

## On the Mimesis of Reification:

### Adorno's Critical Theoretical Interpretation of Kafka

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One of the most central concepts of Adorno's aesthetic theory is that of mimesis. It is, perhaps, surprising to find this concept – so deeply associated with a debate in ancient philosophy – employed in the context of a new theory of aesthetic modernism, one conceived within the intellectual space of critical theory. And it is not only its archaic associations that appear to make it an unlikely way of capturing the specific properties of modernism. Mimesis carries with it connotations of imitation and representation. It has something to do with art's supposed mission, that of copying reality. Yet these are the traditional norms of aesthetic production that modernism self-consciously and often polemically repudiated. Mimesis, however, is an evolving concept. As Jacques Derrida notes: “The whole history of the interpretation of the arts of letters has moved and been transformed within the diverse logical possibilities opened up by the concept of *mimesis*.”<sup>1</sup>

Adorno argues that art has a continuing engagement with reality, and he radically reconceives the notion of mimesis in order to explain the distinctive nature of that engagement. His new conception of mimesis provides an explanation of the kind of *expression* of reality of which modernist artworks are capable. Modernist expression is not, according to Adorno, imitation. His claim is that expression, in this context, consists in giving *aesthetic form* to the form of social reality itself. As we shall see, for Adorno form – not content, image or representations – is the key property of what constitutes the specifically *aesthetic* construction – the mimesis – of that reality. As Peter Uwe Hohendahl explains: for Adorno “modern works articulate, more poignantly than do historical narratives or philosophical systems (such as existentialism), the horrors of the twentieth century. Only through their extreme formal construction do the works of Kafka or Joyce or Beckett become legitimate witnesses to this horror<sup>2</sup>

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\* ‘On the Mimesis of Reification: Adorno's Critical Theoretical Interpretation of Kafka’, in *Philosophy and Kafka* (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), eds. Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (pp. 229-242)

The case of Kafka stands at the very centre of Adorno's articulation of modernist mimesis. His main study of Kafka is the long and complex essay "Notes on Kafka" (1953), which he republished in the collection *Prisms* (1955). But numerous references to Kafka are found throughout his unfinished masterpiece, *Aesthetic Theory* (first published in 1970) and in the four part collection of essays, *Notes to Literature*. From his correspondence with Walter Benjamin (on the subject of Benjamin's essay, "Franz Kafka"), we can also see how deeply Adorno had been considering Kafka's work from the very beginning of his professional career.<sup>3</sup> Adorno claims that historical "processes" are found as "ciphers" in Kafka's work (*P* 252).<sup>4</sup> This might seem to say that Adorno takes Kafka to be a social commentator who sought to say something about history. Although Adorno is aware of Kafka's political standpoints he does not take them to be determinative of the content of Kafka's fiction. Kafka *qua* writer was engaged in a purely aesthetic activity which nevertheless unintentionally but necessarily achieves a mimesis of social reality. As Adorno writes, "Kafka's works protected themselves against the deadly aesthetic error of equating the philosophy that an author pumps into a work with its metaphysical substance. Were this so, the work of art would be stillborn; it would exhaust itself in what it says and would not unfold itself in time" (*P* 247). Adorno's reading of Kafka, then, is not an effort to find an implicit theory or illustrated examples of philosophical insights in the texts. As Walter H. Sokel puts it, "Kafka's reader, Adorno maintained, should not rush to look for the 'meaning' of over-arching images by translating them into cultural concepts ready at hand but external to the text."<sup>5</sup> Adorno does not "read off" a Kafkaesque philosophy from the literary work. He adopts Benjamin's description of Kafka's works as "damaged parables" (*AT* 126)<sup>6</sup>: damaged in that they constantly suggest complexes of metaphors, metaphors that cannot be unlocked. The key to the interpretation of Kafka's work, Adorno says, "has been stolen" (*P* 246). Each work invites decoding yet "none will permit it" (*P* 246). When Adorno speaks about Kafka he is not attempting, then, to tell us what the works are really all about: the hidden meanings that he can bring to our attention. He treats them as works of art with their own irreducible integrity. The philosophical claims he makes about Kafka's work, as we shall see, relate to the forms they distinctively bear within the historical conditions of modernity. The interpretative claims about Kafka's works that Adorno develops emerge through an examination of their aesthetic dimensions. The aesthetic dimensions are primarily, for Adorno, a

work's formal properties. Adorno thinks of the artist as placed within an ever changing historical context in which form must constantly be reinvented. This appears to be self-evident from the perspective of the history of art. Where the interest of critical theory enters, however, is through Adorno's contention that art is the expression of social reality. The development of form is a response to societal evolution. The expression that art achieves cannot be translated into purely theoretical terms. Because, then, art provides us with a distinctive view of social reality considerations of the aesthetic dimension turn out to be significant in directing critical theory to the very phenomenon of social reality. It is important to note – as the analysis to be offered here cannot do justice to it – that Adorno's conclusions about the general mimetic qualities of Kafka's work are rooted in a broad range of specific details in the texts of Kafka (principally the three novels and several of the longer stories).

There are two distinguishable senses of mimesis in Adorno's discussions of Kafka (they may already be apparent). The first relates to the mimetic content of artworks: what they express ("ciphers"). The second is what Adorno calls the "mimetic comportment" of the artist: the process of creativity. Both of these dimensions will be examined below. The concept of mimesis sits within an inter-dependent network of ideas in Adorno's aesthetic theory, and it is intelligible only within that network. So before looking at the details of Adorno's enthusiastic appraisal of Kafka we need to appreciate, even briefly, what Adorno means by the autonomy of art, aesthetic authenticity, mimesis and the relationship between art and social criticism.

### *Art and Autonomy*

Adorno holds that authentic works of art in modernity are characterized by their *autonomy* from the life-processes of society. To ascribe autonomy to art is not to claim that it has some kind of existence outside history or society. The matter of autonomy is not a metaphysical one. The complexity of Adorno's thesis consists in its claim for a very specific relationship of art to society: art is autonomous from the processes of reification that, according to the critical tradition to which he belongs, disfigures the social world. A corollary of a work's autonomy is, for Adorno, its authenticity. An autonomous work is authentic because it has been formed without regard to the requirements of society: the social norms of communication or of

purpose and usefulness. “The more authentic the works, the more they follow what is objectively required, the object’s consistency, and this is always universal,” Adorno writes (AT 201). They are guided by an aesthetic necessity – “objectivity” – rather than by the purposes imposed on social production generally. A work of art that is oriented towards a social purpose is therefore inauthentic: it has, according to Adorno’s theory, constrained itself – thereby losing its autonomy – in order to give that purpose aesthetic form. It is characterized, Adorno contends, by heteronomy in that its meaning must conform to an idea antecedently established outside the work.

Adorno, as we shall see, valorizes Kafka’s works as mimetic expressions of reified life, as “a cryptogram of a decaying capitalist social order.”<sup>7</sup> We need to be clear about what the concept of reification means to him. Adorno holds that individuals become reified by living within the conditions of contemporary capitalism. Two essential features of that form of society are instrumental rationality and capitalism. Both of these, it seems, mutually sustain each other. In order to be an efficient agent of capitalism one must have internalized the “rules of exchange,” and these rules shape the general consciousness of the individual. By exchange Adorno means the system in which all phenomena – things, labour, time – become translatable into a pecuniary value. He calls this “equivalence.” Once made equivalent in this sense phenomena can be bought or sold for the universal token, money. The manipulative rationality which is required for the effective operation of exchange – the capacity to translate the diverse objects of the world into fiscally equivalent phenomena – informs rationality as a whole, since it is the prevailing social rationality. The everyday belief in this exchange system is not voluntaristic. Individuals are inducted, from their earliest experiences, into the distinctive form of social behaviour characteristic of an exchange society. A growing capacity to translate everything into abstract value – what it is “worth” – comes to determine individuals’ perceptions of wider reality. Adorno writes: “Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities.”<sup>8</sup>

A common personality is generated by the total system of exchange. Together, individuals form a network which sustains the system that determines them. As Adorno writes: “What really makes society a social entity, what constitutes it both conceptually and in reality, is the relationship of exchange which binds together

virtually all the people participating in this kind of society.”<sup>9</sup> The exchange principle, then, is not a pragmatic option, but one with quasi-natural compellingness. It becomes a piece of second nature to us, as the way in which self-preservation is to be pursued. As Adorno puts it: “The form of the total system requires everyone to respect the law of exchange if he does not wish to be destroyed, irrespective of whether profit is his subjective motivation or not.”<sup>10</sup> Society is a *totality* in that it integrates all individual moments of life into it: each moment bears the determinations of the totality. A world so organized can sustain and reproduce itself because of the acquiescence of those within it: they accede to the imperatives of exchange, though they do not seek justifications for those imperatives. These imperatives govern life, they must be followed, yet they are antagonistic to human flourishing. Robert W. Witkin describes the pertinence of Kafka to Adorno for the diagnosis of this kind of society: “On a literary plane, Franz Kafka conveyed, with chilling effect, in *The Castle* and *The Trial*, the nightmare of a legal-rational existence bereft of spiritual life, of a subjectivity that filled out empty forms as its historical core.”<sup>11</sup> It is for this reason that Adorno thinks of the social totality as irrational: it constantly acts against individuals who, at the same time, seek no explanation for its apparent necessity and its demanding norms. Kafka – and Proust – perceived this “necessity,” Adorno writes, “in something that is wholly contingent, a necessity that can be perceived only negatively.”<sup>12</sup>

Given that Adorno holds that the social totality pervasively influences consciousness, it might seem that art can be autonomous only when it is detached from history. That is, if the phenomena of exchange and reified life are everywhere, art – if it is at all possible – must operate outside the space of everywhere. And that looks like a metaphysical conception of art, after all. Adorno does indeed see art as free of the forms of determination that characterize reified life. At the same time, though, autonomous art draws its content from society: from *this* society in which “damaged life,” as he famously calls it in *Minima Moralia*, prevails. In that respect artworks are, he believes, socio-historical phenomena. They are not, at the same time, typical social products. Adorno understands aesthetic experience – from creativity, to performance and experience – to operate in a space that it not yet inhabited by reification. It expresses history, but is not, because it is free, reducible to historical processes. Its

form of expression – its mimetic property – has somehow eluded the reach of reification. Adorno offers no account of art's special capacity to resist reification.

Art's autonomous position is frequently explained contrastively by Adorno: in conventional non-aesthetic expression, reified life is represented in reified ways. Social processes are reproduced through reified forms of communication. We might see this in the rather extreme case of TV "soap opera" dramas. These dramas imitate the apparently everyday events of society. They seek to engage their consumers with the would-be slice of life of society that they present, and consumers will enjoy the dramas only in so far as they identify with their plots and characters. These dramas are intensifications of experiences already known to and thematized by the audiences: they are not unsettling and the consumer is drawn passively into their narratives. They are "realistic" in so far as they meet their consumers' expectations of what reality essentially looks like. Modernist work, by contrast, endeavours to break the pattern of identification between the work and expectations. Adorno addresses this specific accomplishment in Kafka: "Among Kafka's presuppositions," he writes, "not the least is that the contemplative relation between text and reader is shaken to its very roots" (*P* 246). And again, in radical contrast to the passive consumption which sustains heteronomous work, Adorno sees Kafka's works as breaking down the "distance between themselves and their victim" (*P* 246), the victim being the reader. The experience of the reader – Adorno speaks of the agitation of "feelings" (*P* 246) – is that of ceasing simply to observe what happens to the characters as the dreadful worlds they inhabit begin to become the reader's own.

The critique of heteronomous art geared towards mass consumption applies equally, for Adorno, to political art. In political art the consumer is to be led in a particular direction. Adorno rejects the very idea that art remains authentically aesthetic when it endeavours to represent empirical social reality as it thinks it actually is in order to educate its audiences in politics. Adorno regards social realism, for instance, as "crude propaganda" (*AT* 243). Social realism subverts art by turning it into an ideological vehicle. In that case the aesthetic process is heteronomous, not self-determining (autonomous).

Autonomous artworks, then, are artifactual forms that do not generate familiar patterns of experiences. And this is because they are produced outside the space of familiarity. The autonomous quality is indeed more apparent the greater the difference between society and the aesthetic. Within an all encompassing social totality authentic art appears to be radically at odds with society. The forms of experience enabled by the autonomous work are not a matter of novelty. Rather, autonomous works enable experiences of social reality as it really is: i.e. a commodified reality, filled with useless junk. Kafka, Adorno claims, expresses in his work, the “waste-products” (*P* 251) of society. His work is autonomous as it builds itself upon a reality in decay. It reproduces society *negatively* by expressing irrational social norms in a way that gives heightened perception to them. “Kafka’s power,” Adorno writes, “is that of a negative feel for reality” (*AT* 19). Non-autonomous art, by contrast, *positively* reproduces the norms of society: it takes society at face value, that is, as being the rational, freedom-enabling entity it claims to be.

#### *Mimetic Comportment*

The various theses of Adorno that we have already discussed – autonomy and authenticity – have been met with considerable criticism.<sup>13</sup> The essence of the various criticisms – an answer to which is important in the context of Adorno’s assessment of Kafka – is that Adorno offers a stipulative theory of art. He specifies, as we have seen, that art must be autonomous if it is to be authentic. It will be constituted by forms that separate it radically from conventional modalities of expression. Furthermore, he directly excludes realism as a genuine aesthetic form. Realism takes “reality” as its standard of aesthetic quality and it thereby places the criterion of art outside of art itself. But what is the basis of Adorno’s claim that art is compromised when guided by external considerations? Without a principle to support his exclusions (of realism, of political art, of popular art) Adorno’s position may indeed be vulnerable to the “stipulation” criticism. An answer is to be found, however, in his conception of mimetic comportment as a characteristic of autonomous art.

The mimetic comportment of the artist means for Adorno unconstrained creativity. Adorno has a complex account of how the natural mimetic capacities of human beings have been damaged by the development of instrumental reason (the history of reification). Ideally mimesis is a capacity in which the individual gives herself over to

a process of uninhibited interaction with another. In that process experiences of what cannot be anticipated emerge. This capacity, however, is now found only in aesthetic activity (AT 331). It is not mimesis in its original form – interaction with another – but an attenuated variety which nevertheless involves a relinquishment of subjective control. Relinquishment does not mean passivity, however. The subject is involved in a series of decisions thrown up within the creative process itself as the problematic legacies of her recent tradition. The flow of creativity is a series of judgments about what – if anything – is required as the next step in the process. The norms of those judgments are aesthetic: they bear upon the history of art, though they are not guided by that history. And the act of judgment is mimetic: it is the act of a self not seeking to control or categorize, unlike the acts of non-aesthetic (reified) judgment. Rather, the subject, through mimetic comportment, adopts a behaviour towards her task in which she frees herself from any sense of what is expected of her. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes: “Only the autonomous self is able to turn critically against itself and break through its illusory imprisonment. This is not conceivable as long as the mimetic element is repressed by a rigid aesthetic superego” (AT 117). This is no demand for randomness or wild spirits. It is a process of evolving aesthetic judgments. We can see, therefore, how Adorno can speak of Arnold Schoenberg’s expressionistic work as “untrammelled, mimetic creation” (P 151). It is mimetic in that it refers to the surrendering of the decisionistic ego to the creative process, regardless of where the process goes. When art is controlled it loses its autonomy. If art is the activity of “the mimetic impulse” (AT 54) it follows, what Adorno refers frequently to as, a law of form. The law does not, he claims, “predominate” in artworks; “they are seldom planned” (AT 64). But a procedure that attempted to make randomness the form would be non-mimetic production in its abstention from the effort to develop the inner coherence of the work. That is, it would be guided by a principle that lay outside the aesthetic process. Mimetic comportment alone is, Adorno holds, fidelity to the aesthetic process itself.

Through the mimetic process Kafka, Adorno claims, develops his distinctive form. Kafka’s works, according to Adorno, are “determined by their inner form” (P 265). This is evident by their inner coherence in which their narratives unfold “in time” (P 247). It develops according to its immanent logic, thereby gaining its own specific integrity. Crucially, Kafka’s narratives do not follow any sequence the reader can

anticipate, yet they are not randomly constructed. Haphazardness could generate no coherence. Adorno, however (as we have seen), ascribes inner coherence to Kafka's work. Mimetic productivity generates coherent works because it involves developing work through a process and unfolding sequence. A work designed with randomness as a principle would be heteronomous: its meaning would lie outside the work. Adorno's claim here reflects the hierarchical place of expressionist works of art in his evaluation of contemporary art forms. This is the very quality he praises in Kafka. The expressionist path – Kafka's "authentic horizon" (*P* 261) as it is Schoenberg's, according to Adorno – is mimetic. It is a committed process of creativity in which the artist seeks to produce a determinable whole (which does not mean constructing a narrative that follows the classical rule about wholes). The notion of mimetic creativity, then, turns out to be the basis for what might otherwise appear to be stipulations within Adorno's theory. If there is such a capacity and it bears the features Adorno describes – principally, the artistic individual relinquishing control – then the notion of authenticity as that which is produced without an agenda gains some ground. Needless to say, a deeper investigation of the concept of mimetic comportment than can be given here is required if Adorno's conception of authenticity is to have more than *prima facie* plausibility.

### *Realism*

In view of the connection Adorno draws between authenticity and autonomy, his claim that authentic work mimetically expresses social reality looks quite mysterious. How is it that free, uninhibited creation, pursuing purely aesthetic objectives just so happens to be a mimesis of social reality? Why should it have that content and somehow encipher social reality? Adorno does not provide a sketched out theory of this relationship. The key to understanding this it, though, it seems to me, lies in a claim we have already seen. Namely, that art is a historical, non-metaphysical practice. The materials that it must use – social ideas, forms of life that influence experience – are historical in nature. But handling these materials aesthetically means presenting them aesthetically. As Adorno says of Kafka's work: "Kafka sins against an ancient rule of the game by constructing art out of nothing but the refuse of reality" (*P* 251). His work expresses only experiences given by the social totality. When these experiences or materials are taken up by conventional forms of expression – mass entertainment, political art, social realism – they are simply reproduced. They are

mirrored, not illuminated. When they are the materials of authentic works of art, however, they are expressed in ways in which the truth of what they are is no longer occluded by the vehicle of their expressions. In this respect Kafka's work, Adorno claims, stands against "an age when sound common sense only reinforces universal blindness" (P 254). His work opens up the possibility that we might actually experience the truth of what we take to be natural. The artwork, in this context, really does become a cipher of falsity (as we shall see in more detail below). As Adorno writes: "it may be said of Kafka that not *verum* but *falsum* is *index sui*" (P 247).

Adorno's position, then, is that, in spite of the apparent indifference of the artwork to social reality, its form – its logic – reveals the form of social reality. And it does so without any recourse to realism. If "social realists," Adorno notes, "took reality seriously enough they would eventually realize what Lukács condemned when during the days of his imprisonment in Romania he is reported to have said that he had finally realized that Kafka was a realist writer" (AT 322). The "realism" of Kafka's work, then, is its effective expression of the distinctive conditions of late capitalism, the period of the irrational social totality. In this period society is not only geared towards the production of commodities, but social life bears the characteristics of commodification.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the aesthetic expression of this is as Simon Jarvis writes, "a realism of the loss of experience."<sup>15</sup> Kafka never names the social totality, yet, as Adorno writes, no "world could be more homogeneous than the stifling one which [Kafka] compresses to a totality by means of petty-bourgeois dread; it is logically airtight and empty of meaning like every system" (P 256). The totality encompasses all behaviour and all interaction. It operates without justification since individuals who are constituted through it do not conceive it as unreasonable, unnecessary or unnatural. For them, it is the space within which they exercise their freedom. Kafka's work is set within this totality, and it mimetically adopts the form of that totalized world. The logic of the totality, however, is false, as are the conventions of the worlds set out in Kafka's novels. What gives those worlds their coherence is not their truth, but their sustained falseness. Adorno writes: "Kafka, in whose work monopoly capitalism appears only distantly, codifies in the dregs of the administered world what becomes of people under the total social spell more faithfully and powerfully than do any novels about corrupt industrial trusts" (AT 230). And he does so simply by

expressing society's form: closed, unjustifiable, yet determining the lives of everyone within it.

Mimesis, then, consists in expressing a world without reproducing it. It is not mirroring, but aesthetic expression. To express the world aesthetically is to imitate it *aesthetically*. Outside the space of the aesthetic, Adorno effectively says, there is simply the damaged experience of individuals adhering spontaneously to the imperatives of the social totality. But authentic art provides us with an entirely different relation to that experience: it is no longer undergone without a sense that there is something wrong. In the "mimesis" of social processes "a universal which has been repressed by sound common sense" becomes apparent (*P* 249): the universal and all pervasive social totality. Kafka's works are negative not in any explicit "negation" of sociality reality, but rather in the sense that they express patterns of irrationality and unsettle the unthinking relationship we have with societal norms. Through these artworks we gain a heightened experiential appreciation of a reified world in which we are normally uncritically immersed. As a "mimesis of reification" (*AT* 230) Kafka's work, according to Adorno, achieves this experiential expression of the problematic social totality.

Adorno appraises the work of Baudelaire and of Beckett in similar terms. He says of Baudelaire that he "neither railed against nor portrayed reification; he protested against it in the experience of its archetypes, and the medium of this experience is the poetic form" (*AT* 21). And of Beckett: "This shabby, damaged world of images is the negative imprint of the administered world. To this extent Beckett is realistic" (*AT* 31). However, he accords specifically to Kafka the capacity to expose what he sees as the *mythic* structure of society: its indefensible norms and conventions that are, nevertheless, uncritically lived. The myth of society, that it is a collection of free individuals voluntarily committed to it because it is consonant with their freedom and based on some kind of rational principles, is a powerful one. It is the narrative that bourgeois society gives to itself, and it frames the self-understanding of bourgeois individuals. Hence it is not just one myth among others: it is the foundational myth of capitalist society. But Kafka, Adorno writes, "convicts civilization and bourgeois individuation of their illusoriness" (*P* 251). Kafka's mimetic presentation exposes the mythic nature of its binding yet arbitrary character. He presents us with reified

characters working within “the myth” in which we see “blind force endlessly reproducing itself” (P 260). Adorno maintains that Kafka’s narratives express the truth behind the self-understanding of modern individuality. Individuals are “the bare material existence that emerges in the subjective sphere through the total collapse of a submissive consciousness, divest of all self-assertion” (P 252). In reality the individual is not an agent. The social totality reproduces itself only when human beings have ceased to be its agents. Hence individuals have become the means by which the social totality reproduces itself: “The crucial moment, however, towards which everything in Kafka is directed, is that in which men become aware that they are not themselves – that they themselves: are things” (P 255). They are the material of the system, not its masters.

### *Immanence*

Adorno considers the form of experience enabled by Kafka’s works as significant to the business of illuminating the essential character of society. His works puncture the illusion of a neutral social totality with no determinative power that is supposedly merely a form of social organization which pragmatically facilitates self-preservation. Kafka demystifies social experience in a purely negative way, that is, he does not indicate anything about a new world, free of reification. No utopia is offered in image. Adorno identifies this approach as Kafka’s literalness. His works “take everything literally; cover up nothing with concepts invoked from above” (P 247). However, this literalness has a productive negativity. It is what Adorno generally refers to as determinate negation. Kafka, Adorno claims, can define society “all the more precisely in its negative” (P 256). A determinate negation is knowledge bearing. This knowledge – in this context – has emancipatory potential in that it gives us a view of what our deepest beliefs (about society and our selves as individuals in it) actually commit us to doing. Conceiving of our impulsive identification with society as a neurosis, Adorno says of Kafka: “Instead of curing neurosis, he seeks in it itself the healing force, that of knowledge: the wounds with which, society brands the individual are seen by the latter as ciphers of the social untruth, as the negative of truth” (P 252).

By admitting no concepts “from above” Kafka’s engagement with society is immanent. His consistent immanence gives exact – literal – expression to the nature

of the social totality. Kafka's work, according to Adorno, "must renounce any claim to transcending myth, it makes the social web of delusion knowable in myth through the how, through language. In his writing, absurdity is as self-evident as it has actually become in society" (*AT* 230-31). Kafka's works confirm that there are no normative sources beyond the institutions and conventions of the totality. The existing conventions predominate and, in the absence of any consciousness of alternatives take on the character of inevitability. Adorno writes: "The closed complex of immanence becomes concrete in the form of a flight from prisons. In the absence of contrast, the monstrous becomes the entire world, as in Sade, the norm, whereas the unreflective adventure novel, by concentrating on extraordinary events thus confirms the rule of the ordinary" (*P* 265). The purely immanent approach, then, disturbs the settled experiences of everydayness.

Adorno confronts and criticizes rather generally the existentialist reading of Kafka with his own immanentist interpretation (*P* 244). Adorno presents existentialism as the recommendation that in an absurd universe human beings can do little but accommodate themselves to it. This accommodation means surrendering the notion that the world in which we live can be altered by our actions: we must therefore resign ourselves to the given rather than rail at our conditions. Faced with absurdity of our situation – our desire for agency and freedom on the one side and the non-responsiveness of the universe on the other – "the only alternative" left to the individual by existentialism, according to Adorno, is that he does "his duty, humbly and without great aspirations, and to integrate himself into a collective which expects just this" (*P* 245). The existentialist reading, then, like Adorno's interpretation, identifies Kafka's immanentism: the notion that there is nothing outside the plane of given experience. Adorno argues, however, that existentialism entirely misunderstands the significance of immanence. Whereas the existentialist reading suggests that Kafka's work is a protest against the yearning for happiness – Adorno he claims – it is for Adorno a revelation of – and implicitly a protest against – the conditions which constantly deny happiness. Adorno, we might say, ascribes a negative immanentism to Kafka: pure immanence implicitly speaks against a closed world. Existentialism, by contrast, frames Kafka's worlds as positive immanence: they supposedly provide us with reasons to act in ways that ultimately embrace the world.

This negative immanentism interpretation also informs Adorno's reading of the status of hope in Kafka's work. He cites Kafka's comment "that there is infinite hope except for us" (*P* 230-31). Adorno does not see this as metaphysical pessimism, as a statement about the intrinsic order of the universe (*pace* existentialism). It is not an effort to produce hopelessness. Adorno sees it, rather, as extinguishing false hope, i.e. the hope that our current arrangements are not irredeemable. A determinate negation of false hope, however, is the beginning of a way beyond those arrangements. As Adorno puts it: "If there is hope in Kafka's work, it is in those extremes rather than in the milder phases: in the capacity to stand up to the worst by making it into language" (*P* 254). Although Adorno, as we have seen, holds that Kafka does not impose a personal philosophical conception of the world on his narratives, he finds a valuable interpretative aide in a comment from Kafka's notebooks (*Blue Octavo*). He cites it to support the notion of a rejection of false hope in Kafka: "To believe in progress is to believe that there has not yet been any" (*P* 257). Adorno articulates the same idea as follows: "the name of history may not be spoken since what would truly be history, the other, has not yet begun" (*P* 257). Again, hope cannot be considered until we realize that there is now no basis for hope. This thesis resonates powerfully with Adorno's own notion of history and progress: "no progress is to be assumed that would imply that humanity in general already existed and therefore could progress."<sup>16</sup> The liberal faith in the progress of the West masks the deformation of human life and the ever closing systematization of our social arrangements.

The immanentism of Kafka's narratives is of particular significance to Adorno as it coincides with his own epistemological vantage point. Adorno advocates social criticism in the form of "immanent critique." For criticism to be immanent means, according to Adorno, working to show the inherent contradictions of society without introducing standards of a good or better society from outside. There is, in any case, no "Archimedean position above culture and the blindness of society" (*P* 31). The social critic does not occupy a normative space that is somehow independent of existing society. In order then to avoid utopian irrelevancies or the delusion of purity, social criticism becomes immanent critique. Kafka achieves this in the great novels. Joseph K. and the land surveyor K. appear at first to be normal people thrown into unusual circumstances. The decisions they take in order to negotiate those

circumstances, however, end up integrating them within the very systems that seem at first to have no authority or justification. In this process the protagonists, in their attempts to reason their way within the system, actually give it an authority that eventually defeats them. As Adorno writes: “The heroes of the *Trial* and the *Castle* become guilty not through their guilt – they have none – but because they try to get justice on their side. ... [T]heir sound reasoning strengthens the delusion against which it protests” (P 270). Their actions – perfectly consistent with the irrational norms of the system – are the actions of non-agents. Kafka’s narratives express the fall of the subject. As Adorno continues: “Through reification of the subject, demanded by the world in any event, Kafka seeks to beat the world at its own game” (P 270). Beating the world at its own game requires pressing the implications of what is required of the social actor to its limits. In this way, Adorno claims, Kafka’s writing works against “the untruth of the abstract utopia” (P 270). It is, in effect, social criticism that succeeds by an insistent immanence.

### *Conclusion*

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno suggests that Kafka may be the “apotheosis” of the self-reflection of philosophy that Adorno himself had attempted to stimulate and develop.<sup>17</sup> Self-reflection is thought “thinking against itself,” guarding against its tendencies to construct, at the expense of the particularities of reality, abstractions and utopias. Those tendencies obscure what Kafka recognized as “the disturbed and damaged course of the world.”<sup>18</sup> We have seen, from looking at “Notes on Kafka” and *Aesthetic Theory*, why Adorno finds in Kafka a deep affinity with his own philosophical project. Although Kafka does not engage in social criticism, his work is, for Adorno, a mimetic expression of society. It is historical and engaged with the materials of society. The immanence of Kafka’s mimeticism shatters our complacency about the everyday by expressing its essential form. Kafka demonstrates, according to Adorno, that “form is the locus of social content” (AT 230). This principle transcends its aesthetic context and function. And it is the reason why Adorno does not conceive of Kafka’s work as a literary version of the philosophical programme of critical theory, but as providing vital foundational support for its deepest theoretical endeavours: that of elucidating the formal conditions of reified society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 187. Quoted in Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis: The New Critical Idiom* (London / New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 87.

<sup>3</sup> See Adorno's letter to Benjamin, 16 December, 1934, in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). For an analysis of this letter see Shierry Weber Nicholzen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work* (Cambridge MA / London: MIT Press, 1997), 183 ff. Benjamin's essay appeared as "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death," trans. Harry Zohn in Walter Benjamin, ed. Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> P = Theodor W. Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (London / Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Walter H. Sokel, "Beyond Self-Assertion: A Life of Reading Kafka," in James Rolleston, ed., *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka* (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2003), 40.

<sup>6</sup> AT = Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Corngold, "Adorno's 'Notes on Kafka': A Critical Reconstruction," *Monatshefte* 94.1 (Spring, 2002), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford CA: Stanford university Press, 2000), 31.

<sup>10</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Society," trans. F. R. Jameson, *Salmagundi* 10-11 (1969-1970), 149.

<sup>11</sup> Robert W. Witkin, "Philosophy of Culture," in Deborah Cook, ed., *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), 168.

<sup>12</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Vol. One, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 181.

<sup>13</sup> See Lambert Zuidervart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge MA / London, 1991), 217-47 for a summary of these criticisms, especially Peter Bürger's influential objection to Adorno's characterization of the avant-garde.

<sup>14</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?” in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 123.

<sup>16</sup> Theodor W. Adorno “Progress,” trans. Henry W. Pickford, in *Critical Model: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 403.

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