.

Just as art realizes itself, so its knowledge is affected in a dialectical way. The more the contemplator surrenders, the greater the energy with which he enters the work of art and the objectivity he perceives inside. It participates in objectivity when its energy, even its diverted subjective 'projection', is extinguished in the work of art. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 199).

But the work is related to the viewer in this way, with fragile balance and tension, as much as it is related to the reality and to the socio-historical context in which it is produced, and cannot be completely disconnected of this empirical element, thus making its otherness.

But art, as a form of knowledge, receives all its material and its forms from reality – especially from society – to transform it, and ends up being embarrassed by irreconcilable contradictions. Its depth is measured by the fact of being able or not, by the reconciliation that its formal laws bring to contradictions, to highlight the real irreconciliation. Contradiction vibrates in its most remote mediations, as in the most extreme *pianissimo* of music, the horrors of reality resound. [...] It is with this criterion that one must see the seriousness of the whole work of art. As something that

escapes reality and yet is immersed in it, art vibrates between seriousness and joy. It is this tension that constitutes art. (ADORNO, 2001, p. 11; 18).

But these characteristics of tension and balance, placed by Adorno as conditions of a true art are not the standards adopted by the massive cultural production of the consumption and spectacle society. This will cause art in the 20th century to lose its evidence and, as a result, to feel threatened in its own concept, that is, in its possibility of still being art.

Since art was taken by the brake of the cultural industry and placed among consumer goods, its joy has become synthetic, false, bewitched. Nothing cheerful is compatible with arbitrarily imposed. The peaceful relationship between joy and nature does not tolerate manipulations and calculations. (ADORNO, 2001, p. 11).

The work of art, unlike mass cultural production, serves, above all, the truth. Obviously, we are not working here with the philosophical concept of truth, as *alethea*, as a fixed essence to be unveiled by the rational mechanism, but rather, recovering here a Benjamin's influence (BENJAMIN, 1984, p. 51) with a more aesthetic conception: truth as contemplation of an element in constant transformation and that will never be imprisoned by the static stubbornness of the concept. In this way, the true content of a work is directly related to its capacity for negativity even when it goes beyond its limitations and starts to influence non-aesthetic dimensions, showing, in its eternal relationship with society, the antinomies present in it. "The real content of art can be understood as this projection of transgressive effects in non-aesthetic areas that makes them show their own contradictions and their eminently contingent character." (MOLANO VEGA, 2009, p. 86) It is given by its characteristic of broken happiness promise (JIMENEZ, 1977, p. 177), in other words, the work of art will always point to something absent, to another that is not found, but it will never be direct or univocal in its reference. The real content of a work is, in a way, its enigmatic character, its ability to point to what is and what is not in it simultaneously. "The real content of works of art, on which their quality finally depends, is historical even to the deepest of itself. [...] History is immanent to the works, it is not an external destination, no fluctuating assessment." (ADORNO, 1982, p. 217) The criteria of truth content, and as a result of the quality of an art work, are not given by its technical perfection, but by its ability to make the "voice of the subject's majority, emancipation of the myth and reconciliation with it" (ADORNO, 1982, p. 240) or, as defined in another passage, in which the content of truth is linked with philosophical reflection and the "waiting" of the work for its interpretation:

The real content of works of art is the objective resolution of the enigma of each one. In demanding the solution, the enigma refers to the content of truth, which can only be obtained through philosophical reflection. This, and nothing else, is what justifies aesthetics. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 149).

The success of a work of art as such is given, therefore, not by its possibility of comparison with other works, what would be unfair and useless, but by its internal coherence as a work of art, which would allow it to be called art only at the specific moment when it achieved such success, being, on the contrary, an approximation, in which “the average is already the bad one” (ADORNO, 1982, p. 213). Thus, coherence, despite not being the only essential factor for the success of a work of art as such, is one of its essential moments. “What makes people aware of the correctness or falsity of a work according to their own criteria are the moments when universality is concretely imposed on the monad.” (ADORNO, 1982, p. 215) Although it does not constitute reconciliation with the spirit itself, the serious work of art provides, at least, a remarkable intellectual increase in its recipients. These, not passive, but rather critical, contrast radically with consumers attached to the intellectual domination of the cultural industry. (DUARTE, 2003, p. 56) The current proximity of art to reality is a falsehood created by the manipulation of the cultural industry, as well as the forced intimacy between the so-called consumers of art and their object of consumption. The loss suffered by the art of its artistic character due to its instrumentalization, what Adorno calls *Entkunstung*, is a direct result of the general tendency of modern society to disenchant various aspects of life, represented by the passion for the tangible, the primacy of the scientific that underpins the current technocracy, which demonstrates the increasingly worrying intellectual difficulty of the mass of consumers to minimally understand the most elaborate artistic manifestations.

The truth content of the work, therefore, is not a truth underlying it and which would just be waiting for its interpretation, as a concept to be disseminated by artistic means, or a message, or even the work as a mean of access the Idea or the Absolute, as the idealists philosophical systems wondered about, but that enigmatic characteristic that decides on the veracity or falsity of the work as itself, and this criterion is only reached through philosophical reflection. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 152) It does not point to a direct solution to the enigma, since it is related to the otherness of the work, which is not univocal, since every work, as a monad, is related to a myriad of possible alterities, reinforcing the identification of their enjoyment with philosophical reflection.

2. Art and *disartization*

According to Marc Jimenez (1977, p. 88), the expression “art becomes disartized” (*Kunst wird entkunstet*) appears for the first time in 1955, in a chapter of *Prisms* that is dedicated to jazz and the forms of manipulation that use it as an artistic and musical phenomenon, its influence on young people and its commercial exploitation. And, according to Rodrigo Duarte (2007, p. 25), the process of art decommissioning could be understood as prior to the phenomenon of the commodification of culture, going back, for example, to the end of art prophesied by Hegel in his aesthetic lectures, who believed that art, as a manifestation of the

spirit, was about to give up its place for rationally established philosophical knowledge. Still within the reflection on the industrialization of culture, the disartization will be understood as the result of a false projection of the subject, belonging to the mass of consumers, on the work of art, through which they would project their inner nullity on this, disqualifying them, for not being up to the task, in a process that, in the context of Adorno's concepts, would be the opposite extreme of *mimesis* as aesthetic category. On the other hand, in addition to being a natural process in cultural goods, the loss of aesthetic specificity can also be noticed in *avant-garde* works intentionally as a strategy to oppose the process of daily life aestheticizing operated by late capitalism, which would be a drastic reduction to the distance between art and life, not in the sense of elevating life, but of degrading art.

In contrast to this intellectual insufficiency of the general public, there is a deliberate simplification of industrialized cultural production in order to facilitate its reception, even if unconscious, as a pedagogical vehicle for the ideology that aims to adapt this receiver to the economic system. The reduction in the distance between art and the public makes it possible, therefore, to see art as a commodity, as a mailable object, so that the popularization and easy access to art, made available by technological means does not bring a cultural improvement, but rather confirm and consolidate a process that turns culture into just another cog in the big machine that has become modern society. *Entkunstung* is, therefore, a process that removes from the work of art what characterizes it as such and turns it into merchandise, in just work; it means the disarmament of art, an aspect to which it is associated, including the liquidation of the tragic through this approximation between art and everyday reality.

The impossibility of judging a work of art according to objective criteria gives way to a dialectical analysis, which, according to its broad aspect, can serve as a critical antithesis of both these moments, that of analysis from the work and point of view, on the other hand, from the viewer's point of view. "The work of art must aim for balance without completely dominating it: this is an aspect of the character with an aesthetic appearance." (ADORNO, 1982, p. 190) The indissoluble and indispensable association of subject and object, spectator and work, makes the dialectical process of aesthetic enjoyment always develop between these pairs, demonstrating a tenuous balance, which, instead of trying to establish an identity, seeks to establish a reciprocity between the two. The function of the esthete, while related to the critical theory, is to make clear to himself the true content of the work, first of all discarding a whole host of fixed and consecrated interpretations from tradition, understood as the continuity of ideological interpretation of the work throughout history. Only then will the philosophical criticism addressed to works of art be able to see that their real content is not extinguished because every work of art is an enigma. With respect to the works of the past, a true critique will demonstrate the critical potential to the society that underlies it and that makes it a consecrated work of art. Quite differently from postulating a return to an alleged purity of art,

what Adorno proposes in *Aesthetic Theory* is a new way of interpreting the artistic phenomenon, stripping it of the false interpretations that aim to instrumentalize the works in order to show their true content, its historical testimony, its possible suggestions of freedom.

But this double aspect of art is not so evident, once it is inserted in a society in which technique and scientific thought predominate, markedly objectivist and rational, which then causes the impasse of the current aesthetics, divided between a view of art as something objective – therefore manipulable and explicitly subservient to the interests of the consumer society – and a position of art as something merely subjective, as *ars gratia artis*, in a context in which aestheticism serves as an instrument of subliminal domination on the part of consumer ideology propagated by the cultural industry. And it is precisely in the face of this impasse, in fact, that the arguments of *Aesthetic Theory* begin (ADORNO, 1982, p. 11), which highlights how much art, in the contemporary context, loses its evidence and even the evidence of its assumptions and “Its right to existence”. In other words, paradoxically, the enlargement provided by the breaking of conventional aesthetic paradigms carried out by modern art, all the vanguards at the beginning of the twentieth century, is revealed as a true narrowing, due to the new taboos created by the standards of these new aesthetic movements, neglecting the freedom by which such *avant-garde* movements began their adventures. This will clearly show how much the autonomy of art, which enjoyed a certain freedom in a particular context, clashes and cancels itself in the context of the non-freedom of the whole, which makes us reflect not only on the concepts of autonomy and freedom in the aesthetic and social context, but also about how much this would be indicative of a process of transformation of the very concept of humanity.

The place of art has become uncertain in him. The autonomy she acquired, after getting rid of the cultural function and its duplicates, lived on the idea of humanity. It was shaken as society became less human. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 11).

Thus, a complete independence of art would be a dangerous and harmful idea both to art itself and to humanity, according to the mutual overlap of these two concepts. The current context, that is, the absence of evidence of art, the emptiness left to the question for its reasons and assumptions, denotes the danger of an absence of humanity, leaving room for this branch of manifestation of human culture, always so close to the divine, to be manipulated and instrumentalized. The assumptions of art that give it its legitimacy are inseparable from the considerations about its origin and results, therefore, in the very discussion of the essence of the work of art.

Art has its concept in the constellation of moments that are historically transformed; thus it closes itself to the definition. Its essence is not deductible from its origin, as if the first were a foundation on which all the others rise and fall as soon as they are shaken. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 12).

This defines art not as absolutely autonomous, but as something that has its essence closely linked to becoming, to the mutability that accompanies it and saves it from the need to exist, restoring freedom, or contingency, indispensable to its existence. Art should not be seen according to what it was in the context in which it was made, nor only in what it represents at the time it is being judged, but in a multiple and dialectical perspective that will consider not only these two moments but also all other possibilities of the work. In this way, we can also verify the interdependence of art in its socio-historical context (ADORNO, 1982, p. 217).

Thus, like a mirror, like the otherness of culture, aesthetics becomes indispensable for the reflection of that same culture insofar as it is determined only by the law of its own movement in the constant relationship with what it is not. In another text, Adorno himself (1970, p. 7-43) states that the content of culture, therefore, is not in itself, self-absorbed, but in its relationship with what antagonizes it, the material reality of human life. "The definition of what art is is always given in advance by what it was once, but it is only legitimized by what it has become, open to what it intends to be and to what it may perhaps become" (ADORNO, 1982, p. 13). Thus, art would be the otherness that would account for the eternally changeable not encompassed by instrumental rationality (TIBURI, 2003, p. 190). But its malaise lies precisely in the fact that the social and cultural structure of the 20th century has made art a static servant of the established order.

In the penchant of the new art for the repulsive and physically repugnant, to which the apologists of the existing state of affairs nothing stronger know how to oppose unless that state of affairs is sufficiently ugly and that, therefore, the art must turn to the simple beauty, the critical and materialistic motif appears, insofar as art, through its autonomous forms, denounces domination, even that which is sublimated in spiritual principle, and testifies to what such domination represses and denies. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 63).

This position points to the radical marginalization of contemporary art towards society, since it does not participate in it in an autonomous or heteronomous way, leaving such classifications only for aesthetic constructs that can be called cultural merchandise, that is, that submit to the destructive logic of consumption, cynically coating the goods with the falseness of artistic beauty and giving ideology the possibility to mimic itself with the aura of disinterested appearance. Adorno will assert (1982, p. 63) that the task of art is to bring what has been removed from culture back into the culture and to represent it not in a soothing way through the masking operated by beauty in order to better integrate or attenuate it, but rather expose it while the ugly it really is if treated crudely, because that is the only way it will be exposed all the ugliness of a society that produces all this repressed and repulsive material and absolutely takes it out of its sight through a massive repression or a media alienation.

To survive in the midst of the most extreme and dark aspects of reality, works of art, which do not want to sell themselves as consolation, should become similar to them.

Nowadays, radical art means dark art, black as its fundamental color. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 52).

Thus, given its relationship with the denied otherness of culture, art is related to philosophy in the sense that both have a duty to account for the ugly, the hidden face of reason, from all the denied and repressed from culture. It is because of this immense importance of the ugly in culture that Adorno says that “powerful aesthetic values are released by the socially ugly” (ADORNO, 1982, p. 63). This would have its function, as well as its relationship with philosophy, reinforced by the commitment to register the horrors of the past, even if they are unspeakable, assuring that they are not forgotten, what could allow its repetition. In other words: “Even in a legendarily better future, art should not deny the memory of accumulated terrors; otherwise, its form would be in vain” (ADORNO, 1982, p. 356). Art, therefore, according to its task of representing the repressed (TIBURI, 2003, p. 192), distances itself from the classical perspectives of art as a transfiguration of horror into beauty, as an ability to transform negative, obscure and chaotic into positive, clear and intelligible, privileging an identification with these rogue categories, so that it would be included, therefore, in the sphere of evil and ugliness. “The current task of art is to introduce chaos into order” (ADORNO, 1992, p. 195). In a way, this corresponds to affirm that art, in modernity, is identified with the repressed by culture, bringing it to the surface, albeit in a mediated way, and denying the possibility of an harmonizing sublimation of reason with its otherness, deviating the process from an ascending dialectic to a negative, insoluble and uncomfortable dialectic, causing its already mentioned marginalization. In other words: “The harmonious aspect of the ugly rises, in modern art, as protest” (ADORNO, 1982, p. 60). And this is seen not only in modern art but also in contemporary art that comes after, due to their its relation with the empiric instances from which both emerge.

Even before Auschwitz it was an affirmative lie, in relation to historical experiences, to attribute a positive meaning to existence. This has consequences in the form of works of art. If they have nothing outside themselves to which they can join without ideology, in no way can they establish what they lack by a subjective act. [...] The *avant-garde* production of the last decades has become self-aware of this state of affairs, has made it its theme and transposed it into the structure of the works. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 175).

In this way, contemporary art is very close to its autonomy, not only in relation to technique and materials, but, above all, regarding its actual content, verifiable through its communicability, its language, or more specifically, of what Adorno called expression. This communicability characteristic of the works would refer to the possibility that they emanate a content even if they were alien to the conventionality of appearance and to the same extent that they do not allow themselves to be supplanted by the summary interpretation of subjectivity that tries to unveil it as a mystery, thus nullifying, its auratic capacity.

Returning to the dialectic between the ugly and the beautiful, it is important to emphasize that this ugly does not exactly oppose symmetrically to the beautiful, because negativity itself is not symmetrically opposed to positivity, but in a very unequal way, that is, positivity, the standard, normality, the beautiful and the good are very narrow concepts, while everything else is defined by the simple exclusion of these concepts, so that everything that does not fit into an exact concept of beauty would be framed as ugly and negative, relating to the ugliness all the excess, all the *hybris*, everything that is not regulated, disciplined and contained.

The plurivocity of the ugly comes from the subject subsuming in its abstract and formal category everything that his verdict was expressed in art, both polymorphic sexuality, disfigurement and death through violence. From what is repeated that other antithetical arises, without which art, according to its own concept, would not exist. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 62).

Therefore, the limits of the ugly can no longer be safely traced, making it the door to the experience of everything that goes beyond the ordinary, everything that goes beyond the normative and regulatory rationality for which the ugly is a border concept, containing not only what relates to itself, but also all that exceeds it. This experience is what Adorno will call *dissonance*, that is, the reception through art of everything that both aesthetics and lay opinion about art usually call ugly, or, in other words, the breaking of the existing harmonious tension in art since antiquity between the elements of the ugly and the beautiful, between the disturbing and the soothing underlying the work.

It is a common place to state that art does not allow itself to be absorbed in the concept of beautiful but that, in order to realize it, it needs the ugly as its negation. [...] The harmony that, as a result, denies the tension that guarantees it, thus becomes a disturbing element, falsehood and, if you wish, dissonance. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 60).

Thus, it can be said that the antithetical categories of the ugly and the beautiful are of essential complementarity for the success of the work as art, and that the disharmony of any of these assumptions would result in its aesthetic disqualification. Adorno criticizes the historical supremacy of the beautiful over the ugly throughout the aesthetic tradition, and points out the damage of such disharmony:

In a way, the beautiful emerged from the ugly rather than the other way around. [...] the definition of aesthetics as a theory of beauty is not very fruitful because the formal character of the concept of beauty derives from the global content of the aesthetic. [...] With regard to aesthetic reflection, the concept of beautiful appears only as a moment. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 65).

For this reason, none of the poles of this dialectical opposition should have the primacy over the other, nor the beautiful over the ugly, as historically verified, not even the ugly over the beautiful, which would be a malaise caused by the imbalance of tension that Adorno

himself had already identified as a dangerous abyss for contemporary art. This tension must be observed not only between the beautiful and the ugly, but also between the whole and the parts, between the particular of the work and the universal of its style, because: “Every work is a field of forces even in its relationship to style” (ADORNO, 1982, p. 233). Therefore, this balance is necessary, in its various senses, to be the shield of art against its subjugation and instrumentalization at our administered world. “Because totality finally absorbs tension and conforms to ideology, homeostasis itself [between totality and beauty] is broken: that is the crisis of beauty and art” (ADORNO, 1982, p. 68).

3. The relationship between art and society

And it is precisely this crisis that makes the approximation between philosophy and art necessary, since only art could give society a bias in the perception of the world that is not based on a relationship of subject dominance over the object, or, in other words, rehabilitate alterity, recover the repressed culture marks and make them able to be considered as a subject of thought, as a way to prevent the horrors brought against human beings considered as passive objects in the historical process. And since the repressed is, inside the work, dissonance, it must make tension between itself and the apparent being, like any tension, a dynamic process, transforming the mutism of the work in language, that is, expression.

Dissonance is also an expression; the consonant, the harmonic, wants to eliminate it in a non-violent way. Expression and appearance are at first an antithesis. If the expression is hardly allowed to be represented in any other way than as an expression of pain – joy has shown itself to be rebellious to all expression, perhaps because it does not yet exist and happiness would be without expression – art finds itself in expression immanently, the moment by which, as one of its constituents, it fights against its immanence under formal law. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 130).

This is what will bring to philosophy an appreciation of practical rationality, inverting the logic of reflection as an engine of action in favor of acting as the driving force behind thinking. “Where thinking is really productive, where it is creative, there it is always also a reaction” (ADORNO, 1995a, p. 17). For philosophical thinking to be productive, it must always be directed towards an object (*Sache*), so that it gains its legitimacy insofar as it intends to modify even its inherent condition of object. This is even more important specifically in philosophical thought, in which the main object of reflection is human life, and which cannot be taken simply as objectivity, as a manipulable thing or data. The pejorative view of the task of thinking at an era of productivity is that of someone who is engaged in an objectless, zero-production activity. “A conscience of theory and praxis should be formed in a way that does not separate them, so that the theory does not become impotent and the praxis would be not arbitrary, nor does it destroy the theory through the primacy of practical reason” (ADORNO, 1995b, p. 204). Philosophical thinking is an abyss. The security of the argument should not take precedence

over your commitment to truth, to sincerity. Reflecting must not hide from the questions it raises or from the gaps it allows. "Thinking is acting, theory is a form of praxis; only the ideology of purity of thought mystifies this point" (ADORNO, 1995b, p. 204). Thus, aesthetics, inserted in this way of proceeding through which thinking critically is also an act, becomes extremely important as the possibility of conceiving a new moral sensitivity.

In such perspectives, aesthetics is revealed not so much as outdated as necessary. The need for art is not to prescribe norms for aesthetics when it is concerned, but to develop in aesthetics the strength of reflection that, by itself, could hardly carry out. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 375).

And this reflection is what refers aesthetics directly to philosophy, because only through this process of philosophical reflection can the truth content of the works be achieved or denied. But that is not to say that the theorist, the esthete, is the one who will give the last word on the work, but rather that its true content, even though accessible through a philosophical reflection, can only be found in the immanence of the work itself.

The truth content of the works is not what they mean, but what decides the truth or falsity of the work itself, and only that truth of the work itself is commensurable with philosophical interpretation and coincides, at least according to the idea, with the philosophical truth. To the current consciousness, fixed in the concrete and in the immediacy, it is really very difficult to acquire this relationship with art, although without it its real content does not appear: the genuine aesthetic experience must become philosophy, or else, it does not exist. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 152).

The crisis of contemporary art, understood as a very multiple set of artistic achievements that begins in the second half of the 20th century, in the post-war period (FREITAS, 2003), can therefore be attributed to the non-observance of these precepts, in an attempt to attribute some value to the work from outside, either by the cultural industry and the technological society, which mechanically produces its works for mass consumption, either by the direct and contrary reaction to them perpetrated by this art, which has some of its works valued not by themselves, but only by its radical opposition to that industry. But this does not justify the fact that current pseudo-intellectuals demand from *avant-garde* art that it should present them with anything, as such an attitude would be nothing more than a defense mechanism for those who are so attached to their position as *connoisseurs* who, faced with the enigma of such works, disqualify them because they do not understand them, that is, they diminish the works because of their own inability to understand, thus making a chorus with the other mechanisms of semiculture and with the mass taste of the cultural industry.

Cultured Philistines are in the habit of demanding that the artwork give them something. They are no longer outraged by what is radical, but they take refuge in the statement, as modest as it is unashamed, that they do not understand it. People say they are too stupid, too old-fashioned, they cannot understand; the smaller they

are, the safer they are to participate in the potent unison of the *vox inhumana populi*, the court of the petrified spirit of the time. (ADORNO, 1992, p. 190).

As a mean of access to the truth, neither philosophy nor art has the last word or can claim to have the concepts fully dominated. Only a conciliatory path between both, pointed out by Adorno as aesthetics, could mediate the content of truth and the social content of a work without the deadly crystallization of possession of the concept.

Certainly, art, as a form of knowledge, implies knowledge of reality and there is no reality that is not social. [...] Art becomes social knowledge by apprehending the essence; he does not speak of it, does not copy or imitate it in any way. It makes it appear against the apparition, through its own complexation. (ADORNO, 1982, p. 289).

Aesthetics will therefore play a mediating role between art and thought. Although this entails the difficulties implicit in its function, since it can neither rely on theoretical reflection nor on pure practice, it must use the reason to be able to fulfill the role of mediator between such poles, which, for the success of this task cannot be seen as irreconcilable opposites, but as dialectically extremes mediated by the effort of aesthetic reflection. "The aesthetic experience is that of something that the spirit would have neither of the world nor of itself, the possibility promised by its impossibility. Art is the promise of happiness that is broken" (ADORNO, 1982, p. 157). And yet, in another excerpt: "Art must be constructed dialectically to the extent that the spirit is inherent to it, without, however, possessing it or guaranteeing it as an absolute" (ADORNO, 1982, p. 379). That is why the idea of art as a promise of broken happiness, or, as in Stendhal's original text, as no more than a promise of happiness, runs through the entire text of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, carrying with it a statement of pessimism due to the current situation of art, threatened in its autonomy and spontaneity by the various means of commodified and massified cultural production (JIMENEZ, 1999, p. 350). In this way, art, as opposed to constituting a literal program of instrumentalization of culture in conformity with the ideological interests of the ruling class, should present itself as a possibility of liberation, according to the definition of beauty contained in Stendhal's much debated statement of *une promesse du bonheur* (DUARTE, 2006, p. 402). The transposition of this utopic capacity of the beauty in general, according to the original text by Stendhal, to the context of art in particular, as interpreted by Adorno, allows art, despite its incompleteness, of always being a broken promise of happiness, actively oppose the process of instrumentalization and commercialization of human cultural productions, that is, the cultural industry, detaching it, or, at least, trying to detach it as much as possible from the imperatives of economic activity to link it to a perspective of a reconciled future for humanity. The very existence of art, and with it its promise and all its other potentialities, is threatened at the moment of opposition to its autonomy relative to the commercial demands of the entertainment industry, causing the threat of its social liquidation, that is, an intentional and rationally planned elimination.

Final considerations

From Adorno's arguments that we have been following, we can see that the relationship between art and society, even if it is interdependent, is constituted fundamentally as a relationship of radical opposition of art to pre-established social conditions, in the sense of never being characterized as a subservience of art to the society and culture. This is precisely what establishes the relationship between art and society as an insoluble dialectic relationship, so that the preferential content of any cultural manifestation does not reside in itself, not even in society or in its context in a merely representative way, but in what, in this relationship, antagonizes each other.

This autonomous art always points, therefore, to another, to an eternal absent, the only condition by which it can contribute to the emergence of the new. Unless, as noted, it has been transformed into disartized art, in other words, it has emptied itself of those elements that would define it as such and has become a barbaric mirroring of the real as a commercial object, as a cultural commodity, then performing a false synthesis of the subject with the work, of reality with representation, of art with society.

On the other hand, authentic art tries not to appease the aesthetic experience, showing the brutality of reality at our contemporary world, as well as the horrors of the past. This annoying residue appears in art as dissonance. Hence the importance of aesthetics, of the philosophical interpretation of art, which will not dominate its judgment using the power of intellectual authority, but rather try to unveil its internal truth, although sometimes indefinable, living up to the criterion of art as a promise of happiness that it will never be fulfilled.

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