

The aesthetics of the shock, part II: the dialectics of the instincts in the artistic uncanny

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Thanatos

At this point, we can articulate a clear distinction between art and magic. In art, and especially in modern art, the repetition compulsion is salient. A practitioner of magic believes that the symbolic act he performs actually fulfils desire in reality. Conversely, art essentially leans on its own failure: its aesthetic success depends on its autonomy, i.e. on negating the belief that a symbolic act can fulfil desire in reality. Moreover, modern art does not just accentuate that failure; it situates it at the center of its practice. Repetition compulsion and death drives have always been an elemental part of all artwork, yet in modern art they are made explicit. While art and magic both strive for immediate realization of desire, they are separated by belief in the power to fulfil them. Having that in mind, let us return to Benjamin as he extols the artistry of the French photographer Atget:

He looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift. And thus such pictures, too, work

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Abstract

This second part of Tidhar Nir's essay on the aesthetics of the shock deals with Adorno and Benjamin's dialectical implementations of Freudian concepts such as Thanatos, repetition compulsion, and Eros as part of their relation to the autonomy of art. Interpreting works of art as uncanny and as animistic fantasies reveals how art, in their mind, is related to social reality and social struggles for individuality. Benjamin's account of the French photographer Atget stresses commercial fetishism by giving the inanimate new life through the absence of subjectivity. Atget's empty city is uncanny in its repetitiveness of unused objects, and nostalgic trends give a paradoxical expression to a yearning for innovation amidst the "always the same." Alienation in this context can be understood in two different ways: 1) as the conjunction of inner and outer reality that takes place when the ego is objectified and comes to be regarded as a mere instrument; or 2) as a blurring of ego with outer reality in an effort to undermine the forces that have fixated the ego erotically by conjoining it with other life elements. Adorno designates this phenomenon as the "return of nature" or the aesthetization of the ego. Adorno's interpretation of poetic language draws the contours for a narcissism in which repetition compulsion may be expressed as an unintelligible sound. But that sound is not meaningless: it reiterates and uncovers the trauma inherent in the reification of language.

Keywords: Adorno; Freud; Benjamin; uncanny; aesthetics

against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities; they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship.²

Those neglected, overlooked details that Atget immortalizes are not metaphysically “small.” Rather, they are diminished by cultural hegemony and thus “Atget almost always passed by the ‘great sights and so-called landmarks’.”⁴ Benjamin contrasts the appearance of “naked”, unadorned objects in Atget to the portrait pictures mentioned above.⁵ In contradistinction to the overload of details in the Kafka photograph, emptiness in Atget’s works fends off the shock arising from the modern overload of stimuli. Atget’s works are still lives deprived of any of the conspicuous self-reverence that is present in traditional portraits as well as in some modern ones. Atget’s inanimate nature, never a mere technical accessory, is entirely unutilized. His photographs expose the failure of collective narcissism in its mediated reification of the model into an inanimate fixture:

Since the days of Louis Philippe, the bourgeoisie has endeavored to compensate itself for the fact that private life leaves no traces in the big city. [...] The bourgeoisie unabashedly makes impressions of a host of objects.⁶

Benjamin refers to an attempt at mental compensation. Individuality as the most sacred value of modernity is compromised by mass production which in turn is aimed at endowing renewed individual identity to its own outputs. Atget’s work stresses this fetishism by giving the inanimate new life through the absence of a dominator.

Surely, one may interpret those photographs the other way around: as a fetishistic fixation upon artificiality. Yet this can only be the case if one stresses the subjectivity that is assimilated into the object: technological potency as signifying subjective desire that is fulfilled through intricate mediation. Benjamin’s interpretation emphasizes the absence of subjectivity: a set of tools lacking their user and as long as that perspective is accentuated, trauma is re-presented. Mediated potency is revealed as a failed attempt to satisfy human want and thus human productivity would appear redundant:

Remarkably, however, almost all these pictures are empty. [...] They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant.⁷

Atget’s empty city is uncanny in its repetitiveness of unused objects. In this repetitiveness familiar surroundings seem alien; objects are deserted, leaving us with a sense of discomfort. Towards the end of his work, Benjamin analogizes between Atget’s pictures and crime scenes; the photographer is depicted as a “descendant of the augurs and haruspices.” Benjamin uses that simile to position the artist as society’s prosecutor and the



Figure 1: Eugène Atget, “Boulevard de Strassburg,” 1912. George Eastman Museum.³

²Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in *Selected Writings Vol. II*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1996-1999), 519.

⁴Ibid.

⁵See Tidhar Nir, “The aesthetics of the shock, part I: Adorno, avant-garde art and the uncanny,” *emphInscriptions* 2, no. 2 (2019): 33.

⁶Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” in *Selected Writings Vol. IV*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1996-1999) 25-26.

⁷Benjamin, “Photography,” 519.

entire city as a crime scene.⁸

While attributing moral implications to works of art is always problematic, there is reasonable ground to suppose that Atget himself would have rejected those interpretations, as his nostalgic interest in the architecture of the Old Regime might imply. However, considering his work as a whole, the sense of emptiness is augmented in the face of the pictorial equivalence between shop window corsets (see figure 1), empty streets, and human images.

Atget, perhaps, was not fully aware of the uncanny repetitiveness which emanates from his technique (due to the fact that he never changed his camera). His work cogently reveals the “always more of the same.” Beyond the question of unique style, one cannot escape the sense of *déjà vu* produced by Atget’s reiterations of emptiness. That repetitive experience can even be associated with a nostalgic tendency: as modern cities are centrally designed, in Paris according to Haussmann’s perception, they are rendered into environments stimulating repetition compulsion. Whether or not we approve of the planners’ aesthetics, it is sufficient that a small group of professionals have the power to determine the look of the surroundings of thousands human beings. The nostalgic trend is therefore, paradoxically, a yearning for innovation amidst the “always the same.” While aiming for what has been lost, nostalgia is not just an attempt at retrieving a uniqueness that has vanished under homogenous utilization or in Benjamin’s terms a loss of renowned “aura.” It is also a desire for something slightly less effectively mastered, less mediated, and hence allegedly new.

Eros

The creation of an imaginary subject located at the center of a work of art and expressing a life of its own has become problematic in modernity. It is that very highly cherished possibility of the Russian formalists – alienation – which is now confronted by commodities that are supposedly constantly innovative and surprising. Alienation in this context can be understood in at least two different ways: the first, as the conjunction of inner and outer reality as the ego is objectified and comes to be regarded as a mere instrument. The second is the blurring of ego and outer reality in an effort to undermine the forces that have fixated the ego erotically by conjoining it with other life elements. Adorno designates this phenomenon as the “return of nature” or the aesthetization of the ego. It is in poetry in which the intonation of words is accentuated that Adorno finds such eroticism:

The subject turns itself into *Rauschen*, the rushing, murmuring, sound of nature, living on only in the process of dying away, like language. The act in which the human being becomes language, the flesh becomes word, incorporates the expression of nature into language and transfigures the movement of language so that it becomes life again. [...] Things, which have grown cold, are brought back to themselves by the similarity of their names to themselves, and the movement of language awakens that resemblance. A potential contained in the work of the young Goethe, the nocturnal landscape in his poem “Willkommen und Abschied” [Welcome and Farewell] becomes a law of form in Eichendorff’s work: the law of language as a second nature, in which the objectified nature that has been lost to the subject returns as an animated nature.⁹

Adorno’s interpretation of poetic language draws the contours for a narcissism in which repetition compulsion may be expressed as an unintelligible sound. But that sound is hardly meaningless: it reiterates and uncovers the trauma inherent in the reification of language. While subverting the ideology which identifies the subject with its instruments, subjectivity returns to that very instrument after it has been deserted. The subjectivity inherent in an instrument is what Adorno refers to as “nature.” For Adorno, nature is not an abstract generalization of human beings, animals, plants or material, but rather the unruly residue of human domination, its “non-identity” in instrumental language. While the term may have no constant or homogenous meaning, much like the Freudian *id*, it signifies desire as a whole. Since desire cannot be fully satisfied by any object, desire cannot be identified with it. It is the constant dynamic of life itself and the unconscious subjectivity which rejects its own objectification.

The imaginary ego, sometimes appearing as a storyteller, is separate from the super-ego although it functions in a similar way. Both judge and criticize the ego. But in the artistic instance, the ego is judged for attaining its own over-oppression. The ego’s doubleness is thus necessary in order to reunite its suppressive foundations (the reality principle) with its libidinal foundations (the pleasure principle).

⁸Ibid., 527.

⁹Theodor W. Adorno, “In memory of Eichendorff,” in *Notes to Literature Vol. I*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991-92), 68-69.

Mere infantile regression cannot succeed in realizing desire since it does not acknowledge the actual presence of an outer sphere and it ignores the fundamental trauma that had transpired. Hence one needs to imagine *another* ego which would confront the initial fixative formation of the conscious ego. Due to the ego's inherent mediative character, any direct attempt at unifying those two spheres always results in failure, at least from the infantile point of view. Nonetheless, that failure also endows a therapeutic moment – the very inherent failure also signifies desire's non-identity – its constant, vibrating “inner life.”

When desire's failure is expressed in the mental sphere, it signifies not just the trauma of the historical fissure between the inner and outer realms but also its own driving force which cannot be mastered. Adorno refers to anxiety-raising murmurings and mutterings in Eichendorff's poetry, which somehow attain independence and potency in and of themselves. It is as if only when the inanimate is given renewed subjectivity that the individual, who has allegedly become inanimate in himself, may strive to reunite with it:

But the fact that we happened upon foreign words in particular was hardly due to political considerations. Rather, since language is erotically charged in its words, at least for the kind of person who is capable of expression, love drives us to foreign words. In reality it is love that sets off the indignation over their use. The early craving for foreign words is like the craving for foreign and if possible exotic girls, what lures us is a kind of exogamy of language, which would like to escape from the sphere of what is always the same, the spell of what one is and knows anyway.¹⁰

One may easily be tempted to argue that Adorno is describing some fetishism regarding foreign words, not far from the fetishism surrounding commodities that Marxist thought has always reprehended. The yearning for innovation bestows a special value upon unfamiliar words, regardless of their content. But just as in poetic language the intonation bequeaths a sense of subjectivity to words, so the unfamiliar sound of foreign words produces an aesthetic relation to them. Frequent usage of language represses the mode in which language has an effect upon us, i.e. the ideological internalization of language as a means of communication explicitly ignoring its “other” aspects.

Language has become akin to magic. As in magical practice, “correct” word usage creates a different reality and linguistic usage molds the “actual” social world we live in. That ideology bears conspicuous truth content: as we all play a role in life, we ascribe “appropriate” meaning to words according to the role that we are acting. But ideology conceals the power structures in which decrees, precepts, regulations, and other speech acts continue to function even without the individuals who enunciate them, much like the Lacanian “Big Other.” It is in that sense that language continues to function under the unconscious belief that words have independent power. Their independence is a derivative of the ego's doubleness: The super-ego that lurks behind linguistic usage does not just command “that is the only meaning,” it also commands what to express and how to express it. The menace that foreign words pose also suggests an insurgent possibility – that it is conceivable to express oneself otherwise. The fact that a translation can never precisely repeat the source and that there are always meanings that are left unstated refers to the independence that we ascribe to the sheer irreducibility of words.

The rationality of erotic expression

Two of the mentioned leitmotifs, the doubleness of the ego and the unintelligible character of Adorno's “non-identity,” may (and did) fortify criticism against what has been presented in this work as irrational. Conceptual vagueness may mistakenly be grasped as faulty just as doubleness of the ego may be understood as an infantile regression. The fundamental misconception here stems from identifying instrumental reason with any form of knowledge.¹¹ In that very wide context of knowledge something about Adorno's notion of truth should be mentioned. Many critics have connected Adorno to postmodern thought as the latter allegedly debunks the pretension to represent truth and nowadays one cannot consistently maintain such a concept. Thus, Jameson argues that:

The narrative will now turn on the fate of philosophy, whose index is its metaphysical function – or, in other words, what used to be called *truth*. But this traditional preoccupation does

¹⁰Theodor W. Adorno, “Words from abroad” in *Notes to Literature Vol. I*, 187.

¹¹“But Habermas is wrong to conclude that Adorno's implacable critique of reason (*Verstand* rather than *Vernunft*) paints him into the corner of irrationalism. [...] He thinks so only because he cannot himself allow for the possibility or the reality of some new, genuinely dialectical thinking.” Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), 24.

not distance Adorno from poststructuralism as greatly as might be imagined, since his theme also is the impossibility of ‘truth’ in our own time, the enfeeblement of the category itself, the debility of such mental operations and judgments.¹²

The debility of the concept of truth is paradoxical. It is as if the subject and his words were nothing but exemplifications of instrumental reason in that they cannot attest to anything else but themselves. And, since instrumental reason does not fulfil its assignment to realize subjectivity in social reality but, on the contrary, raises death instincts and aggressiveness, its “truth” has turned into a lie. The totality of such a reason allegedly prevents any other reason from proclaiming itself as valid. Instrumental fixation hinders any expression of truth that is not bound up with its practical application, i.e. with the “correct” manner in which words, humans, and objects should be used. As instrumental fixation applies even to our very ends and desires, the rationale of any instrumentality is now brought into question. Thus, the irrationality in “appropriateness of means to an end” is revealed when desire is treated as one expedient among others. The covert ideology in the debility of the concept of truth ignores the *real* potency of linguistic usage to fulfil desires. It is the exact reversal of the historically growing potency of the human species, the process in which mental proceedings have been collectively realized in social reality.

At any rate, it is erroneous to argue that Adorno’s philosophy leads to denial of the concept of truth. The truth content [*Wahrheit gehalt*] of works of art is their expressed trauma and pain. To deny their truth content is also to deny numerous neglected historical possibilities. Nothing could be more remote from Adorno’s intentions: The chapter which criticizes the notion of truth in his *Negative Dialectics* is immediately followed by a chapter which assaults relativism.¹³ It is exactly the truth content of works of art which expresses the very truth that instrumental reason cannot articulate:

As in Kafka’s writings, the disturbed and damaged course of the world is incommensurable also with the sense of its sheer senselessness and blindness; we cannot stringently construe it according to their principle. It resists all attempts of a desperate consciousness to posit despair as an absolute. The world’s course is not absolutely conclusive, nor is absolute despair; rather, despair is its conclusiveness. However void every trace of otherness in it, however much all happiness is marred by revocability: in the breaks that belie identity, entity is still pervaded by the ever-broken pledges of that otherness. All happiness is but a fragment of the entire happiness men are denied, and are denied by themselves.¹⁴

Adorno does not deduce total denial of abstract thought from the “desperate thought which posits despair as an absolute.” As private happiness has become more and more dependent on social structures, the neglected abstract thought reiterates its ideological roots in favor of some imaginary private happiness. And on the other hand, the desperate thought which posits itself as an absolute is far from being a firm metaphysical constant, in fact it is mutable.

This is the major difference between Adorno and postmodernism: the uncanny as otherness is in this context the *totality*, and in spite of its familiarity it includes potency which we do not fully understand as it is so extensively decentralized. Linguistic totality in universal concepts such as “truth” is not disqualified as a mere lie, even if it is indifferent to what social totality tramples upon: its victims — individuals who are not considered as such. In order to disclose that suffering one must apprehend the global potency of mankind which is exemplified in linguistic totality. In poetic mediation linguistic totality is partly denied, or as Adorno enigmatically puts it, “semblance is a promise of nonsemblance.”¹⁵ The concept that conveys meaning is a part of linguistic totality, which disavows that very concept’s unique and irreducible source. And, since the concept is allegedly no longer obliged to “represent” anything, the word and its source are now separated and detached from any human end.

Postmodern anti-representational trends contain an ideological price: while language is played unrestrictedly as an internal game of signifiers in an artistic or academic field, in social reality it obediently serves an unknown, concealed source. As language has become increasingly instrumental, its aims and its own desires and motives have been banished to an unpractical realm. In other words, language has become uncanny, and its alienation can be articulated in those three modes of repression:

¹²Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 117.

¹³Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 33-35.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 404-403.

¹⁵“Art is semblance even at its highest peaks; but its semblance, the irresistible part of it, is given to it by what is not semblance. What art, notably the art decried as nihilistic, says in refraining from judgments is that everything is not just nothing. If it were, whatever is would be pale, colorless, indifferent. No light falls on men and things without reflecting transcendence. Indelible from the resistance to the fungible world of barter is the resistance of the eye that does not want the colors of the world to fade. Semblance is a promise of nonsemblance.” Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 404-405.

1. The repression of language's independent force, i.e. the manifold forms in which power structures continue to function without subjects who speak;
2. The idealistic denial of the linguistic "source," i.e. relations of production, while reaffirming those relations in linguistic instrumentality;
3. The repression of desire as the ultimate end of linguistic usage by continuous application of subordinate and subsidiary ends.

The return of animism in language is thereby realized in postmodern fetishism of linguistic functions. Linguistic fetishism functions similarly to systems, institutions, bureaucracies, or power structures that ostensibly work on their own yet conceal the abstract collective subjectivity that is uncannily imbued in them. It is relived in works of art where subjectivity is once again directly ascribed to linguistic functions; just as the legal system in Kafka's work seem to have its own independent life and will, above and beyond its culprits. Moreover, the dialectical process in works of art reunites unconscious subjectivity within those inanimate beings as an imaginary relation to erotic objects. That is to say, the urge for totality is not just a drive to transform otherness into endlessly repeating uniformity. Rather, it can also be an attempt to eroticize reality in such a manner that the ego's otherness merges with it. That is exactly what commodity societies promise us: diverseness, colorfulness, and richness of human experience. Adorno's criticism is that that promise cannot be fulfilled within commodity society since its structures of desire fulfilment are essentially contradictory.

The remoteness of alien words or linguistic intonations is also symptomatic of the obsolete "law against individual conflict" which the postmodern has allegedly dissolved. Avant-garde art's need for conceptual obscurities or for lack of coherent meanings emanates from the manner in which the private does not find its place within linguistic totality. Failed eroticism and instrumental totality conjoin to banish "that which cannot be described" into the dark realm of infantile silliness. Postmodern explosions of the unity of meaning or heteronymous interpretive codes emphasize masochistic acts that condemn the ego to its own disintegration of meaning:

Unlike canonical post-structuralism, however, whose emblematic gesture is that by which Barthes, in *S/Z*, shatters a Balzac novella into a random operation of multiple codes, the Althusserian/Marxist conception of culture requires this multiplicity to be reunified, if not at the level of the work itself, then at the level of its process of production, which is not random but can be described as a coherent functional operation. The current post-structural celebration of discontinuity and heterogeneity is therefore only an initial moment in Althusserian exegesis, which then requires the fragments, the incommensurable levels, the heterogeneous impulses, of the text to be once again related, but in the mode of structural difference and determinate contradiction.¹⁶

One may feel compelled to ask why a work should be unified at any level if it is allegedly proven to be fragmentary from the very start. If *multiplicity* is the new ontology that disguises itself as anti-ontology, then the semblance of comprehensive unity of meaning does lead to instrumental irrationality. The coherent function aims at an impossible deed: patching up ruptures of diverse meanings. Lacking a utopian meaning, the functionality of the process is uncanny. That is to say, without acknowledging that fantasy of unification, an imaginary ego which strives for inosculation, the notion of harmony deteriorates into a deception. Even the human endeavour to link diverse living elements becomes altogether as arbitrary as destroying one's life. The passion for the multiplicity of meanings is a transgression which delineates social borders as objects of desire. In celebrating the evaporation of old theoretical laws, real social formations have never been fundamentally shaken.

Art as an imaginary crime

However, followers of Adorno and Marcuse who intertwine political emancipation with aesthetic choices, do need to cope with at least one postmodern hurdle. The ego aims at realizing not indefinite desire but desire which includes its transgressions so that repressive patterns may permeate its efforts. Since discussing eroticism in an abstract and "democratic" manner, without ascribing to it any specific content but the urge to integrate with other living elements, death instinct might as well find its way in. In a Foucauldian sense, the transgressor needs a law in order to enjoy transgressing it. As much as he cannot or would not like to imagine another life or another law, *jouissance* appropriates the law of fungibility

¹⁶Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Social Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 56.

into sadomasochistic eroticism.

Uncanny eroticism can overcome this if in the “return of the repressed” expression will be given to the most private as well as the law. The most familiar, the homiest, and the closest object which has been rendered alien is the most secret: the human body. The human body has been distorted by abstract unification of concept and object. Abstract painting may indeed express negation or destruction of bodies, or violent outbursts of emotion. However, the convulsed body may as well reflect polymorphic sexuality disqualified by normative standards of beauty. Ugliness as a social category emanates not just from damage done to desire from perceiving the body as “physical” and inanimate, but also from forbidding forms of sexual diversity. The artistic gesture emphasizes the border between reality and other real possibilities and as such erotic unification cannot be fully achieved. This failure does not derive, as Lacanian pessimists would argue, from the very impossibility of fulfilling desire. Rather, it is a structural failure derived from the fact that erotic effort is being exercised in fantasy instead of in social reality. As such, art is always a castrated gesture of unification.

The problematic character of violent appearances in modern works of art is not only that commodity society shows from time to time willingness to accept such contents. The critical remoteness between art and society is undermined in postmodern culture wherein sadomasochistic gestures are now accepted as legitimate parts of sexuality. As such, death instincts are not recognized as destructive but as “useful” parts of erotic expression. The usage of the normative border as an object of desire justifies and reaffirms normative structures; just as imaginative technique endows us with the delight of committing a crime without “getting caught.” For Benjamin, the uncanny as an artistic structure is interpreted as a weapon signifying independent force employed against the “outer realm.” Right after discussing the link between the modern experience of shock and Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he argues that:

The greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience [*Erfahrung*] and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*] [...] Without reflection, there would be nothing but the sudden start, occasionally pleasant but usually distasteful, which, according to Freud, confirms the failure of the shock defence. Baudelaire has portrayed this process in a harsh image. He speaks of a duel in which the artist, just before being beaten, screams in fright. This duel is the creative process itself. Thus, Baudelaire placed [the] shock experience [*Chockerfahrung*] at the very center of his art.¹⁷

The interlacing of reflective thought and repetition compulsion bestows upon the artistic process an *other* potency. The reflection of outer dread is a mimetic technique which artists use to mask an imaginary subject with anxiety as a defence against that outer dread. Yet what was ineffective in magical masks, at least from the Enlightenment perspective, is transformed in works of art from the magical to the reflective. Just as a performer impersonates a terrible character who is not himself, the imaginary ego enacts the dreadfulness of outer reality. Since potency is fulfilled herein only in the imaginary realm, it expresses the artist’s failure to implement real potency. But, since the duel that Benjamin describes takes place among phenomena of the same kind, the reflective process occurring between the ego and its imaginative replica is an effort that is based on a real possibility of overcoming ideological boundaries. The boundaries between the inner, the mental, the subjective and the outer, the social, the objective are ideological as long as societal mediation which is supposed to be subjugated to human desires is not fully recognized as such. Avant-garde artistic movements, to the extent that they strive to revoke those boundaries, miss that point. The autonomy of art works is not just mere self-castration. As art establishes itself as a potential opponent to normative power structures, as Benjamin interprets Baudelaire, it subverts ideological boundaries. Imaginary struggles are not necessarily false; they are conducted within and beyond ideological hegemonies.

The understanding of aesthetic reflection as repetition compulsion, as well as being a part of the dialectics between Eros and Thanatos, finds its support in the perspective of one who experiences works of art and performs an “inaccurate” repetition of the initial creative gesture. For example, musical performance that is guided by instructions inscribed in notes is never completely subjugated to them. The remoteness from the source preserves a sort of subjectivity regarding the work, as its instructions (what to see, what to hear, what to think etc.) become at a certain moment a heteronomous law. Such remoteness enables us to produce what we call personal interpretation, and to oppose at certain instances, aesthetic traditions.

¹⁷Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Selected Writings Vol. IV*, 319.

Surely, one can argue that there is never a source, there is no accurate performance and no one can be aloof from what is anyway a multiplicity of meanings. Even so, it is enough to point to an imaginary source to retain some sort of familiarity, a proximity that echoes within one's performance. It is within such proximity that the viewer, listener, or reader produces the reiterating alienation by introducing his subjectivity and it is that which structures it as uncanny. In reading, the text or our imaginary relation to the text is the source as the reader reiterates it by his linguistic activity. One may find interest and delight in returning to a familiar text as an unsolved puzzle. As such, its unintelligibility posits a threat to instrumental totality. Furthermore, the altered experience of reading in every occasion does not necessarily indicate that there is no real source but a plurality of "readings." It is rather our subjectivity that has not completely mastered the text and extracted its diverse meanings. Composition and aesthetic experience are thus open processes, their conclusion is never certain as they are always susceptible to repetition compulsion.

Understanding that animistic aspect, the subjective process of imaginary constructs, draws us nearer to what Adorno argues about the dynamics between the details and the totality within the work of art:

The artwork is a process essentially in the relation of its whole and parts. Without being reducible to one side or the other, it is the relation itself that is a process of becoming.¹⁸

If the form somehow reflects the normative law, then the details are the assembled life parts and the living context from which they were taken. But inasmuch as the dynamics of the work are based on its inherent antagonism between the details and the law, the process of the work's becoming is also the process of its decay. But inasmuch as the dynamics of the work is based on its inherent antagonism between the symbolic details and the law, the process of the work's becoming is also the process of its decay. In its own history, various layers of meaning are being either elucidated or mystified. It is thus the task of the artist, so to speak, to enigmatize its work so it may elude the decline of its inner conflict.¹⁹

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¹⁸Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 178.

¹⁹Ibid.