

*Art and Emancipation:
Habermas's "Die Moderne—
ein unvollendetes Projekt" Reconsidered*

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The Fate of Aesthetics

While, by Habermas's own admission, his remarks on aesthetic modernity always had a "secondary character to the extent that they arose only in the context of other themes," aesthetics and aesthetic modernity do occupy an important position in his overall oeuvre.¹ Much of Habermas's work is characterized by an effort to restore the modern faith in reason first articulated by Enlightenment thinkers. It was, on Habermas's terms, problematic that the critique of reason launched by the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists, notably Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, left them without a basis on which any reasoned critique of society could be pursued.² For those theorists, Adorno especially, aesthetic experience held the promise of a reconciled relation between the sensual and the rational, posing as an "other" to the dominating force of instrumental reason in modern society and offering a way to

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1. Jürgen Habermas, "Questions and Counterquestions," in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 199.

2. Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 138–39.

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develop a critical relation to society.³ In 1976 Shierry Weber observed that in Habermas's work "interest in the subjective or interactional components of domination has led to a more systematic return to the original problems of the nature of reason and its role in history, without, as yet, a similar reconsideration of the nature of the aesthetic and its relation to reason."⁴ While Habermas himself has, since that time, offered further commentary on the nature of the aesthetic, only a relatively small body of secondary literature has addressed the role of aesthetics in his thinking.⁵

In his study tracing the "fate of aesthetics" in Habermas's work, Pieter Duvenage argues that Habermas's reflections on aesthetics divide into two phases: the first marked by the publication of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1962) and culminating in an essay on Walter Benjamin published in the early 1970s, and the second set off by the publication of *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (*The Theory of Communicative Action*, 1981).⁶ This division parallels the noted "linguistic turn" in Habermas's work, by which he came to ground a theory of rationality in language and communication rather than in epistemology.⁷ In so doing, Habermas rejected his earlier account of rationality—conceived in terms of the consciousness of a subject coming to know the objects of his world—in favor of an intersubjectively grounded communication theory whereby com-

3. See Albrecht Wellmer, "Reason, Utopia, and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," in Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, 48–49.

4. Shierry Weber, "Aesthetic Experience and Self-Reflection as Emancipatory Process: Two Complementary Aspects of Critical Theory," in *On Critical Theory*, ed. John O'Neill (New York: Seabury, 1976), 80.

5. This literature includes Martin Jay, "Habermas and Modernism," in Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, 125–39; Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Post-modernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); David Ingram, "Habermas on Aesthetics and Rationality: Completing the Project of Enlightenment," *New German Critique*, no. 53 (1991): 67–103; Peter Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Contemporary Aesthetics: A Reply to Jürgen Habermas," *New German Critique*, no. 22 (1981): 19–22; Jay Bernstein, "Art against Enlightenment: Adorno's Critique of Habermas," in *The Problems of Modernity*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1989); and Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006). Bürger's reply to Habermas is hereafter cited as AG.

6. Pieter Duvenage, *Habermas and Aesthetics: The Limits of Communicative Reason* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 2. Hereafter cited as HA.

7. This "linguistic turn" has been noted by a number of scholars, including Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 238; Wellmer, "Reason, Utopia, and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," 51; and Anthony Giddens, "Reason without Revolution? Habermas's *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*," in Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, 95–124. Giddens also sees *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) as exemplifying this first phase.

municating subjects, competent in language, are able to reach mutual understanding. To this end Habermas proposed three forms of modern rationality: cognitive-scientific, moral-judicial, and expressive-aesthetic. As Duvenage observes, while Habermas's earlier *Structural Transformation* offers a positive, sociohistorical account of the literary-aesthetic sphere and its role in shaping rational, public debate, in his later *Communicative Action* he restricts the role of aesthetic rationality in his conceptual framework, emphasizing instead the cognitive and moral modes of argumentation. Duvenage suggests that this is due in part to the fact that while communicating subjects may reach universal agreement on cognitive and moral claims, aesthetic arguments are evaluated by reference to subjective experience. In other words, while Habermas's communicative framework sought to overturn the subject-object paradigm of earlier philosophies of consciousness, claims to aesthetic validity still remained bound to subjective judgments. Habermas's theory of rationality could not account for the subjective dimension of aesthetic experience and thus fell short of fully integrating aesthetic experience into the intersubjective sphere of formal discourse (*HA*, 97).

Duvenage's own study, however, does not address the underlying tensions that would explain *why* Habermas failed to fully integrate aesthetic experience into his communicative, rational framework—why, in other words, even as he sought to move away from a philosophy of consciousness and toward a communication-based theory of reason, he remained bound to subjective measures of evaluating aesthetic experience.⁸ It is this question that motivates the present study. More broadly, engaging with this question suggests some of the limitations of Habermas's communicative theory, especially with regard to aesthetic concerns. We might pose the question differently, then, and ask whether Habermas's communicative framework leaves room at all for critical, emancipatory aesthetic experience. Duvenage's critical reconstruction of Habermas's work on aesthetics leaves open such considerations. In particular, Duvenage, drawing on arguments made by Jay Bernstein and Albrecht Wellmer, claims that the second phase of Habermas's aesthetics stands as a reaction to Adorno's aesthetic project and maintains that his own study was motivated by the "paradox" that while aesthetic concerns figured prominently in the work of first-generation Frankfurt School theorists, like Adorno, this

8. See Patrycja Kaszynska, "Review: Habermas and Aesthetics: *The Limits of Communicative Reason*," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45, no. 3 (2005): 317–19.

was much less the case with Habermas (*HA*, 40, 111–17).⁹ Probing this claim further, I argue that Habermas’s later reflections on rationality—and the restricted place he assigns specifically to aesthetic rationality—suggest a continued struggle with Adorno’s thinking on aesthetics. It is here that Habermas’s 1980 Adorno Prize address, “Die Moderne—ein unvollendetes Projekt” (“Modernity—an Unfinished Project”), offers a constructive point of departure.

By Duvenage’s account, Habermas’s 1973 essay on Benjamin’s aesthetics, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism,” stands at an important juncture in his intellectual development, marking the end of the first phase of his aesthetics. In it Habermas distinguishes between what he calls the “consciousness-raising” critique proposed by Herbert Marcuse and Adorno and the “redemptive criticism” articulated by Walter Benjamin. Habermas defends the Benjaminian model, arguing that criticism ought to rescue aesthetic experience for public debate rather than simply raise individual consciousness.¹⁰ Duvenage observes that while this essay offers some of Habermas’s most pointed remarks on aesthetic experience, it led not to a further exploration of aesthetic concerns but to the development of a systematic, communication-based theory of rationality (*HA*, 9). Again, Duvenage does not probe further the underlying tensions motivating this shift. In this regard, Habermas’s “Die Moderne” essay—about which the scholarly literature, Duvenage’s text included, has said little—is particularly instructive and can be situated alongside the Benjamin essay as part of a larger transformation in Habermas’s intellectual development. Delivered just a year before his *Theory of Communicative Action* was published, “Die Moderne” outlines some of the same themes addressed in his later work. But it also offers a rare statement on aesthetic modernity. It is of interest because of what it suggests about the place of Adorno’s aesthetic thinking in the context of Habermas’s later concerns.

The “Die Moderne” text, one of Habermas’s most outspoken endorsements of the project of modernity, makes clear his continued faith in the Enlightenment project. The essay characterizes the project of modernity as twofold. Modernity develops the separate value spheres of science, morality,

9. Bernstein defends the principle of aesthetic autonomy posited by Adorno’s aesthetic theory against the dominating force of instrumental reason and challenges Habermas’s communicative alternative to aesthetic experience, whereas Wellmer proposes a mediation between Adorno’s concerns and Habermas’s communication-based theory. This study considers the extent to which Habermas’s reflections on aesthetic experience, as well as the more general shift in his later work, were themselves conceived in dialogue with Adorno or, at the very least, with Adorno’s work in mind.

10. Jürgen Habermas, “Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik—die Aktualität Walter Benjamins,” in *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 175–221.

and art, each according to its respective inner logic, while releasing “die kognitiven Potentiale . . . aus ihren esoterischen Hochformen” (the cognitive potentials . . . from their esoteric forms) and thus allowing for the enrichment and rational organization of everyday life.¹¹ Articulated in this way, the project of modernity suggests a movement toward increased specialization and differentiation between the spheres alongside a call for their reintegration into everyday life. On the surface, Habermas’s text is posited in response to three notable, and notably divergent, currents of “antimodernity”—all of which are seen as obstacles to the completion of the modernity project. At one end are the neoconservatives, who blame a decline of traditional values on the hedonism and relativism unleashed by cultural modernism; modernist culture is seen as incompatible with the demands of professional and social life. At the other end are the “Young Conservatives,” who include, in France, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida and who, according to Habermas, seek in aesthetic modernity a retreat from the freedom-denying aspects of modern life. Between these two movements are the “Old Conservatives,” who allegedly seek a return to premodernity. Each movement, in its own way, opposes the project of modernity. While they diagnose the ills of modern society differently, they each, in response, seem to call for increased differentiation and separation between aesthetic or cultural modernism and modern life. And it is this increased differentiation that Habermas believes should be resisted.

Although the award that occasioned the essay bears Adorno’s name, Habermas makes little mention of his former mentor. While Habermas ostensibly addresses the three movements just noted, I argue that a closer reading of the work suggests a subterranean dialogue with Adorno about the status of the aesthetic sphere. What this dialogue reveals is that both Habermas and Adorno saw in art the potential to meaningfully transform the sphere of social reality, but the means by which they proposed it do so radically diverged. As noted above, only a relatively small body of secondary literature has addressed Habermas’s “Die Moderne” essay to date. Those scholars have uncovered several problems in Habermas’s thinking on aesthetic modernity. Peter Bürger, for example, criticizes Habermas for failing to acknowledge the inherent structural differences between the three spheres and for failing to appreciate the

11. Jürgen Habermas, “Die Moderne—ein unvollendetes Projekt,” in *Kleine politische Schriften I–IV* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 453; “Modernity: An Unfinished Project,” trans. Seyla Benhabib, in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on “The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity,”* ed. Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 45. Hereafter cited as DM, with the first page number indicating the German text and the second, when present, the English translation.

extent to which the two aspects of modernization—increased differentiation of the spheres and their simultaneous reintegration into modern life—stand in contradiction to each other. Bürger writes: “In fully developed bourgeois society ‘autonomous’ and ‘use’ of art have increasingly come to oppose each other. They will not be so easily reconciled as Habermas’s construction of modernity suggests” (AG, 21). Building on these criticisms, Martin Jay faults Habermas for failing to better articulate the features of his vision for a completed modernity. Because of this, Jay writes, “not only is modernity an uncompleted project, so, too, is Habermas’s enormously ambitious attempt to salvage its still emancipatory potential.”¹²

While Bürger and Jay point to the ambiguities latent in Habermas’s conceptualization of modernity and the aesthetic sphere, more specifically, the extent to which Habermas’s essay suggests a continued struggle with Adorno’s thinking on aesthetics has not been addressed. The present study seeks to complement and transcend the critical literature by analyzing the tension between Habermas’s and Adorno’s aesthetics as they manifest themselves in the “Die Moderne” essay. Such a comparative reading throws new light on the essay itself while bringing into focus the historiographical questions left open by Duvenage’s account and pointing toward some of the limitations of Habermas’s communicative framework, developed in his later work. I suggest that the essay is emblematic of Habermas’s struggle with Adorno’s aesthetic theory, and with the work of the first-generation Frankfurt School theorists more generally; even as he aims to move beyond the thinking of those theorists, unresolved tensions continue to complicate the text.

Aesthetic Autonomy and Historical Necessity

Habermas’s attitude toward the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere is ambivalent. On the one hand, the development of the inner logic of artworks is a good thing. Artistic production would dry up otherwise (DM, 460). On the other hand, the splitting off of this sphere does violence to the emancipatory aspirations of the modernity project by denying nonexperts access to an aesthetic experience capable of transforming their cognitive interpretations and normative expectations (DM, 461). Habermas’s critics have rightly pointed out that he fails to articulate just how what he calls a mediated relationship between the lifeworld and the three autonomous spheres more generally would work; more specifically, Bürger has argued that Habermas fails to recognize how the autonomy of art and its use might stand in opposition. Both concerns are

12. Jay, “Habermas and Modernism,” 139.

thrown into relief if we consider Habermas's proposal for a distinctly aesthetic rationality alongside the apparent contradictions brought out in his discussion of autonomous art. Jay organizes his criticisms into what he deems the two more problematic questions raised by Habermas's essay. First, what would a mediated relation between the three spheres look like? Second, how is Habermas's proposal for what he calls an "aesthetic-practical rationality" meant to work? The two points of contention are linked. While in the next section some of the problems raised by Habermas's discussion of aesthetic rationality are addressed in detail, it is enough for now to show how Habermas's treatment of aesthetic rationality foregrounds his ambivalence toward the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere.

An aesthetic rationality remedies the problems posed by the elitist (on Habermas's terms) splitting off of the artistic sphere by making the interpretation of aesthetic experience accessible to nonexperts as well as trained critics. Habermas writes, "Die Rezeption durch den Laien, oder vielmehr durch den Experten des Alltags, gewinnt eine *andere Richtung* als die des professionellen, auf die kunstinterne Entwicklung blickenden Kritikers" (The reception of art by the layperson, or rather the person who is an expert in the field of everyday life, takes a *different course* from the reception of art by the professional critic who focuses principally on developments that are purely internal to art) (DM, 461; 51). For Habermas, aesthetic rationality is meant to articulate an experience of truth found in works of art and, in this articulation, bring the artwork to the level of everyday communicative practices. In Habermas's terms the development of a specifically aesthetic rationality is both a symptom of the increasing autonomization of the artistic sphere and the grounds for such autonomy. In other words, it is problematic that the aesthetic sphere has come under the control of specialists tasked with working out the inner logic of artistic works. Such specialization culminates in the avant-garde's *l'art pour l'art* and the corresponding disregard for how art might speak to lived experience. Yet it is only by developing a rationality capable of giving expression to the experience of art that the public will have access to that experience. This double movement—toward both increasing specialization of the artistic sphere and its reintegration back into the lifeworld—would seem harder to reconcile than Habermas is ready to acknowledge.¹³ Such tensions seem to anticipate the difficulties that arise in Habermas's later work on communicative rationality. Aesthetic rationality develops *out of* the specialization of the artistic sphere; it

13. This argument is made in Bürger, AG.

is conceivable only once specialists have worked out the “inner logic” of artworks. But that inner logic is itself bound to the subjective experience of truth found in the work of art. The subjective dimension of aesthetic experience is, in this way, necessarily tied to the development of an aesthetic rationality.

We might, however, situate Habermas’s ambivalence toward the artistic sphere, and the difficulties arising from this position, within the paradox suggested by Adorno’s treatment of the autonomy of artworks. Simply stated, the paradox of autonomous art is that it can exist only to the extent that it is not constituted absolutely. That is, autonomous works depend on their relation to the empirical world and would not be conceivable without this relation. Their autonomy is premised on a heteronomous moment.¹⁴ Adorno writes: “Die Differenz der Kunstwerke von der Empirie, ihr Scheincharakter, konstituiert sich an jener und in der Tendenz gegen sie. Wollten Kunstwerke um des eigenen Begriffs willen jene Rückbeziehung absolut tilgen, so tilgten sie ihre eigene Voraussetzung” (The difference of artworks from the empirical world, their semblance character, is constituted out of the empirical world and in opposition to it. If for the sake of their own concept artworks wanted absolutely to destroy this reference back to the empirical world, they would wipe out their own premise).¹⁵ The work’s autonomy is essential to its critical role. If works of art were entirely autonomous, they would, by definition, not serve the socially critical function that Adorno (or Habermas, for that matter) wants them to serve. Works ought to be autonomous so that they can critique modern society, but not so autonomous that they are entirely removed from all of society’s concerns. Adorno writes, “Radikale Moderne wahrt die Immanenz der Kunst, bei Strafe ihrer Selbstaufhebung, derart, daß Gesellschaft einzig verdunkelt wie in den Träumen in sie eingelassen wird, denen man die Kunstwerke von je verglich” (At the risk of its self-alienation, radical modernity preserves art’s immanence by admitting society only in an obscured form, as in the dreams with which artworks have always been compared) (*AT*, 336; 226). Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*—a work that, precisely because it admits society “only in an obscured form,” “achieves a level of expression that sharpens it to social protest”—is exemplary in this context (*AT*, 353; 237).

It is important, as well, to address the extent to which Adorno’s treatment of the autonomy of art is historically motivated—both by specific artistic

14. See Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Polity, 1998), 123.

15. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 158; *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997), 103. Hereafter cited as *AT*, with the first page number indicating the German text and the second the English translation.

movements that have, by his account, failed to adequately meet the requirements of socially critical art and by the ills brought on by modern capitalism. In Adorno's view, it is not that artworks *need* to be autonomous. Rather, the autonomization of the artistic sphere is part of a historical process.¹⁶ In an earlier work, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Habermas assigns greater weight to the role of aesthetics by grounding his discussion of the literary-aesthetic sphere in specific historical contexts. However, in his later work on communicative rationality, and in "Die Moderne," that role is minimized; the aesthetic dimension is emptied of its specific historical content. Aesthetic rationality is posited as an empty framework that can guide a discussion of any work of art and thus bring it into everyday communication. This suggests yet another way that the work of Habermas's later phase, beginning with "Die Moderne," counters or stands in dialogue with Adorno's thought. While Adorno is reluctant to argue for a specific, historically grounded mode of reception of artworks, as Habermas does with his description of the literary-aesthetic sphere, Adorno does insist that the particular aesthetic experience in question, aesthetic autonomy, not be thought of as historically invariant—applicable across time and place. That Habermas's "Die Moderne" essay, as well as later works, poses a radical shift in his thinking on the historicity of aesthetic experience suggests, then, a continued debate with Adorno's work.

What Habermas and Adorno do share is an interest in responding to the failures of current and past artistic movements. In particular, the failures of the avant-garde's *l'art pour l'art* movement seem to weigh heavily on Adorno's thinking. The problem with such movements, in Adorno's view, is that they posit the separation of art as an absolute: "Was Ideologie ist am *l'art pour l'art*-Prinzip, hat seinen Ort nicht in der energischen Antithese der Kunst zur Empirie sondern in der Abstraktheit und Fazilität jener Antithese" (What is ideological in the principle of *l'art pour l'art* does not have its locus in the energetic antithesis of art to the empirical world but rather in the abstractness and facile character of this antithesis) (*AT*, 351–52; 236–37). The abstract character of *l'art pour l'art*'s autonomy is problematic because it denies art its critical relation to empirical life. This is why for Adorno aesthetic autonomy develops *out of* a critique of the empirical world; its position outside empirical life is not fixed or predetermined. The principle of autonomy grows out of the social context. Adorno writes (and here Habermas's expressed ambivalence toward aesthetic autonomy strongly resonates): "Auch gesellschaftlich ist darum die

16. See Jarvis, *Adorno*, 123. See also Andy Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music* (London: Continuum, 2007), 255.

Situation von Kunst heute aporetisch. Läßt sie von ihrer Autonomie nach, so verschreibt sie sich dem Betrieb der bestehenden Gesellschaft; bleibt sie strikt für sich, so läßt sie als harmlose Sparte unter anderen nicht minder gut sich integrieren” (It is for this reason that socially the situation of art today is aporetic. If art cedes its autonomy, it delivers itself over to the machinations of the status quo; if art remains strictly for-itself, it nonetheless submits to integration as one harmless domain among others) (*AT*, 352–53; 237). Habermas’s text also reflects on the ineffectiveness of the avant-garde’s movement. He, too, notes that such movements make the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere a deliberate social project (*DM*, 455). Alongside such ineffectiveness both Adorno and Habermas consider the failures of the surrealist movement, which—at the other extreme—sought to force art into everyday life through its “false sublation.” Habermas even cites Adorno here: “Adorno sieht sehr genau, warum das surrealistische Programm ‘der Kunst absagt, ohne sie doch abschütteln zu können’” (Adorno sees very clearly why the surrealist program “renounces art, without, however, being able to shake it off”) (*DM*, 457; 49). Both Adorno and Habermas seek to forge a middle ground between two failed artistic movements. They diverge, however, in their respective responses to such failures.

Aesthetic Rationality and the Formalist Dialectic

The embrace of an aesthetic rationality reflects both Habermas’s continued faith in Enlightenment reason and his more general turn away from a philosophy of consciousness in favor of an intersubjectively grounded communication theory.¹⁷ The shift from what Duvenage and others call the first to the second phase of Habermas’s thought also marks a shift in Habermas’s thinking on aesthetics; in the second phase aesthetic concerns take a backseat. Again, allowing Adorno’s aesthetic theory to “speak” alongside Habermas’s reflections can help inform this shift.

An aesthetic rationality, rather than appeal to a priori, universalist notions of the beautiful or the good, trusts the ability of rational actors to discuss a work of art according to the rules of artistic interpretation, which what Habermas calls an “aesthetic-practical rationality” would supposedly articulate. Habermas offers one example of how an aesthetic experience, through this aesthetic rationality, might influence everyday life. He cites Peter Weiss’s novel *Ästhetik des Widerstands*, in which a group of politically motivated

17. David Ingram, “Habermas on Aesthetics and Rationality: Completing the Project of Enlightenment,” *New German Critique*, no. 53 (1991): 79.

workers in Berlin in 1937 acquires, through evening classes, the means of understanding the history of European painting. In moving back and forth between these evening lessons and their own milieu, they gain an understanding of art that illuminates their life experience, and thus expert culture is appropriated from the perspective of the lifeworld (DM, 462). Habermas writes that aesthetic experience “greift gleichzeitig in die kognitiven Deutungen und die normativen Erwartungen ein und verändert die Art, wie alle diese Momente auf einander *verweisen*” (influences our cognitive interpretations and our normative expectations, and thus alters how all these moments *refer back and forth* to one another) (DM, 461; 51). This back and forth suggests a particular relation between the work of art and the world—one whereby the work relates to the world only insofar as the individual can experience that relation, and he can experience that relation only insofar as he can communicate his understanding of the work to others. The movement between the work of art and the world is constituted by the individual’s movement between the work and the world. The Berlin workers literally move back and forth between their lessons on art and their everyday reality.

The question of this relation—between the work of art and the social world—figures prominently in Adorno’s aesthetics. For Adorno, the artwork’s significance lies principally in the way that it speaks to the world outside the work and, importantly, how it negates or challenges social reality. This is possible only if, in the first place, the work exists at a remove from that reality. Otherwise it risks simply reinforcing or affirming it. The movement between the world and the work suggested by Adorno is dialectic: “Wodurch der Wahrheitsgehalt der Werke kraft ihrer ästhetischen Komplexion über diese hinausweist, hat er allemal seinen gesellschaftlichen Stellenwert. Solche Doppelschlächtigkeit ist . . . jedem einzelnen Werk eingepägt, das Lebenselement von Kunst” (That whereby the truth content of artworks points beyond their aesthetic complexion, which it does only by virtue of that aesthetic complexion, assures it its social significance. This duality . . . is art’s vital element and lodged within each and every work) (AT, 368; 248). While Habermas’s aesthetic rationality facilitates a movement between the work and the world, that movement exists only to the extent that the viewer of art moves between the two and the viewer can talk about the work. The individual thus mediates the relation between work and world. Habermas writes: “If aesthetic experience is incorporated into the context of individual life histories, if it is utilized to illuminate a situation and throw light on individual life problems—if it communicates at all its impulses to a collective form of life—then art enters into a

language game which is no longer that of aesthetic criticism, but belongs, rather, to everyday communicative practice.”¹⁸ The only way for art to illuminate the individual’s situation is by entering into everyday communicative practices. The communicating subject is thus positioned in between the artwork and everyday reality. Such positioning avoids giving an absolute account of the subject by positing instead an empty framework in which the experience of art can be argued about. In this way the work of art is not related to the world *tout court*; rather, the possibility of that relation depends on the communicating subject. Habermas insists that while expert criticism may be capable of working out the inner logic of artworks, it is the layman who can relate the experience of the artwork to everyday life and raise questions that go beyond the aesthetic sphere—such as those of truth or justice. The intended effect of such conversation is emancipation from individual life problems (DM, 460). This is not to say that expert criticism should be dispensed with. On the contrary, it is only once experts have worked out the inner logic of artworks that the experience of viewing and interpreting art may be made available to the layperson. And this is because the work may then enter into the everyday communicative practices of the viewing subject.

Yet Habermas’s requirement that the work become part of a “language game” stands in opposition to Adorno’s insistence that works “renounce communication” in favor of “expression” through which “artworks become eloquent with wordless gesture.”¹⁹ For Adorno, the relation between the work and the world cannot depend on the efforts of the communicating subject. In pointed contrast to Habermas’s communicative framework, Adorno insists that art can resist society only indirectly: “Was sie [Kunst] zur Gesellschaft beiträgt, ist nicht Kommunikation mit jener sondern ein sehr Mittelbares, Widerstand, in dem kraft der innerästhetischen Entwicklung die gesellschaftliche sich reproduziert, ohne daß sie nachgeahmt würde” ([Art’s] contribution to society is not communication with it but rather something extremely mediated: it is resistance in which, by virtue of inner aesthetic development, social development is reproduced without being imitated) (AT, 335–36; 226). Adorno, too, wants to avoid presupposing a transcendental subject. But he does so by positing a dialectical relation between the work of art and the world. Where does

18. Habermas, “Questions and Counterquestions,” 202.

19. Adorno writes, “Daß Werke der Kommunikation absagen, ist eine notwendige, keineswegs die zureichende Bedingung ihres unideologischen Wesens. Zentrales Kriterium ist die Kraft des Ausdrucks, durch dessen Spannung die Kunstwerke mit wortlosem Gestus beredt werden” (That works renounce communication is a necessary yet by no means sufficient condition of their unideological essence. The central criterion is the force of expression, through the tension of which artworks become eloquent with wordless gesture) (AT, 353; 237).

the subject fit into his schema? By Adorno's account, if the work of art effectively critiques the world outside, the subject, in being made to see what is wrong with present conditions, is made to experience that relation between the work and the world. Adorno concedes that such an experience might be difficult to formulate (perhaps because doing so would require a prescription of how art is to be experienced), yet only this indefinable experience can bring about any practical change: "Praktische Wirkung üben Kunstwerke allenfalls in einer kaum dingfest zu machenden Veränderung des Bewußtseins aus, nicht indem sie haranguieren" (Artworks exercise a practical effect, if they do so at all, not by haranguing but by the scarcely apprehensible transformation of consciousness) (*AT*, 360; 243). In stark contrast to Habermas, Adorno writes that artworks must give up the use of "communicative means" that would bring the work to the public in an easily digestible form (*AT*, 360). Any direct "communication" would deny art its critical power. In implicating the subject in the relation between the work and the world, Habermas thereby challenges the emancipatory potential of Adorno's account. The individual and his or her everyday communicative practices are firmly grounded in the structures of the world as it is. If those communicative practices mediate the relation between work and world, then the work can speak to the world only within those self-same structures. In arguing for a dialectical relation between the artwork and world, Adorno allowed for the possibility that the artwork might produce a vision of the world not only as it is (and as it is in terms of what is presently wrong with it) but also—and crucially—as it could be.

Utopian Aspirations and Reconciliation

Underlying the discussion of the relation between the artwork and the world, as Habermas and Adorno each conceive it, is their divergent thinking on the utopian aspects of aesthetic experience. Habermas opens "Die Moderne" with a discussion of the 1980 Venice Biennale, in which, for the first time, architects, and specifically postmodern architects, were admitted. In this way Habermas posits his own thinking on modernity as a continuation of the discussion triggered by an exhibition of collectively received art.

In an earlier essay on Benjamin, the essay that, by Duvenage's account, marks a critical juncture in Habermas's intellectual development, Habermas characterizes Adorno's attitude toward collectively received arts. For Adorno, after the destruction of aura only formalist works, inaccessible to the masses, can resist the pressure to assimilate to the needs of consumers.²⁰ Habermas believed, however, that this led Adorno to "a strategy of hibernation" and that,

20. Habermas, "Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik," 195.

following Benjamin, collectively received art forms might still bring about the hoped-for reconciliation between art and life: “Für die kollektiv rezipierten Künste—Architektur, Theater, Malerei—zeichnet sich . . . eine Entwicklung ab, die über bloße Kulturindustrie hinausweist und Benjamins Hoffnung auf eine verallgemeinerte profane Erleuchtung nicht *a fortiori* entkräftet” (For arts received collectively—architecture, theater, painting—. . . there are indications of a development that points beyond mere culture industry and does not *a fortiori* invalidate Benjamin’s hope for a generalized secular illumination).²¹ We might note, as well, that the model of aesthetic experience Habermas gives in “Die Moderne” centers on a group of young Berlin workers who together learn about European art, which further suggests Habermas’s preference for a collective mode of reception.

In “Die Moderne” Habermas is critical of those thinkers and movements that, in his view, have given up on the idea of utopia as it was initially formulated by the Enlightenment philosophers. In their work, “die Utopie der Versöhnung” (the utopia of reconciliation) has become a “kritische Widerspiegelung der Unversöhntheit der sozialen Welt” (critical reflection of the unreconciled nature of the social world) (DM, 457; 48). Habermas makes no explicit mention of Adorno here, perhaps because he is wary of being critical of Adorno when he is receiving the Adorno Prize. Nonetheless, Habermas critiques the kind of utopian aspirations to which Adorno’s aesthetics is committed. Both Adorno and Habermas believe in the emancipatory potential of modern art. It is perhaps for this reason that Habermas can still praise Adorno as someone who so unreservedly subscribed to the spirit of modernity (DM, 444). Yet for Adorno the utopian dimension of the work of art lies in its status as a negation of or alternative to the present social reality. The artwork is utopian to the extent that it projects a reality entirely transformed from the present one. Adorno writes, “Umzukehren wäre am Ende die Nachahmungslehre; in einem sublimierten Sinn soll die Realität die Kunstwerke nachahmen” (Ultimately, the doctrine of imitation should be reversed; in a sublimated sense, reality should imitate the artworks) (AT, 200; 132).²² In this way autonomous works posit a “wortlose, bilderlose Utopie” (wordless, imageless utopia). The work’s significance lies in its implicit proposal of a new, utopian social order:

21. *Ibid.*, 196; “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, in *Philosophical-Political Profiles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 144.

22. See also Richard Wolin, “Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory,” *Representations*, no. 32 (1990): 40–41.

Shakespeare hat in *Romeo und Julia* nicht die Liebe ohne familiäre Bevormundung propagiert, aber ohne die Sehnsucht nach einem Zustand, wo Liebe nicht länger von der patriarchalen und jeglicher Macht verstümmelt und verurteilt wäre, hätte die Gegenwart der beiden ineinander Versunkenen nicht die Süße, über welche die Jahrhunderte bis heute nichts vermochten—die wortlose, bilderlose Utopie; das Tabu der Erkenntnis über jeglicher positiven waltet auch über den Kunstwerken.

[In *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare was not promoting love without familial guardianship, but without the longing for a situation in which love would no longer be mutilated and condemned by patriarchal or any other powers, the presence of the two lost in one another would not have the sweetness—the wordless, imageless utopia—over which, to this day, the centuries have been powerless; the taboo that prohibits knowledge of any positive utopia also reigns over artworks.] (*AT*, 366–67; 247)

Adorno insists that art can only *point* to a tacit utopia, the *possibility* of a world that is not yet. Habermas, however, remains unconvinced by the universal, emancipatory potential of such tacit, utopian projections. In the Benjamin essay he writes, “Gegen die falsche Aufhebung der Religion setzt Adorno . . . die Einbringung der utopischen Gehalte als Ferment eines unnachgiebigen kritischen Denkens, aber eben nicht in der Form einer verallgemeinerten profanen Erleuchtung” (In opposition to the false overcoming of religion Adorno . . . proposes bringing in utopian contents as the ferment for an uncompromisingly critical thought but precisely not in the form of a universalized profane illumination).²³ Habermas locates the failures of surrealism in its forced reconciliation between art and life and argues that the surrealist movement would not have pursued such strategies were it not for the fact that modern art no longer advanced a promise of such reconciliation (*DM*, 457). Habermas wants to avoid the mistakes of the surrealist movement without abandoning the hoped-for reconciliation. For him, “modern art harbors a utopia that becomes a reality to the degree that the mimetic powers sublimated in the work of art find resonance in the mimetic relations of balanced and undistorted intersubjectivity of everyday life.”²⁴ In response to Adorno’s insistence on the artwork’s implicit proposal of a new, utopian social order through which, as Adorno writes, “artworks become eloquent with wordless gestures,” Habermas wants

23. Habermas, “Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik,” 194–95; “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 143–44. See also Wolin, “Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation.”

24. Habermas, “Questions and Counterquestions,” 202.

to see the emancipatory moment of aesthetic experience realized. Against the tacit, wordless promise of reconciliation, Habermas insists that aesthetic experience find resonance with everyday life by entering our communicative practices. And, rather than locate the artwork's emancipatory potential in characteristics immanent to it, Habermas locates this potential in the work's critical reception and thus states his preference for collectively received art forms through which viewing subjects can together discuss the work and relate it back to their everyday experience.

Habermas, in articulating the role of artistic reception in completing the project of modernity, seems to take as his cue the lessons of bourgeois art. The expectations of the bourgeois audience, by Habermas's account, were that laypeople who enjoy art would educate themselves to become experts while behaving as connoisseurs capable of relating their aesthetic experience back to the problems of their own life (DM, 460). In *Ästhetische Theorie* Adorno makes explicit the problems with such an approach: "Das Gemeinsame der beiden zensorischen Grundpositionen des bürgerlichen Bewußtseins jedoch: daß das Kunstwerk nicht dürfe verändern wollen und daß es für alle da zu sein habe, ist das Plaidoyer für den status quo" (What the two basic censorial positions of bourgeois consciousness hold in common—that the artwork must not want to change the world and that it must be there for all—is a *plaidoyer* for the status quo) (AT, 367; 248). We might say that Adorno's and Habermas's distinct responses to the question of the utopian dimension of aesthetic experience stem from their respective degree of satisfaction with the status quo. Adorno sees in art the potential to overcome the status quo by positing an entirely new vision of the social world. Habermas, in locating the emancipatory potential of art in its power to resonate with the everyday, leaves no room for the possibility of a wholesale transformation of the present order, seeking instead to identify potential sources of change through which the project of modernity may finally be seen to completion.

Art and Emancipation

Why did Habermas, as a member of the Frankfurt School's second generation, come to reflect on aesthetic experience only sparingly? Why did he fall short of integrating aesthetic experience into his communication-based theory of reason, developed in what Duvenage has called the second phase of his thought? Why do aesthetics take a backseat in his later work? Is there room, finally, for a constructive role for aesthetic experience within the communicative framework? In considering Adorno's aesthetic theory alongside, or in conversation with, Habermas's limited remarks on aesthetics, I have tried to cast

these questions in light of Habermas's efforts to think through Adorno's reflections on aesthetics. I have argued, in other words, that the shortcomings of Habermas's thinking on aesthetics have more to do with a continued struggle with Adorno's aesthetic theory than with anything else. In this context, engaging closely with Habermas's "Die Moderne" allowed us to consider those shortcomings in the context of that struggle.

Of the criticism launched against "Die Moderne" and Habermas's aesthetics more generally, Habermas himself wrote, "What is in dispute are the internal aspects of the 'inner logic' of autonomous art."²⁵ Taking such disputes as the point of departure, this essay has sought to move beyond the criticism suggested by, primarily, Peter Bürger and Martin Jay by positioning the identified ambiguities in Habermas's text within a subtextual dialogue with Adorno. Beginning with a discussion of the status of autonomous art, I have suggested, first, some of the shared obstacles Habermas and Adorno faced in trying to articulate the features of an aesthetic experience that would answer to the observed pathologies of modern society. This brought out the extent to which both Adorno, as a founding member of the Frankfurt School, and Habermas, as a member of the school's second generation, were convinced by the artwork's potential to play a socially critical role. Their thinking diverged, however, when it came to the proposed means by which such socially critical roles might be fulfilled. Habermas's aesthetic rationality answers to the increasing autonomy of the artistic sphere by positing a language through which artworks may enter everyday communicative practices. At the same time, this language is bound to the subjective experience of autonomous artworks articulated by experts. This tension—between the autonomy of the artistic sphere and the artwork's potential to influence the sphere of everyday life—suggested some of the ways that Habermas both engaged with and sought to overcome the gaps left open by Adorno's aesthetics. In turning to Habermas's thinking on the utopian aspects of aesthetic experience, and the notable ways in which Habermas diverges from Adorno in this regard, I have suggested that such divergence has to do with their attitudes toward the given social reality. For Habermas, the work of art does not need to point to a wholly different, utopian reality lying outside the current one. Instead, artworks might bring about change within the current reality to the extent that such works are discussed and related back to everyday experiences.

Habermas's approach to aesthetic experience, then, seems to reflect his attitude toward critical theory more generally. Small changes within the

25. *Ibid.*, 200.

current system are favored over a wholesale transformation of the lifeworld. Such an approach is, inevitably, more pragmatic. Indeed, one way to characterize the Habermasian corrective to Adorno suggested by their “hidden dialogue” is to say that Habermas gives Adorno’s aesthetic theory a pragmatic bent. For Habermas, it will not suffice to say that the work of art critiques society and the subject is somehow made to experience that relation. Instead, Habermas articulates how the subject’s reception of art might bring about the desired changes. In doing so, he makes room for a position between the work of art and the world, a position that the subject or subjects viewing the work of art occupy. This allows him, in opposition to Adorno, to focus his discussion on the reception of artworks, not on the characteristics immanent to them, and to locate the emancipatory moment of aesthetic experience—and the potential to complete the project of enlightenment—in the present, rather than in an indefinite future utopia. Further, by making room for this intermediate position between work and world, Habermas can shift the burden of agency. By Adorno’s account, it is the work of art that does the “work” of critique, negating the present social order. Habermas, however, forces that role onto the communicating subjects, who occupy a space between the work and the world and thus should be able to relate the one to the other. This explains why, in part, Habermas remained committed to subjective measures of evaluating aesthetic experience, even as he sought to articulate an intersubjective, communication-based framework. The opening of a space between work and world, where the viewing subject does his “work,” is offered in contrast to Adorno’s account. But the opening of such a position, as the reflections offered here have suggested, comes at a cost. The pragmatic, communication-based understanding of aesthetic experience neutralizes the dialectic through which artworks, by Adorno’s account, present a radical challenge to present social reality. Against the negative utopian potential of aesthetic experience—utopia as critical mirror of the social world—Habermas forces the critical potential of the artwork onto its communication-based reception. The ideal speech situation posited by Habermas’s later theory of communicative rationality also suggests Habermas’s continued insistence that the emancipatory, utopian moment of critical thought be realized through communicative practices.²⁶ That Habermas, in his later work, would minimize the role of aesthetics and choose to focus almost exclusively on pragmatics—beginning with his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*—suggests that he himself was left unconvinced by his efforts to articulate an aesthetic experience that would both critically answer to the diag-

26. See Wolin, “Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation,” 34.

nosed ills of modern society and offer a more pragmatic way forward. Even as he tried to move beyond a subject-centered philosophy of consciousness and toward a theory of rationality based in language and communication, he struggled to make room for an emancipatory aesthetic experience. The “wordless, imageless utopia” to which, on Adorno’s account, great artworks must tacitly point, had captured his interest—even as it could not be put into words.

