

# REMARKS ON THE RIDDLE-CHARACTER OF ART AND METAPHYSICAL EXPERIENCE

*Observaciones sobre el carácter enigmático del arte y la experiencia metafísica*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay attempts through extended textual exegesis to clarify two fundamental concepts in late Adorno's metaphysical and philosophical-aesthetic writings respectively: "metaphysical experience" and the "riddle-character" of art. The first part of the essay explores how in *Negative Dialectics* Adorno reworks certain Kantian themes to provide an account of metaphysical experience as the exercise of the mind's capacity for thinking beyond the immanently given that brings happiness despite failing to attain the absolute. The second part of the essay interprets concepts from *Aesthetic Theory* and related writings, including the internal/external, performative/cognitive perspectives on the artwork, and its similarity to language, to show how the riddle-character of art elicits an experience similar to metaphysical experience, in that it demonstrates the ability of mind to reach beyond its cognitive self-limitations into a response-dependent objectivity with utopian implications.

*Keywords:* Theodor W. Adorno, metaphysics, philosophical aesthetics, experience, Kant.

## RESUMEN

A través de una extensa exégesis textual, este ensayo pretende clarificar dos conceptos en los escritos tardíos de Adorno sobre metafísica y estética filosófica: "experiencia metafísica" y "carácter enigmático". La primera parte del ensayo explora cómo Adorno reelabora ciertos temas kantianos en *Dialéctica negativa* con miras a ofrecer una explicación de la experiencia metafísica como el ejercicio de la capacidad de pensar más allá de lo inmanentemente dado, que proporciona felicidad pese a no lograr alcanzar el absoluto. La segunda

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parte interpreta conceptos de Teoría estética y escritos afines, incluyendo las perspectivas interna/externa y performativa/cognitiva de la obra de arte, así como su semejanza al lenguaje, para mostrar cómo el carácter enigmático del arte produce una experiencia similar a la metafísica al demostrar la habilidad de la mente para ir más allá de sus limitaciones cognitivas para alcanzar una objetividad dependiente de la respuesta con implicaciones utópicas.

*Palabras clave:* Theodor W. Adorno, metafísica, estética filosófica, experiencia, Kant.

“Metaphysics concerns something objective, yet without being able to dispense itself from subjective reflection. Subjects are embedded in themselves, in their ‘constitution’: it is for metaphysics to contemplate how far subjects may none the less look out beyond themselves.”

Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1973: 376, translation modified)

The conceptual field of riddle (*Rätsel*) and riddle-solving (*enträtselfeln*) inhabit Adorno's thought, from his earliest works, including his inaugural lecture “The Actuality of Philosophy” (1931) and his first book *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1933) through his many musicological studies, and culminating in a major section of his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1969) entitled “Riddle-Character, Truth Content, Metaphysics.”<sup>1</sup> Whereas in his inaugural lecture riddle-figure and riddle-solving function as a unique cognitive model for social-philosophical “interpretation” (*Deutung*) that issues in praxis (Pickford, 2018a), in *Aesthetic Theory* the riddle-character of art and its lack of solution indicates instead a different model of mind-world interaction – or so I shall endeavor to show – one that makes the aesthetic experience of “authentic” artworks the privileged arena of possible “metaphysical experience” as Adorno understands that concept. This essay is primarily exegetical, with passing attention to certain Kantian motifs repurposed by Adorno, and offers some preliminary remarks on the nexus between metaphysical experience and art's riddle-character: it aims first to introduce Adorno's notion of metaphysical experience and its proximity to aesthetic experience, and then to clarify

<sup>1</sup> In general I will rely on Robert Hullot-Kentor's translation of *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), but will diverge from his convention of translating *Rätselcharakter* as “enigmaticalness” in favor of “riddle-character.” All quotations from translations of Adorno's writings are checked against the original German.

the notion of riddle-character and its apprehension in aesthetic experience as presented in *Aesthetic Theory* and related texts.

## 1 METAPHYSICAL EXPERIENCE

In this 1965 lecture course *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* and in the final section of his 1966 magnum opus *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno introduces the concept of “metaphysical experience” (*metaphysische Erfahrung*) as the condition of possibility for metaphysics in the post-Holocaust world. In the lecture course he traces the emergence of identity-thinking – subsuming a sensuous, material particular under a universal, a concept – from Aristotle’s metaphysics to Hegel’s objective idealism, accompanied by an implicit or explicit horizon of unchanging, absolute Being towards which knowledge was teleologically oriented, even in Kant’s antinomic picture of mind’s natural inclination to know and constitutive inability to experience the unconditioned. Kant erred, however, in hypostatizing as universal and unchanging what is in fact merely a specific historical form of experience modelled on the mathematical, logical, and empirical natural sciences of his day, and in conceiving objective knowledge as the abstract subsumption under concepts and coordinating categories of the mind of sensuous particulars given in receptivity. These errors, for Adorno (following Lukács), are reflective of the reified social and productive relations at the dawn of industrial capitalism; Adorno’s critique of them entails that the concept of experience need not be restricted to these Kantian forms, which constitute a “block” to possible experience (Adorno, 1973: 384-390; Wellmer, 1998, Hammer, 2008).

Nonetheless the continuity in the Western picture of metaphysics was ruptured by the historical caesura of “a situation [that] has been reached today, in the present form of the organization of work in conjunction with the maintenance of the existing relations of production, in which every person is absolutely fungible or replaceable, even under conditions of formal freedom. This situation gives rise to a feeling of the superfluity and, if you like, the insignificance of each of us in relation to the whole” (2000: 109). This situation culminated in the industrial anonymous genocide of the Holocaust (and continues in Vietnam, he suggests) that stripped any possible affirmative meaning from human suffering and death: “It is therefore impossible ... to insist after Auschwitz on the presence of a positive meaning or purpose in Being... To assert that existence or Being has a positive meaning

constituted within itself and orientated towards the divine principle (if one is to put it like that) would be, like all principles of truth, beauty and goodness which philosophers have concocted, a pure mockery in the face of the victims and the infinitude of their torment” (2000: 101-2). The absence of any overarching meaning (*Sinn*) subtending individual lives and deaths is the absence of any affirmative metaphysics. Adorno’s project, in the face of the nihilism oriented toward the “torturable body” (2000: 108, citing Brecht), is to elaborate the condition of the possibility of any metaphysics, namely the possibility of metaphysical experience in the subject, understood not as the intimation or apprehension of an absolutely other (as in dialectical theology [2000: 122]), but rather mind or spirit’s (*Geist*) ability to transcend itself and the given (that which is already subsumed or subsumable under a universal), into what Adorno calls “the open” (*das Offene*): “And this thinking beyond itself, into *openness* – that, precisely, is metaphysics” (2000: 68). Invoking Kantian themes, Adorno implies this is a morally worthy kind of happiness: “the happiness of thought (*das Glück des Gedankens*), which motivates us to think on metaphysical matters in the first place ... is simply the happiness of elevation (*Elevation*), the happiness of transcending beyond that which merely is” (2000: 114, trans. modified; cf. 1973: 364)<sup>2</sup>, that it merits “a respect for the possibility of the mind, despite everything, to raise itself however slightly above that which is” (2000: 125) and that “not equat[ing] itself to, and ‘devour[ing]’, everything which exists,” mind “takes on a small moment of not-being-engulfed-in-blind-contingency: a very paradoxical form of hope” (2000: 135).

Put another way, metaphysics understood as unchanging Being – which perhaps was always ideological – has in modernity migrated into the picture of an ever-same reality that is allegedly subsumable without remainder on the one hand, and on the other hand a self-reifying subject whose capacity for genuine, ‘emphatic’ experience has atrophied, what in *Minima Moralia* Adorno calls “the withering of experience, the vacuum between men and their fate, in which their real fate lies” (1974: 55). In the lectures on metaphysics Adorno glosses this vacuum as how death is apprehended as an accidental, external event, rather than as an ‘epic death,’ the inherent end of a ‘ripened’ life: “the less people really live – or, perhaps more cor-

<sup>2</sup> Later Adorno claims that happiness is “the [experience of] the interiority of objects as something at the same time displaced from them [*ein diesen zugleich Entrücktes*]” (2000: 140, trans. modified; cf. 1973: 374). This is one of many echoes of Benjamin’s concept of *aura* that I can here only note in passing.

rectly, the more they become aware that they have not really lived - the more abrupt and frightening death becomes for them, and the more it appears as an accident [*Unglücksfall*]. It is as if, in death, they experienced their own reification: that they were corpses from the first.... The terror of death today is largely the terror of seeing how much the living resemble it” (2000: 136; cf. 1973: 368-73). Adorno therefore equates the rescue of mind’s capacity for possible self-transcendence with the subversion of mind’s self-reification (its making itself resemble the likewise reified second nature of contemporary society).

Adorno adduces an example of the kind of metaphysical experience that is possible today by turning to Proust’s description of the imagination’s engagement with evocative village names in *À la recherche du temps perdu*: “What metaphysical experience might be, for whoever disdains to deduce it from allegedly primal religious experiences, is most readily similar to how Proust imagined it, in the happiness that is promised by the names of villages such as Otterbach, Watterbach, Reuenthal, Monbrunn. One believes that if one goes there one would be in what is fulfilled, as if it existed. When one really is there, what has been promised recedes like a rainbow. And yet one is not disappointed: rather one feels as though one were too near, and for that reason does not see it.... To the child it is self-evident that what delights him about his favorite little town is to be found only there, solely and nowhere else; the child errs, but his error founds the model for experience, for a concept that might at last be that of the thing itself [*die Sache selbst*], not the paltry bit that has been stripped away from things [*das Armselige von den Sachen Abgezogene*]. ...Only in the face of the absolutely, indissolubly individuated is it to be hoped that precisely this once was and will be; only by approaching this would fulfill the concept of the concept” (1973: 373-74, translation modified; cf. 2000: 140; Gordon 2020)<sup>3</sup>. The dialectic of happiness and self-knowledge suggested here is perhaps glossed in this passage from *Minima Moralia*: “It is no different with happiness than with truth: one does not have it, but is in it. Indeed, happiness is nothing other than being encompassed, an after-image of the warm security of the mother. That is why no-one can know that they are happy. In order to see happiness, they would have to step out of it: they would be like a newborn. Whoever says, they are happy, lies, by evoking it and thus sinning against happiness. Only those who say: I was happy, are true to it. The only relationship of consciousness to

<sup>3</sup> Adorno writes in a similar fashion in his essay in remembrance of Amorbach, the town where his family vacationed when he was a child (GS 10.1: 302-309; cf. Gillespie 2016).

happiness is that of gratitude: this constitutes its incomparable dignity” (1974: 112, translation modified). Happiness here is not the momentary satisfaction of an appetite, but rather a fulfilled existence, which requires concomitantly a rationally organized society that, having eliminated structural antagonisms, domination, and material want, thereby fosters fulfilled lives of its individuals (see Finalyson, 2012: 395-97). As Adorno says elsewhere in *Minima Moralia*, a mankind which no longer knows want or antagonism would find that “enjoyment itself would be affected,” no longer yoked to a system of domination: “none of the abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than perpetual peace” (1974: 157, translation modified), that is, reconciliation between self and others, and between self and world. Unlike Kantian concepts of the unconditioned such as God, the immortal soul, or practical freedom, Kant’s theory of perpetual peace envisions it as the possible outcome of a dialectical historical process: an absolute that someday may be attained (1973: 385). In the quotation Adorno claims that one who is in this state of reconciliation, happiness, cannot know it, because such discursive knowledge requires epistemic distance, as mirrored in a predicate judgment that distinguishes subject from attribute or state of affairs, and which presupposes concepts, categories of judgment, and so on. Recalling the earlier passage from *Negative Dialectics*, this reconciliation would include the overcoming or surpassing of the “Kantian block,” transcending the erroneously postulated invariant limits to experience.

As Adorno makes clear in the 1965 lecture course, metaphysical experience, as it is possible at this time, under these political-economic and cultural conditions, as the mind’s minimal capacity for transcendence<sup>4</sup> beyond the brute given into “the open,” is intrinsically fallible: “it is in the concept of openness, as that which is not already subsumed under the identity of the concept, that the possibility of disappointment lies” (2000: 141). Adorno more strongly claims it survives only negatively, with no accession to, no intimation of a metaphysical or theological other: “Pure metaphysical experience unmistakably becomes paler and more desultory in the course of the process of secularization, and this weakens the substantiality of the older kind of experience. It maintains itself negatively in that ‘is that all?’, that is most closely realized in waiting in vain (*im vergeblichen Warten*)” (1973: 375, translation modified; cf. 2000: 144).

<sup>4</sup> He and Horkheimer sometimes liken it to a snail or insect extending its feelers; for instance, see the opening sentence to the section “In the Genesis of Stupidity” from “Notes and Sketches” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “The emblem of intelligence is the feeler of the snail...” (2002: 213).

We thus can understand metaphysical experience as the mind's ability to extend, or project itself, beyond what is immediately given to cognition, where cognition is generally understood along Kantian lines: subsuming under universal concepts of the understanding sensuous particulars given in receptivity. This projection is a mental objectual attitude of expectation or hope, yet without a determinate concept which sensibility might fulfill. Hence it is an expectation that is in error, and is disappointed (see Skrike, 2012 for an error-theory of metaphysical experience). But, unlike non-metaphysical hope, it does not produce frustration or sadness but happiness, because it demonstrates mind's independence from the given, mind's ability to adopt an objectual attitude towards the possible within the merely existent (on this notion of possibility in Adorno's thought, see Macdonald, 2019). Furthermore, the logical form for this kind of objectual mental attitude is not propositional or predicative judgments, but logically proper names which referentially denote a unique particular. Several commentators suggest that such names are in some sense revelatory or disclosive of their referent's essence, perhaps reworking Walter Benjamin's theory of language; if so, the name in its ideal function would be logically equivalent to an infinitely long conjunction of predicates that ultimately *per impossible* would uniquely describe the referent. However, I am inclined to suggest an alternative interpretation, in light of Adorno's claim that the referent – the village – once experienced, fails to fulfill the expectation supposedly described by its name. The alternative explanation is that the name is not equivalent to an ideal infinite description but rather is a non-propositional expression evocative of the sense of at-home-ness between subject and object, and that thereby what is affirmed even in the disappointment is the presupposed relation of *nameability* between subject and unique particular, that is, the fundamental but nonconceptual *affinity* between mind and world that is a condition for any cognition whatsoever, the moment that, “in the overall process of enlightenment gradually crumbles away” (1973: 45, translation modified; cf. 25, 149-50, 158, 270). This affinity is affirmed even when the name's referent disappoints or when one's hopeful expectation amounts to waiting in vain.

Having praised Kant's “rescue of the intelligible sphere” as “an intervention in the dialectic of enlightenment” (1973: 385), Adorno locates the possibility of metaphysics today in the question of whether transcendence can be experienced from within finite immanence, introducing the figure of the riddle, semblance, and aesthetics: “The consideration of whether metaphysics is still possible at all

must reflect the negation of what is finite that is demanded by finitude. That negation's riddle-image [*Rätselbild*] animates [*beseelt*] the word 'intelligible.' Its conception is not wholly unmotivated thanks to that moment of self-sufficiency, which spirit forfeited by its absolutization and which, for its part also something not identical with what exists, spirit attains as soon as it has acknowledged the non-identical, as soon as not everything existing evaporates into spirit. For all its mediations spirit participates in that lived existence [*Dasein*] that its alleged transcendental purity replaced. In spirit's moment of transcendent objectivity, however little that moment can be split off and ontologized, the possibility of metaphysics has its inconspicuous site [*Stätte*]. The concept of the intelligible realm would be that of something that is not and yet not only is not" (1973: 392-93, translation modified).

The riddle-image results from the attempt to conceive of the concept of the intelligible realm within a classical ontology. On the one hand the intelligible realm is not, because it lies 'beyond' the realm of spatio-temporally structured and causally interacting appearances: it is the negation of the mundane existence of finite, mortal mind or spirit (*Geist*), and parallels the negation made when conceiving mind as transcendently pure forms of intuition in sensibility and categories of the understanding. Yet in both cases the negation - if conceived as abstract negation (to speak with Hegel) that yields a separate, ontological realm of Being - is illusory (*Schein*), for mind is actually entwined via mediations with lived existence (*Dasein*): negating such mediations does not entail immediate epistemic or experiential access to the absolute. Hence Adorno goes on to write: "it would be false to infer through the immediate elevation [*Erhebung*] of negativity, of the critique of the merely existent, something positive, as though the insufficiency of that which is would guarantee that that which is were free of such insufficiency. Even in the extreme the negation of negation is no positivity" (1973: 393, translation modified). On the other hand, if the negation is considered as determinate negation, as (again with Hegel) a moment of mind's transcending itself and reaching into an objectivity outside its conceptual compass, then this 'intelligible realm' not only is not, for the illusion is not merely idiosyncratic, subjective projection, but a kind of non-conceptual objectivity (for a developed theory of this type of objectivity, see Finke, 2001). Thus Adorno concludes this section of his work as follows: "Conscious of itself, illusion [*Schein*] is no more the same. What finite beings say about transcendence is the semblance [*Schein*] of transcendence, yet, as Kant well knew, a necessary semblance. Hence the rescue of semblance, the object of aesthetics, has

its incomparable metaphysical relevance” (1973: 393, translation modified). If art can make experientially available to its subject a kind of non-conceptual objectivity, then this would be at least one point of continuity, or perhaps affinity, between metaphysical and aesthetic experience.

## 2 THE RIDDLE-CHARACTER OF ART

In an influential article, Rolf Tiedemann (1997: 141) reproduces an unpublished note entitled by Adorno “On Metaphysics” (“Zur Metaphysik”): “Yesterday I wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*: no transcendence without that which would be transcended. Yet doesn’t that reach far beyond art? Doesn’t the answer to the question of the conditioned’s endless relevance for the unconditioned – the kernel of mystical experience – lie enclosed in *thought*? For if the absolute is so only in relation to the conditioned – any talk of the absolute would be wholly senseless otherwise – then it would be very bad and abstract to characterize the relationship according solely to this dichotomy. If the absolute cannot be without the conditioned, the conditioned itself thereby falls into the absolute, which is then still conditioned. This corresponds exactly with the feeling for life that everything here in life is at once quite irrelevant and so too of endless relevance (the feeling that one has nothing but just this nothingness and that it is therefore endlessly important, is parodied by metaphysical experience and leaves open whether, in the end, the most banal experience doesn’t coincide with the sublime – ). Therein lies nothing less than the *communication* between all that is, the objectivity of mimesis. Of utmost importance, demonstrate (*Höchst wichtig, ausführen*)” (translation modified).

This note offers guiding insights into our topic and contains several claims that merit investigation: the necessary relation between transcendence and what would be transcended that Adorno suggests is significant to both aesthetic and metaphysical experience, particularly in regards to thinking; the rejection of bad and abstract division between conditioned and unconditioned (or the absolute), reminiscent of Hegel’s concept of ‘bad infinity,’ in favor of the view in which the conditioned ‘falls’ into the absolute while remaining conditioned; the agreement of this with a peculiar phenomenological attitude inherent in the ‘feeling for life’ that everything is both nothing and infinitely important; the claim first that this phenomenological attitude parodies metaphysical experiences, but second that perhaps ultimately this attitude – the banal and the sublime – coincides with meta-

physical experience; and lastly, the claim that underlying this coincidence is the communication between everything that exists, which is tantamount to the objectivity of mimesis.

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno rejects all *prima philosophia* and, as we saw, with it a conception of the absolute grounded in a fixed and abstract division between the unconditioned and conditioned: rather the division is itself historical and materialist. One aspect of this move is that the theological provenance and whatever remaining theological qualities of the absolute must be thoroughly secularized: “Nothing of theological content will persist without being transformed; every content will have to put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane” (1998: 136; cf. 2002: 139-41, Brittain, 2010). The everyday can ‘fall’ into the absolute, the absolute might successfully ‘migrate’ into the secular: these are figures of methexis, sharing or participation, rather than abstract, formal division. This entails that one must begin in the *hic et nunc*, within the immanent context that, for Adorno, is virtually a closed totality of deception distorted by the commodity form and domination, and try to discern the possibility of transcendence therein: “Every individual trait in the nexus of deception is nonetheless relevant to its possible end. Good is what wrenches free, it is interwoven in history that, without being organized unequivocally toward reconciliation, in the course of its movement allows the possibility of redemption to flash up” (1998: 148).

In “Zur Metaphysik” Adorno also asks whether the infinite relevance of the conditioned for the unconditioned, which presumably he just explored in regards to aesthetic experience, extends beyond art to lie in thinking itself. He considers this question critically in another way when he faults the abstraction inherent in the “architectonic schema” of category and principle in Ernst Bloch’s *Prinzip Hoffnung*: “While his philosophy overflows with materials and colors, it does not escape abstractness. What is colorful and particular in it serves largely to exemplify the single idea of utopia and breakthrough ... Bloch’s philosophy has to distill utopia into a general concept that subsumes the concreteness that utopia actually would be ... Hope is not a principle. But philosophy cannot fall silent in the face of color. Philosophy cannot move in the medium of thought, of abstraction, and then practice asceticism when it comes to the interpretation [*Deutung*] in which such movement terminates. If it does so, its ideas become riddle-images” (1991: 213, translation modified). From the side of philosophy, discursive thought that halts at abstraction, generalization, subsumption, forswearing interpretation and the desire for

the concrete, is left with riddle-images. However, as we shall see, it is precisely the aesthetic experience of riddle-images that can induce metaphysical experience in the subject: the riddle-character is, as it were, the hinge that joins philosophy and art.

The concepts of riddle (*Rätsel*), riddle-character (*Rätselcharakter*), riddle-image (*Rätselbild*) and enigmatic (*rätselhaft*) and the closely related figure of the paradox perform much argumentative labor in *Aesthetic Theory*, so I must limit the provisional remarks of this essay to contexts where one may discern the closest affinities with the concept of metaphysical experience, namely in the section entitled “Riddle-Character, Truth Content, Metaphysics,” where he intriguingly writes “[t]his manifestation of the riddle-character of art as incomprehension in the face of questions of putatively grand principle is familiar in the broader context of the bluff inherent in the question as to the meaning of life” (1997: 121), with a footnote referring to the section “Meditations on Metaphysics” in *Negative Dialectics*: both modern artworks and modern life under capitalism reveal the question of overall sense or meaning, purpose, to be a mere ‘bluff’ or semblance.

Most straightforwardly then, the riddle-character of art is the question of its meaning (*Sinn*) or purpose. While this claim suggests Kant’s attribution to art of a structural “purposefulness without purpose,” for Adorno the riddle-character is a result of historical and secularizing processes: “This riddle-character emerged out of an historical process. Art is what remains after the loss of what was supposed to exercise a magical, and after a cultic function [elsewhere he will also include music’s emergence from courtly entertainment on the one hand, and religious rituals on the other]. Art’s why-and-wherefore – its archaic rationality, to put it paradoxically – was forfeited and transformed into an element of its being-in-itself [*ihres Ansich*]. Art thus became a riddle: if it no longer exists for the purpose that it infused with meaning, then what is it? .... The most extreme form in which the question posed by the riddle-character of art can be formulated is whether or not there is meaning itself” (1997: 126-7, translation modified; cf. 119, 286). The autonomization of art, its disenchantment from both mimetic-magical practices (the philosophical-anthropological history recounted in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) and contexts of tradition and ritual (Benjamin’s account in the “Artwork” essay), lends its existence metaphysical purport: “the recurring question ‘What is it all about?’ [*Was soll das alles*] becomes “is it then true?” – the question of the absolute, to which every artwork responds by wresting itself free from the discursive form of answer”

(1997: 127). The riddle-character of artworks then is the tacit question of their *raison d'être* that they pose to the aesthetic subject who attends to and engages with them. Adorno further claims that this riddle-character arises precisely from the artwork's rationality, its construction: "The riddle-character of artworks is less their irrationality than their rationality [ie mimetic rationality, the mimetic impulses that are sublimated, reflected and mediated into the artwork's elements and processes]; the more methodically they are ruled, the more sharply their riddle-character is thrown into relief. Through form, artworks gain their resemblance to language, seeming at every point to say just this and only this, and at the same time whatever it is slips away" (1997: 120, translation modified).

By form Adorno means the specific modes, principles, patterns, movements by which the elements of an artwork – material, historical, formal, inherited forms/genres and artistic techniques, etc. – are organized into a whole greater than its parts, to become "a thing that negates the world of things" (1997: 119; cf. Robinson 2018). Unlike mere things, artworks are complex artefacts that are mediated ('spiritualized' [*vergeistigt*], says Adorno, 1997: 129-130) by mind/spirit (*Geist*), where – unlike idealist aesthetics – spirit is not something that can be abstractly separated from the artwork, say as its empirical genius-creator or the Hegelian idea it embodies. Rather spirit refers to the organized nature of the artwork such that it elicits (for Adorno, normatively) specific responses that are consistently troped by figures of animate life: the artwork 'speaks,' 'becomes eloquent,' 'opens its eyes,' 'gazes' at the aesthetic subject: "they become artworks in that they produce their own transcendence, rather than being its arena, and thereby they once again become separated from transcendence. The actual arena of transcendence in artworks is the nexus of their elements [*Zusammenhang ihrer Momente*]. By straining toward, as well as adapting to, this nexus, they go beyond the appearance that they are, though this transcendence may be unreal. Only in the achievement of this transcendence, not foremost and indeed probably never through meanings, are artworks spiritual. Their transcendence is their eloquence [*Sprechendes*], their script [*Schrift*], but it is a script without meaning, or, more precisely, a script with a broken [*gekappt*] or veiled [*zugehängt*] meaning" (1997: 79; cf. 85-6).

Other kinds artefacts are not riddles, because their *raison d'être* stands in heteronomous relation to the purpose for which they were made: for example, tools as means to a specific end or activity, commodities as means for exchange. In virtue of its artefactual autonomy, however, the modernist artwork bears a semblance

(*Schein*) of coherent meaning (*Stimmigkeit, Sinn*) that transcends their thingness, they “produce their transcendence” and “their transcendence is their eloquence,” which promises meaning but whose “solution is not objectively given” (1997: 121; cf. 2002: 117).

Adorno first introduces the concept of the riddle-character of art in essays devoted to music, namely “On the Contemporary Relationship of Philosophy and Music” (1953) and “Music, Language and their Relationship in Contemporary Composition” (1956), and these essays provide further insight into the nature of the riddle-character, which Adorno presents as a negative dialectic of art’s similarity to language (*Sprachähnlichkeit*). Varying motifs from Walter Benjamin’s thought that cannot be explored here (cf. Nichol森 1997), Adorno establishes a series of polarities that are never encountered in their pure form but always mediated with their antithetical counterpart, but which in their dynamism render even non-linguistic artworks similar to language. “Expression” (*Ausdruck*, mimetic impulses that are mediated into the artwork) tends toward the pole of “pure naming, the absolute unity of object and sign,” yet the expressive element in art – even in music – does not have an immediate grasp of an absolute, and so must attempt to approach the naming function of art through elaborate constructions – constellations – of mediated elements; “therefore [music, art] is, at the same time, itself woven into the very process in which categories like rationality, sense, meaning, language have their validity” (2002: 139-40)<sup>5</sup>, the opposite pole. In his lectures on negative dialectics Adorno writes: “the process I have in mind has its distant model in *names*, which do not cover things up with concepts – admittedly at the expense of their cognitive function... idiosyncratic precision in the choice of words, as if they were supposed to name the thing, as if they were their name. If ‘this thing here’ is conceptually mediated, then language can find a point of attack” (2008: 176-7). Significantly, Adorno defines the concept *name* negatively, as the antithesis to the concept, that covers over the object with categorial determinations. Even a minimal logically proper name used to indicate the mode of knowing that Bertrand Russell called *acquaintance* (e.g. “yellow here now” or, as Adorno indicates, a de-

<sup>5</sup> Cf. “Music is similar to language in that it is a temporal succession of articulated sounds that are more than just sound. They say something, often something humane. The higher the species of music, the more forcefully they say it. The succession of sounds is related to logic; there is a right and a wrong. But what is said cannot be abstracted from the music; it does not form a system of signs” (2002: 113).

monstrative) is conceptually mediated, and so pure naming remains a Kantian regulative idea.

Expression and naming correlate with further polar concepts within the “dual nature” of language, preeminently the gestural, imitative, mimetic, relation between mind and world, an ontogenetic and phylogenetic ancestral relation antecedent to the dialectic of enlightenment (cf. e.g., 2002: 26; 1974: 227-28; Müller and Gillespie, 2009). We can understand the mimetic-expressive pole as engaged with those features in an artwork or the world that are *response-dependent*, where human subjectivity partially constitutes their nature and yields a subject-dependent objectivity, in the sense that under usual circumstances human beings will respond in similar ways. This expressive moment of the language-similarity of artworks, Adorno suggests, is the recollection (but not present actualization, because mediated through aesthetic experience) of that nonconceptual affinity and mimetic likeness between people and things in the ‘magical phase’ of human history: “The artwork’s riddle-character is the shudder, not however in its living presence but as recollection” (1997: 286, translation modified). Crucially, this is the “objectivity of mimesis” that Adorno in his note “On Metaphysics” sees as a concern to both aesthetics and metaphysics, both art and discursive thought.

The opposing pole – also a regulative idea – lies in the conceptual, conventional, communicative, signifying, universal, formal-rational, logical aspects of language that are analogous (but not identical) in art as well, by which the artwork is organized into an apparent unity that underwrites a subject-independent objectivity, in the sense that its features are response-independent. The epistemic mind-world relation here is not grounded in imitation and resemblance, but rather identification, conceptual subsumption and abstraction. This relation is displaced in the artwork as its apparent “purposiveness” suggesting a signifying, a universal category qua purpose under which it could be subsumed, yet undercut by its lacking any purpose: “Art’s purposiveness, free of any practical purpose, is its similarity to language; its being ‘without a purpose’ is its nonconceptuality, that which distinguishes art from significative language. Artworks move toward the idea of a language of things only by way of their own language, through the organization of their disparate elements; the more they are syntactically articulated in themselves, the more eloquent [*sprechender*] they become in all their elements. The aesthetic concept of teleology has its objectivity in the language of art” (1997: 140).

Similarly, in the earlier essay on music Adorno claims that the expressive, mimetic elements of music countervail its similarity to the signifying aspect of language and thereby yields the riddle-character of art in general: “The fact that music, as language, imitates – that on the strength of its similarity to language it constantly poses a riddle, and yet, as non-signifying language, never answers it – must, nevertheless, not mislead us into erasing that element as a mere illusion. This quality of being a riddle, of saying something that the listener understands and yet does not understand, is something it shares with all art. No art can be pinned down as to what it says, and yet it speaks” (2002: 122).

The riddle-character, therefore, denotes the similarity to language that is constitutive of art such that the artefact appears to be teleologically organized towards conveying a meaning, intention, or – in the register of metaphysics – sense (*Sinn*); thereby the artworks “point beyond themselves,” “produce transcendence” that in Adorno is consistently troped with metaphors of saying (*Sprechendes*) or script (*Schrift*) that promises meaning that nonetheless is broken (*gekappt*) or veiled (*zugehängt*). This aspect of the artwork Adorno terms “semblance” (*Schein*), whose meaning can vacillate between veridical appearance and erroneous illusion. Determining whether a specific artwork’s semblance is true or false is the task of criticism and philosophy, whose subject matter is the truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) of the artwork, a topic that reaches beyond the limits of this essay.

Adorno sheds further light on the concept of the riddle-character of art through a second dichotomy: between the aesthetic subject’s internal and external perspectives on the artwork. Early on in his lecture course on *Aesthetics* (1958-1959) he introduces the distinction by first invoking the common experience that “in a certain sense, one cannot understand works of art at all. What I mean is this: either one is inside a work of art and aligned with it in a living sense, in which case the question of understanding the work or of the meaning of the work does not really arise; or, on the other hand, through reflection or development ... one is now outside the sphere of influence of art and cast one’s gaze on the work; and then ... one suddenly asks oneself abruptly: so what’s it all about, what is all this? The moment one is no longer inside it, where one is no longer aligned with it, art begins to withdraw in a certain sense, to close up, and assumes what I earlier called its riddle character” (2018: 17-18).

Being-inside the artwork for Adorno means a kind of artistic-practical (rather than hermeneutic) understanding, involving one’s “co-enacting” (*mitvollziehen*) or

“imitating” the work: “understanding the logic that leads [the work] from one chord to the next, from one color to the next, from one line to the next. And only when this understanding of the matter itself is fully achieved, albeit without yet touching the work’s riddle-character, only then does one come close to the work” (2018: 123-24.; cf. Paddison, 2016). He develops the epistemological account in *Aesthetic Theory*: “Artworks are self-likeness freed from the compulsion of identity. The Aristotelian dictum that only like can know like, which progressive rationality has reduced to a marginal value, divides the knowledge that is art from conceptual knowledge: What is essentially mimetic awaits mimetic comportment. If artworks do not make themselves like something else but only like themselves, then only those who imitate them understand them” (1997: 125). Phenomenologically, the aesthetic subject is absorbed in the experience such that the firm division between subject and object, the relation of domination between subject and material, is suspended, tantamount to the aesthetic intimation of subjectivity reconciled with nature (Wellmer, 1991; Pickford, 2020). Crucial, however, is that Adorno holds that this mimetic imitation, this thinking-and-following-with the artwork’s construction, represents a correction if not enlargement of the forms of receptivity and the categories of judgment, thereby substantiating the claim made in *Negative Dialectics* against the alleged immutability of Kantian forms of sensibility and understanding. The ‘inner’ experience of an artwork demonstrates the possibility of alternate or enhanced subject-object relations that can be actualized through the self-transcending of the aesthetic subject and this is another instance of a kind of response-dependent objectivity.

Interestingly, Adorno describes the extreme of this internal, imitative relation to the artwork as the moments of ‘breakthrough’ (*Durchbruch*) “that feeling of being lifted out... of transcending mere existence, is intensely concentrated and actualizes itself, and in which it seems to us as if the absolutely mediated, namely the idea of being freed, is something immediate after all, where we think we can directly touch it... these moments truly have a form of delight to them that – I will not say outshines, but definitely matches the highest moments of happiness one experiences elsewhere; they have the same power as the highest real moments that we know.” Adorno describes the experience as that of the aesthetic subject being “overwhelmed,” and “inwardly shaken,” likening it to Schopenhauer’s theory that within aesthetic experience the *principium individuationis* is suspended, or one forgets one’s self. That this can be considered a metaphysical experience, I contend, is

evident in how Adorno describes its relation to happiness (*Glück*): “[they are] really moments in which the subject annihilates itself and experiences happiness at this annihilation – and not happiness at being granted something as a subject. These moments are not enjoyment; the happiness lies in the fact that one has them” (2018: 123). We can understand Adorno’s thinking as follows. First, the experience is one of semblance: it is “as if” the idea of being freed from immanence “is something immediate after all,” whereas in fact the subject is “absolutely mediated” with its world; it is not an immediate knowledge of Kant’s *mundus intelligibilis*, the realm of freedom. One does not experience, come to know the absolute, freedom, but the experience is not nothing, not purely subjective projection. Second, this moment is not one of sensuous pleasure or enjoyment (*Genuss*), nor is it happiness as a state of consciousness that a self-conscious epistemic subject experiences or senses; rather – in analogy to the Kantian sublime – it is a demonstration to the subject of the contingency, the conditionedness of its self-identity, of the possibility that mind may come to know and reflect upon its mediatedness with objectivity and thereby alter, displace some of those mediations, or – put philosophically – may learn that idealism is not *prima philosophia*. Conversely, note that in the quote Adorno says “one is inside a work of art and aligned with it in a living sense,” by which he means that these moments of imitative co-execution are exercises of the subject’s capacities that defy the self-reification that modern capitalism imposes on its subjects, where, we learn in *Minima Moralia*, the reigning principles are “Life is not alive” [*Das Leben lebt nicht*] and “There is no right living in the false whole” [*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*]. Recall that in his lecture course on metaphysics Adorno derives this diagnosis of self-reification from the symptomatic anxiety people feel about death: “The terror of death today is largely the terror of seeing how much the living resemble it. And it might therefore be said that if life were lived rightly, the experience of death would also be changed radically, in its innermost composition” (2000: 136). In the same lecture course he cautions that “where there this no longer any life, where immediacy has been truly abolished as in the world in which we exist, the temptation is doubly strong to mistake the remnants of life, or even the negation of the prevailing condition, for the absolute” (2000: 143-144); that is, such moments of sublimity are *not* to be understood as epiphanies of the absolute, the unconditioned, but rather much more modestly as the exercise of spirit’s capacity for spontaneity, transcending the given which is the precondition for genuine lived (as opposed to reified) experience, for

“nothing can be even experienced as living if it does not contain a promise of something transcending life” (2000: 144-5) (on the cultivation of capacities as a form of resistance in Adorno’s thought, cf. Pickford, 2018b).

We therefore arrive at a provisional thesis: the demonstration of mind’s ability to transcend the given, which we can think of in analogy to Kantian spontaneity, but located for Adorno in the imagination (*Imagination, Phantasie*), is a living exercise of a vital capacity which resists reification and indicates the existence of genuine objective possibility, that the immanent context is not all there is; and that this exercise of transcendence indicates the possibility of the non-identity but also non-domination between mind and world, of a dynamic reconciliation that Adorno likens to the Kantian idea of perpetual peace.

On the other hand, the external perspective reintroduces “the distance, the thing-ness, that is inherent in the concept of understanding” (2018: 124) and reestablishes the subject-object division and the historically congealed patterns of intelligibility – purposive rationality, the principle of exchangeability, identification through abstraction and categorial subsumption, etc. – that make the autonomous artwork’s very existence a riddle: because it appears as an *Ansichsein*, it is merely the semblance of the Kantian absolute. The aesthetic subject adopts a reflective attitude and is presented with an artefact that is incomprehensible to such patterns of intelligibility: “The better an artwork is understood, the more it is unpuzzled [*enträtselt*] on one level the more obscure its constitutive riddle-character becomes. It only emerges demonstratively in the profoundest experience of art. If a work opens itself completely, it reveals itself as a question and demands reflection; then the work vanishes into the distance, only to return to those who thought they understood it, overwhelming them a second time with the question ‘What is it?’” (1997: 121, translation modified).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In his 1958/59 *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Adorno emphasizes the subjective-dependent objectivity as a criterion of adequacy for demarcating an artwork as such: “...what is also central for accessing a work of art, for experiencing a work of art as a work of art in the first place, is that one is met with an experience of – how should I put it? – ‘meaning’ as something objective. I understand a work of art at the moment when ... I understand what it is itself saying as something it says to me, not as something I am projecting onto it, something that has come only from me. ... I would say that this is precisely the threshold on which the artistic experience of a work of art sets itself apart from the pre-artistic or merely material experience, when one becomes aware of that quality in the work that inheres in it as an objectivity, as something spiritually objective that does not extend beyond the subject viewing the work” (2018: 25-6).

The dual character of the language similarity of art, together with the dichotomy of internal and external perspectives it requires, entail the aporetic formulation of the riddle-character's demands on the aesthetic subject: "Not experience alone but only thought that is fully saturated with experience is equal to the phenomenon" (1997: 350). Such "thinking experience" (*denkende Erfahrung*, *ibid.*: 186) traces out the specific social, historical, formal and material mediations between the various elements of the artwork, co-executing the artwork's "spiritualization" while paradoxically also reflecting on these mediations as constituting the artwork's specific form: "Understanding in the highest sense – a solution of the riddle that at the same time maintains the riddle – depends on a spiritualization of art and artistic experience whose primary medium is the imagination [*Phantasie*]. The spiritualization of art approaches its riddle-character not directly through conceptual elucidation, but rather by concretizing its riddle-character. The solution of the riddle amounts to giving the reason for its insolubility, which is the gaze artworks direct at the viewer. The demand of artworks that they be understood, that their content [*Gehalt*] be grasped, is bound to their specific experience; but it can only be fulfilled by way of the theory that reflects this experience. What the riddle-character of artworks refers to can only be thought mediately [*ist einzig vermittelt zu denken*]" (1997: 122, translation modified).

We are now in a position, I hope, to tender an explanation of the relationship between the riddle-character of art and metaphysical experience. The specific form of an artwork, the result of the 'spiritualization' of its elements, tends toward uniqueness, concreteness, singularity that is nonetheless objectively posited, like a language: "The telos of artworks is a language whose words cannot be located on the spectrum; a language whose words are not imprisoned by a prestabilized universality" (1997: 83). At the conclusion of the section on riddle-character in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes: "Art desires what has not yet been, though everything that art is has already been. ... but what has not yet been is the concrete [*das Konkrete*] ... Even by artworks the concrete is scarcely to be named other than negatively. It is only through the nonfungibility of its own existence and not through any special content [*Inhalt*] that the artwork suspends empirical reality as an abstract and universal functional nexus. Each artwork is utopia insofar as through its form it anticipates what would finally be itself, and this converges with the demand for the abrogation of the spell of self-identity cast by the subject. ... But because for art, utopia – the yet-to-exist [*das noch nicht Seiende*] – is draped in black, it remains in all

its mediations recollection; recollection of the possible in opposition to the actual that suppresses it; it is the imaginary reparation of the catastrophe of world history; it is freedom, which under the spell of necessity did not – and may not ever – come to pass. Art's methexis in the tenebrous, its negativity, is implicit in its tense relation to permanent catastrophe. No existing, appearing artwork holds any positive control over the nonexisting. This distinguishes artworks from religious symbols, which in their appearance lay claim to the transcendence of the immediately present. The nonexisting in artworks is a constellation of the existing. By their negativity, even as total negation, artworks make a promise, ...Aesthetic experience is that of something that spirit may find neither in the world nor in itself; it is possibility promised by its impossibility. Art is the ever broken promise of happiness" (1997: 136).

An autonomous artwork tends towards a being in itself, a singular language that in its uniqueness, its non-fungibility (conceptual or commercial) testifies to the contingency, the conditionedness, of the context of immanence, to the ontological possibility of what could be different. This is one aspect of its utopian force; however, because the artwork is not subsumable under a concept, it does not provide positive, utopian contents; as a riddle-character it is "draped in black". Furthermore, the internal, imitative co-execution of the artwork, the aesthetic subject's mimetic engagement with its processuality and expressiveness, shows how aesthetic experience can break "the spell of self-identity cast by the subject" and intimate a non-dominating yet objective (response-dependent, not merely projective) relationship with nature as the "recollection of the possible in opposition to the actual that suppresses it"; this is another aspect of its utopian force. Neither of these utopian aspects relate to immediacy – otherwise artworks would be "religious symbols" – and both of these utopian aspects turn on the metaphysical modal property of *possibility*, namely the possibility of mind's transcending its self-reification and mind's capacity to discern in the given that which possibly would transcend the given. Because both these kinds of possible transcendence are dialectically uncovered within the context of immanence, the utopian force of these aspects is the force of "possibility promised by impossibility." In both *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* image of choice for this semblance of transcendence constitutive of riddle-character and metaphysical experience is the rainbow (1973: 373, 1997: 122): the response-dependent objective presence of a multiplicity of color that

from a distance appears as if concrete and immediate, but which recedes without disappointment when one draws nearer.

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