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Participatory truth between Adorno's negativity and Gadamer's play: digital media, the culture industry, and Kantian aesthetic consciousness

Abstract

This article investigates the intersection between critical theory and hermeneutics, examining whether Hans-Georg Gadamer's aesthetic philosophy – especially his critique of Kantian aesthetics – might offer an ontological alternative to the culture industry critique developed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Gadamer reimagines aesthetic experience as a participatory event of understanding, rooted in the ontological seriousness of play (*Spiel*), in contrast to the Frankfurt School, which contends that art under capitalism becomes commodified and bereft of critical potential. His paradigm suggests that artworks reveal truth through dialogical involvement, challenging Kantian "aesthetic consciousness" as a detached, disinterested subject. The article proposes that Gadamer reframes the question of aesthetic critique by foregrounding tradition, interpretation, and

historical consciousness. In doing so, it invites reflection on how art might resist commodification and sustain critical possibilities, even within the structures of digital capitalism, by renewing attention to the interpretive act as a space of truth-making.

Keywords: Critical Theory, culture industry, aesthetic consciousness, play, philosophical hermeneutics, negativity

Introduction

The relationship between art, critique, and society remains a central concern for aesthetic philosophy. Nowhere is this relationship more fraught than in the cultural diagnoses offered by critical theory, particularly in the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Their well-known account of the culture industry, developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002 [1944]), describes the ways in which modern aesthetic experience has been subsumed by the logics advanced by capitalism: standardisation, commodification, and mass deception. In their view, the artwork – once a bearer of utopian promise and negative critique – has become instrumentalised; its autonomy hollowed out by market forces. This leads to a troubling paradox: art is still recognised as a potential site of critical reflection, but the very structures of late capitalist society seem to close off the conditions under which this critical function might be realised.

While Adorno and Horkheimer's critique remains potent, it offers little guidance on how to reclaim aesthetic experience from the grip of instrumental reason. Their aesthetic theory directs itself toward the ideal of autonomy, but it cannot fully articulate how such autonomy might be actualised within reality. Thus, their work shifts between cultural critique and a melancholic resignation, with art's critical power preserved more as a theoretical ideal than in practical reality. This concern is complicated in contemporary times by digital media, where the commodification and management of aesthetic experience are intensified through algorithmic control and mass culture. Digital platforms shape aesthetic consumption on a large scale, reinforcing the need to rethink the foundations of aesthetic autonomy and critique (see Fuchs 2022: 45–48). The conceptual frameworks offered by Critical Theory and hermeneutics provide important resources for addressing these challenges.

This article proposes that the aesthetic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and in particular his ontological account of play (*Spiel*), offers an alternative framework for thinking about art, and its critical function. While Gadamer is

rarely grouped with the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, his critique of Kantian aesthetics, developed most fully in *Truth and Method* ([1960] 2004), addresses many of the same concerns about the alienation and formalisation of aesthetic experience. Gadamer challenges the idea of aesthetic disinterestedness proposed by Kant through reimagining the experience of art as a participatory event of understanding. This shift allows us to reconceive the artwork as a dialogical encounter through which meaning emerges; not as a commodity to be consumed, or a message to be decoded. This experience is characterised by a subject-to-subject relationship – one where the artwork is not appreciated as an object, but a subject that acts alongside the viewer in an event of understanding.

Gadamer is not a corrective to Adorno and Horkheimer; this article reads him as a philosopher who reconfigures the ontological terms of aesthetic critique. In doing so, this article aims to open a line of enquiry that investigates how ontological and hermeneutic approaches to art might resist, rather than merely lament, the loss of critical experience in contemporary culture under capitalism. This article proposes that the culture industry thesis remains confined within Kantian schematic aesthetics, ultimately resigning itself to the view that art can no longer perform any truth-making function. The need for rethinking the foundations of aesthetic critique is thus not only theoretical, but philosophical in the deepest sense.

This article does not aim to resolve the tensions identified by the Frankfurt School, nor does it claim that Gadamer offers a fully articulated alternative to their critique. Rather, it suggests that Gadamer's aesthetic framework invites a reconsideration of the philosophical foundations upon which critique might rest. Through imagining a paradigm where art is shifted away from disinterested judgement and toward participatory engagement, Gadamer reimagines art not as an isolated aesthetic object, but as an event of shared understanding. This reorientation enables a different relationship to aesthetic autonomy – one that is not defined negatively (as resistance to commodification) but positively (as disclosure through play).

The method employed here is conceptual and comparative. It draws upon close readings of key texts: Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno's writings on aesthetics, Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. These are contextualised through selected secondary literature from philosophical hermeneutics and critical theory. The purpose is not to weigh up the value of these thinkers, but to bring

them into tension – revealing not just points of contrast, but latent affinities and overlapping concerns. Central to this comparison is the notion that the culture industry critique is deeply reliant on a Kantian aesthetic schema, even as it seeks to overcome it. Gadamer, by contrast, moves beyond that schema without abandoning the critical ambitions that animate it.

The article will deal with this argument over five sections. The first section outlines the central features of Kantian aesthetic theory, especially the notions of disinterested judgement and subjective universality, which underpin both Adorno's and Gadamer's reactions. Section two turns to the Frankfurt School's culture industry thesis, highlighting its critique of aesthetic formalism and the instrumentalisation of culture under capitalism. Section three introduces Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness, his ontological conception of play, and the way in which it overcomes Kantian schemas. The fourth section stages a critical dialogue between Gadamer and critical theory, specifically Adorno's negativity, not to collapse their differences but to illuminate a productive disjunction as to how they imagine the critical function of art. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the implications of Gadamer's reframing of the experience of art, not as a solution to aesthetic alienation, but as a provocation for rethinking the conditions under which art might still disclose truth even under capitalist commodification.

Kantian aesthetics and the subject of judgement

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* ([1790] 2001), Immanuel Kant formulates his aesthetic philosophy which represents a pivotal moment in modern philosophical accounts of aesthetic experience. Kant's concern was to establish a universal foundation for judgements of taste, while simultaneously maintaining their subjective nature – a universal faculty of the mind that allows for subjective experiences. This resulted in what Gadamer would later identify as the paradigm of "aesthetic consciousness" – a mode of experience in which art is separated from truth and reduced to a domain of subjective yet universally communicable feeling (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 76, Grondin 1997: 112-115). Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement is rooted in a specific metaphysical orientation. For Kant, beauty does not pertain to the objective features of an artwork or natural phenomenon, but to the pleasure experienced by a subject when imagination and understanding harmonise in the contemplation of an object without recourse to concepts or practical interest (Kant [1790] 2001:

§9). This experience is one of "disinterested satisfaction" – a feeling of pleasure devoid of desire, utility, or moral purpose. As Muelder Eaton (1999: 11-12) has shown, Kant's aesthetic framework privileges a kind of passive reception over any form of active engagement. During this experience the subject, in a sense, brackets everyday concerns to allow for a purified aesthetic experience of the aesthetic object.

This aesthetic attitude is marked by a series of paradoxes. It is subjective, yet demands universal assent; it is detached from concepts, yet claims cognitive legitimacy; it is affective, yet governed by a formal, a priori structure. Zimmerman captures this well when he writes: "The Kantian mind is a delicately balanced machine … whose machinations are repeatable and duplicative even though they occur in different bodies" (Zimmerman 1963: 337). The subject's judgement of taste, then, is not a personal preference, but a claim to a shared mode of experiencing the beautiful. Kant's *Analytic of the Beautiful* secures the necessity and universality of taste by positioning beauty in a reflective harmony (the free play) of understanding and imagination that is not concept-dependent in content, only in form (Kant [1790] 2001: 95-106, esp. 103-104, §§1-22, §9). The subjective universality that is produced as a result isolates aesthetic judgement from practical ends, consolidating autonomy while also encouraging the detachment of the spectator later problematised, albeit differently, by Adorno's negativity and Gadamer's play (Zimmerman 1963: 333-344, Bernstein 1992: 17-25, 188-192, Gadamer [1960] 2004: 102-135).

An important yet often overlooked component of Kant's aesthetic theory is his account of genius – introduced in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (§46-§50) – which describes the origin of aesthetic ideas as the product of a natural, inimitable talent. Kant's account of genius preserves the creativity of the individual within the formal universality of taste which intensifies the tension between shareability and non-conceptual particularity (Kant [1790] 2001: §§46-50, Bernstein 1992: 188-192). This concept reinforces Kant's broader aim of grounding aesthetics in reflective judgement. While the spectator experiences disinterested pleasure in viewing the artwork, the artist operates in a space of imaginative invention that cannot be codified in technique (Kant [1790] 2001: §47). Thus, the concept of genius marks a limit point in Kantian thought: it gestures toward the transcendence of concept while remaining within a formal framework. For Adorno, this tension is both productive and problematic. On one hand, he recognises the emancipatory potential of aesthetic singularity as a protest against instrumentalised culture.

Conversely, he remains suspicious of how the idealisation of genius can become complicit in the cult of personality and the commodification of the artist (Adorno [1970] 2004: 177-180, Bernstein 1992: 147-150). Gadamer largely sidesteps the rhetoric of genius, instead emphasising the artwork's role in the unfolding of tradition rather than in the singularity of its origin (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 115-118). Kant complicates the modern subject-object relationship that underpins his aesthetic system through his introduction of genius. The artist becomes a figure of excess, of surplus meaning, which the system itself cannot fully absorb. This moment of excess will be picked up by both critical theory and hermeneutics – though in radically different ways (Bowie 2003: 39-40).

Adorno's reading of Kant, while critical, is far from dismissive. In many respects, he reaffirms the notion of aesthetic autonomy – but he does so in order to retain a space for art's resistance to commodified life. In *Aesthetic Theory* ([1970] 2004), Adorno writes that "Kant was the first to grasp the paradox that artworks are at once autonomous and fated" (Adorno [1970] 2004: 18). The very formalism that isolates the aesthetic realm from instrumental concerns becomes, for Adorno, the condition of art's negativity. It is only because artworks do not serve a function that they are able to interrupt the logic of utility (Adorno [1970] 2004: 99-100). However, this negativity comes at a price: art becomes estranged, its autonomy a form of social impotence. Adorno thus appropriates Kantian disinterestedness, but turns it against Kant's own Enlightenment optimism. Where Kant sought to reconcile the faculties of the mind in a harmonious aesthetic state, Adorno emphasises their disharmony. Adorno rejects the notion of an intrinsic determination in beauty. He instead positions aesthetic form as a dialectical tension between form and content, autonomy and heteronomy (Adorno [1970] 2004: 138-142, Bernstein 1992: 131-135).

Thus, Adorno appropriates and reinterprets Kantian aesthetics – its promise of universality indirectly leading to the very alienation it sought to overcome. Adorno identifies in Kant's aesthetic formalism a double structure: on the one hand, it protects art from being reduced to ideology; on the other, it isolates art from social praxis (Adorno [1970] 2004: 225-229, Bernstein 1992: 138-141). Thus, art becomes a paradoxical enclave of negation – it critiques reality precisely by withdrawing from it. This dialectic of autonomy and estrangement is central to Adorno's mature aesthetic thought. At the same time, Adorno is aware that art must continue to engage with the brokenness of experience – as he writes, "Art keeps itself alive through its social inappropriateness"

(Adorno [1970] 2004: 240). Aesthetic autonomy, if it is to retain its critical potential, must reflect the very unfreedom it negates. Thus, for Adorno, Kant's formalism is both enabling and disabling: it secures a space for critique while simultaneously insulating that critique from the social world it hopes to transform (Bernstein 1992: 142-145).

Adorno's aesthetics remains suspended – defensive of art's independence, yet mournful of its isolation. This critical position has been widely commented on in the secondary literature, particularly in relation to the limitations of negative dialectics as a tool for reconstructing the relation between art and experience (Grondin 1997: 129-132). It is against this background that Gadamer's intervention should be understood. His critique of aesthetic consciousness does not merely revisit the Kantian legacy; it seeks to re-ground aesthetic experience in ontology rather than transcendental subjectivity. As Grondin (1997: 138-141) and Bowie (2003: 67-70) both note, Gadamer's concept of play (*Spiel*) displaces the aesthetic subject altogether. The experience of the artwork becomes one that occurs between the artwork and the participant through tradition and dialogical understanding.

The culture industry thesis

The culture industry thesis, developed by Adorno and Horkheimer in their text *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2002), stands as a significant intervention in 20th-century aesthetics and critical theory. Building upon the Kantian formalisation of disinterested judgement, Adorno and Horkheimer reveal how aesthetic detachment, which was once a guarantor of autonomy, is historically transformed into a mechanism of commodification and ideological control. In this account, culture ceases to be a domain of emancipation and instead becomes an instrument of domination. The production and consumption of art are subordinated to the logics of standardisation and exchange of late-stage capitalism. "The culture industry", they write, "perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises" (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002: 129). Art is no longer a site of reflection or disruption and becomes a mechanism of conformity, producing pseudo-individualised experiences that reproduce existing social structures of domination and oppression. This diagnosis marks a sharp departure from the Enlightenment ideal of art as a bearer of truth or rational insight. In fact, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment itself is complicit in the process of stripping art of its social and truth bearing powers.

Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment project rests on their claim that the very project which sought to liberate humanity through reason ultimately gives rise to new forms of domination. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2002), they argue that Enlightenment rationality, in its attempt to demystify the world, increasingly reduces nature – and eventually culture – to an object of control and prediction (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002: 3-4). This process culminates in what Horkheimer, in his text *Eclipse of Reason* ([1947] 2004), calls "subjective reason" – a form of reasoning that no longer seeks truth or justice, but merely concerns itself with the efficient attainment of arbitrary ends (Horkheimer [1947] 2004: 3-5). "Objective reason", which once grounded ethical and aesthetic judgements in a broader metaphysical or normative order, is eclipsed by a logic that sees all means as tools and all ends as subjective preferences. This transformation has profound implications for art. A consequence of the instrumentalisation of reason is that the aesthetic realm is stripped of its capacity to disclose truth or meaning. Art is no longer a site of ethical reflection or metaphysical speculation but is judged by its functionality and utility – its ability to entertain, distract, or sell. Under the logic of the culture industry, artworks are no longer singular encounters but products tailored to target audiences, shaped by algorithms of mass appeal and profit. Aesthetic experience is hollowed out into a passive mode of consumption and stripped of its characteristics that were once aligned with *Bildung* and ethical formation. This is not the Enlightenment as Kant envisioned it – emancipation through critical reflection – but its perversion: a world in which freedom is simulated through choice, while critique is stifled by commodified pleasure (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002: 95-100, Horkheimer [1947] 2004: 12-14).

Reason, when reduced to instrumental calculation, becomes a tool of domination. Aesthetic experience, once allied with freedom and subjectivity, is absorbed into the machinery of mass deception. The standardised pleasures offered by cinema, radio, and television simulate freedom, but in fact, they reinforce passivity and social regression (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002: 121-144). In contemporary digital lifeworlds we see the extension of these powers as subjective reason is no longer merely a stance; it is artefactually configured. Platform architectures – recommendations, ranking, and metric systems – translate a calculated and calculable adequacy into the interfaces of preference, thereby simulating autonomy as customisation and personalisation. In Horkheimer's terms, the eclipse of objective reason results in a world in

which ends arrive as pre-formatted while means are always optimised and regulated (Horkheimer [1947] 2004: 3-6, 79-84). Read alongside Adorno and Horkheimer's ([1944] 2002: 94-102, 128-136) account of the culture industry as administered satisfaction, contemporary algorithmic mediation appears as its technical continuation: the sensible field itself is curated as pre-formatted preference. As Han (2017a: ch. "The Recorded Life", para. 1) notes, "No trust is possible in the digital panopticon – nor is it necessary. In other words, it occurs when freedom and control prove indistinguishable." Likewise psychopolitical domination interiorises control as self-optimisation: "Neoliberalism represents a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom… Today, we do not deem ourselves subjugated subjects, but rather projects… The neoliberal regime transforms allo-exploitation into auto-exploitation" (Han [2014] 2017b: ch. 1, paras. 2, 5, 12). In short, what once demanded judgement is reconfigured as choice, narrowing the space for critique (Bernstein 1992: 188-192).

The historical emergence of the culture industry is intimately tied to the rise of mass media technologies and consumer capitalism in the 20th century. As radio, cinema, and television developed into dominant cultural products, the production of art was increasingly subjected to the mechanisms of mass standardisation. Adorno's thought was particularly attuned to the music of the time, where he observed that popular music followed repetitive formulas – predictable structures, recurring motifs, and familiar emotional triggers that gave the illusion of novelty while ensuring cognitive ease and marketability (Adorno [1938] 2001: 29-60). He termed this phenomenon "pseudo-individuation": the creation of aesthetic variation that disguises fundamental uniformity (Adorno [1967] 2001: 36-37). This critique was not limited to music; Hollywood cinema, serialised literature, and advertising similarly relied on formulaic narratives and affective templates. Cultural commodities are designed to be easily consumed and just as easily forgotten. In this context, aesthetic form becomes instrumentalised: it serves not to provoke thought or disclose truth but to soothe and pacify the audience. The pleasure offered by cultural products is not emancipatory but narcotic, as what appears as freedom of choice is in fact a closed loop of algorithmic repetition. The historical specificity of the culture industry thesis thus lies in its recognition that modern capitalism did not abolish art but reconfigured it into a system of affective management and ideological reproduction (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002: 121-129, Bernstein 1992: 150-152).

Adorno's essays in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* ([1967] 2001) deepen this critique. In "Culture Industry Reconsidered," he argues that cultural commodities operate under the same logic as industrial production: "What is new is not that it is a commodity, but that today it deliberately admits it is one" (Adorno, [1967] 2001: 98). The aesthetic object, once thought to resist commodification by virtue of its autonomy, is now produced with exchange-value in mind. Its form, content, and reception are all pre-structured by the demands of the market. As a result, aesthetic experience becomes predictable and controllable – a mere function of ideological reproduction (Adorno [1967] 2001: 94-107).

However, Adorno's critique of the culture industry is not entirely nihilistic. As mentioned earlier, his aesthetics are grounded in the method of "negative dialectics", which refuses synthesis and insists that the contradictions of reality must remain unresolved (Adorno [1970] 2004: 16-18, Bernstein 1992: 157-159). This method informs his understanding of genuine art as that which resists conceptual closure and social utility. The value of modernist or autonomous art, for Adorno, lies precisely in its refusal to affirm the world as it is. In aesthetic form, contradiction is preserved rather than subsumed: dissonance, fragmentation, opacity, and silence become aesthetic strategies that reveal what cannot be directly said (Adorno [1970] 2004: 35-37, 132-136). Thus, even when art does not explicitly critique ideology, it can instantiate critique through its refusal to be easily consumed (Bernstein 1992: 160-162). In this sense, Adorno's notion of aesthetic negativity is not simply a cultural diagnosis – it is a philosophical stance against reconciliation. The artwork's truth lies in its use of form, in the tensions between content and expression, autonomy and heteronomy (Adorno [1970] 2004: 162-165). Its non-identity with reality is not an inadequacy, but a condition of possibility for critique. As Adorno notes, "artworks say what is not said, not only because they are mute, but because they present things in a refracted light" (Adorno [1970] 2004: 120). This is why he sees authentic artworks as enigmas: they resist interpretation not because they are meaningless, but because they refuse to be reduced to functional explanation (Adorno [1970] 2004: 159-161, Bowie 2003: 82-84). This negativity, however, also explains why Adorno cannot articulate a constructive aesthetic programme. He can defend art's autonomy as critique, but he cannot describe how such art might positively engage the world without betraying its formal resistance (Bernstein 1992: 162-165).

In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer ([1947] 2004) expands on the underlying philosophical logic of this development. The shift from objective reason, which seeks truth and reconciliation, to subjective reason, which seeks efficiency and self-preservation, results in the erosion of meaning in all domains of life – including art (Horkheimer [1947] 2004: 3-21). Rationality is no longer a pathway to freedom, as Kant imagined it to be, but a technique of adaptation. This in turn undermines the possibility of genuine aesthetic experience, which depends on distance, reflection, and negativity. The culture industry thesis thus continues the Kantian logic of disinterestedness, but empties it of its critical power. Where Kant sought to establish a space of reflective judgement beyond empirical determination, Adorno and Horkheimer see this space colonised by commercial logic – the commodification of art is initiated by disinterested judgement but acted upon by the commercial logic of 20th-century capitalism. The aesthetic object is no longer free from interest; it is shaped by interests that are economic and ideological. The autonomy of art becomes an illusion as what appears as aesthetic distance, which is outlined by Kant, is in fact a socially prescribed posture which is exposed by capitalism.

Bernstein (1992: 148-156) highlights how the culture industry thesis draws on, but also radically transforms, Kantian aesthetic categories. Concepts like purposiveness without purpose and the harmony of faculties are recoded through a critical lens: the only harmony now discernible is that between consumer and commodity. The *sensus communis* is replaced by demographic targeting; the pleasure of aesthetic reflection becomes indistinguishable from the seductions of advertising. However, for all its pessimism, the culture industry thesis preserves a vestige of hope. The very concept of art's autonomy, however compromised, still points toward a form of resistance. As Adorno insists, even the most degraded artworks may contain traces of non-identity – flashes of *aesthetic negativity* that disrupt the smooth functioning of ideology (Adorno [1970] 2004: 245-248). It is this tension, which gives rise to negative dialectics, that sustains critical theory's interest in art, even under conditions of near-total instrumentalisation.

Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry ultimately reaches an impasse. Their commitment to aesthetic negativity preserves the critical function of art but at the cost of any concrete vision for how that function might be realised in contemporary conditions. Aesthetic autonomy becomes not a space of engagement but one of retreat, where art can only express its truth by refusing reconciliation with the social world (Adorno [1970] 2004: 187-189,

Horkheimer [1947] 2004: 116). This creates a paradox: the more thoroughly art resists instrumentalisation, the more isolated it becomes from public discourse and historical participation. The very forms meant to protect its truth-content risk rendering it unintelligible to those outside elite interpretive communities (Bernstein 1992: 166-168, Bowie 2003: 90-91).

Moreover, the culture industry thesis struggles to explain the persistence of affective, dialogical, and transformative engagements with art even within commodified contexts. Not all aesthetic experience under late capitalism is passive or manipulative. Horkheimer and Adorno's refusal to account for the potential of historical understanding, communal reception, or interpretive play limits its ability to theorise how art might still matter – not just negatively, but generatively. It is here that Gadamer's intervention becomes philosophically significant. Rather than refuting critical theory, Gadamer reframes the question: not how to preserve art's autonomy through negation, but how to recover its truth by rethinking its embeddedness in the structures of participation, tradition, and understanding (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 110-115). In what follows, we turn to Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and his critique of aesthetic consciousness. Gadamer offers a different, ontologically grounded approach to aesthetic experience – one that seeks not to negate Kant, but to redirect the question of art's truth beyond the impasses of formalism and commodification.

Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno's melancholic diagnosis of cultural regression, offers a different approach to aesthetic experience – one grounded not in ideology critique but in philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer's analysis, developed in the text *Truth and Method* ([1960] 2004), does not deny the historical alienation of aesthetic experience, but instead seeks to reimagine art within a novel ontological structure. His aim is not to restore art's autonomy through negation, as Adorno does, but to rethink what it means for art to disclose truth in the first place.

Central to Gadamer's reimagining of art is his critique of "aesthetic consciousness" – a concept he uses to describe the Kantian tendency in modernity to isolate the aesthetic object from its context and transpose it into a realm of detached appreciation. This mode of consciousness, Gadamer argues, is historically specific: it emerges from Enlightenment formalism and Kantian aesthetics, where aesthetic judgement is predicated on disinterestedness and

the autonomy of taste. In this mode of consciousness, the spectator is distanced from the work, treating it as a self-contained object of contemplation that is separate from the observing subject. As Gadamer writes, "The fundamental error of aesthetic consciousness is to posit the aesthetic as a realm apart" (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 82). This critique is more than a commentary on aesthetic modernity – it is a challenge to the subject-object schema that underpins much of modern philosophy. Aesthetic experience, as Gadamer posits, cannot be reduced to the isolated act of a subject confronting an object. Rather, it must be understood as a mode of *Erfahrung* – a transformative event of meaning in which the artwork and the interpreter co-participate. The artwork is not simply perceived, it plays. In playing, it draws the interpreter into a world that is neither purely subjective nor purely objective but historically and hermeneutically mediated (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 102-105, Grondin 1997: 141).

At the centre of this ontological approach is Gadamer's concept of *Spiel* (play). Contrary to popular associations of play with frivolity or leisure, Gadamer treats play as a serious structure of being. In aesthetic experience, play describes the dynamic back-and-forth movement between the artwork and the spectator – neither dominates the other, and neither is wholly independent: as he writes, "the player knows very well what play is, but what play knows about itself is more important" (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 104). Play is not located in the subject who observes nor in the object observed, but in the event that unfolds *between* them. This implies that the artwork is not a static object in the Kantian noumenal world, but something that 'plays' – it is enacted, performed, and realised in the act of interpretation. *Darstellung* (presentation) is a concept closely related to this, which underscores the event-bound nature of art. The artwork presents itself – *es stellt sich dar* – and in doing so, it does not merely express a pre-existing content but brings something into being that did not exist before. The meaning of the work is not fixed – it emerges in the encounter, and this emergence is constitutive of its truth. For Gadamer, truth is not a property that can be extracted from the work by a detached observer. Rather, it is something that comes to presence in the interpretive event (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 121-125).

Gadamer's ontological approach to aesthetics is best understood as a response not only to Kantian disinterestedness but to the broader modern conception of the aesthetic subject. The emphasis on autonomy and subjectivity in Kant severs the bond between the work of art and its place within tradition, rendering art inert – an object for contemplation rather than

a medium through which truth might emerge (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 76-78, Grondin 1997: 113-116). Gadamer, by contrast, views art as a form of *Erfahrung* (experience), which is not reducible to knowledge or psychological impression, but constitutes a mode of being with the world (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 92-98). This is why play is so central: it dismantles the binary of active subject and passive object, repositioning both artwork and interpreter within a shared, self-unfolding movement that resists final determination. In this sense, the artwork is not just encountered but enacted – its truth arises only in the act of interpretation (Bowie 2003: 66-68).

Moreover, Gadamer's use of *Darstellung* draws from classical rhetoric and dramaturgy to indicate that the artwork does not merely express content, but stages a world. This world is not the projection of the subject, nor is it the autonomous essence of the object – it is what emerges between the two. Such a formulation reveals how Gadamer's aesthetics is profoundly relational: the meaning of the artwork is not located in a metaphysical essence or a purely formal structure, but in the dynamic interplay of tradition, interpreter, and work (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 115-122, Grondin 1997: 139-141). This fundamentally dialogical orientation situates Gadamer's hermeneutics within a philosophy of finitude. We do not escape history to encounter the artwork; we encounter the artwork as history, as something that addresses us within a lineage of meaning and interpretation (Bowie 2003: 71).

This positioning has ethical consequences. In resisting the aesthetic attitude of detached judgement, Gadamer points us toward a form of attentiveness grounded in humility – a listening, rather than a mastery, of the artwork. His appeal to *phronesis*, practical wisdom, underscores this point: aesthetic experience is not only about recognising beauty, but about engaging in the cultivation of interpretive sensitivity (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 132-137, Grondin 1997: 146-149). This is not simply an ethical attitude in the narrow sense, but a form of ontological responsibility. Gadamer's appeal to *phronesis* reaches beyond aesthetics and into the ethical constitution of understanding itself. Derived from Aristotle, *phronesis* refers to a mode of judgement that is context-sensitive, attuned to particular situations, and grounded in active ethical engagement rather than rule-governed calculation. In Gadamer's framework, it names the kind of attentiveness that is required for interpretation to be genuinely receptive rather than manipulative (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 312-320). In resisting the instrumental logic of modernity, *phronesis* reinstates the

ethical stakes of interpretation: one listens, responds, and allows oneself to be addressed by the artwork, rather than subordinating it to one's conceptual apparatus or ideological framework.

This ethical attentiveness stands in stark contrast to the form of reasoning critiqued by Horkheimer in *Eclipse of Reason*, where subjective rationality becomes divorced from moral and aesthetic dimensions, reducing thought to technique (Horkheimer [1947] 2004: 10-12). Gadamer, by contrast, offers a model in which the aesthetic is not an escape from ethics, but a training ground for it. Engaging with art becomes a practice in humility and historical consciousness – an opportunity to rehearse a kind of judgement that is open to otherness and grounded in tradition without being bound by it. In this way, Gadamer's aesthetics is not only a theory of interpretation, but a theory of ethical formation. It teaches us how to dwell with the unfamiliar, how to remain open to what resists immediate understanding, and how to engage with the world in a way that affirms both finitude and meaning. One does not use the artwork, nor dominate it, but rather submits to the event of understanding it offers. In this way, Gadamer offers not only an alternative aesthetic theory, but an alternative disposition for how we inhabit art, tradition, and each other.

This idea of truth, as an event of understanding, stands in contrast to both the Kantian model of aesthetic judgement and the Frankfurt School's melancholic preservation of autonomy. Gadamer neither brackets the world of the artwork, nor isolates it from tradition and history. Instead, he situates it within the continuous unfolding of *Wirkungsgeschichte* – the "history of effect" – in which every act of understanding is also a continuation of the work's life. This means that the truth of art is always historically situated, contingent, and dialogical; not something abstract or universal (Grondin 1997: 143-145).

Gadamer's notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or the "history of effect", plays an important role in articulating how the artwork is embedded in, and transformed by, its tradition of reception. Rather than viewing historical context as something that limits the interpreter's access to truth, Gadamer argues that all understanding is conditioned by history – that is, we always approach artworks with prejudices (*Vorurteile*) shaped by the linguistic and cultural world we inhabit (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 268-271). These prejudices, far from being an obstacle, are constitutive of the interpretive process as they create the horizon from which meaning can emerge. This is what Gadamer means when he asserts that "understanding is always the fusion of horizons"

(*Horizontverschmelzung*) – a process in which the interpreter's present horizon and the historically sedimented horizon of the work intersect and transform one another (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 305-307). Importantly, this fusion does not mean collapsing one perspective into another. Instead, it marks the ontological co-production of meaning: the artwork lives through its interpretations, and each act of understanding not only reveals something new but reactivates the work's historical existence. In this way, *Wirkungsgeschichte* resists the idea of an original, "pure" meaning that could be retrieved by bracketing history. There is no view from nowhere – only a situated process of engagement through which the artwork continues to speak.

This has significant implications for aesthetics. Where Kant and even Adorno retain a model of aesthetic judgement in which truth is either universal or negatively gestured toward, Gadamer insists on a historical unfolding of truth. Art does not merely resist commodification by withdrawing from the world; it transforms the world by participating in its continuous historical reinterpretation. This participatory, temporally extended conception of truth positions Gadamer's aesthetics as uniquely attuned to the dynamics of tradition and history – not as stasis, but as transmission and renewal.

Gadamer's position does not avoid critique altogether, but it reframes it through the ontology of understanding which he finds in play. Instead of offering a programmatic resistance to commodification or mass culture, as Horkheimer and Adorno propose, Gadamer suggests that the seriousness of play and the shared nature of understanding can reveal truth without withdrawing from reality and historical life. As Grondin argues, Gadamer's aesthetics provides a model of participation in which the meaning of a work arises in its continuous reception and interpretation – a horizon that expands rather than contracts the space for critical thought (Grondin 1997: 146-149). Importantly, this model does not reject the Enlightenment; rather, it retrieves elements of it by redirecting aesthetic experience toward the cultivation of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. In playing with the artwork, the interpreter does not impose meaning but listens for it – an orientation that re-establishes aesthetic experience as a site of genuine disclosure and ethical reflection (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 132-137, Bowie 2003: 72-75).

Read against digital mediation, Gadamer's *Spiel* (play) re-educates attention for presentation (*Darstellung*) rather than capture. In *Truth and Method*, the work's play "plays us" by drawing us into a temporally structured event of

participation and appearance (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 102-135). Han names what the presence of a temporality specific to platforms corrodes: ritual temporality. Rituals stabilise form and create duration, which are the very conditions under which something can appear and gather us; in contrast, the smartphone's endless succession of snippets makes life lose its endurance and lingering becomes impossible (Han [2019] 2020: ch. 1, para. 3). Han's analysis of festival (e.g. Sabbath/*menuchah*) clarifies further the idea that communal practices of silence and patterned time are not antiquarian residues but the very conditions for a shared world (Han [2019] 2020: ch. 4, para. 1). In alignment with this idea, play is an askesis of attention: a disciplined, participatory comportment that reinstates forms (slow looking, framed occasions, rituals of reception) in which the work can genuinely "play us", without collapsing critique into mere affirmation (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 102-135). Thus, the forms that sustain play do not mute dissonance; they stage it as appearance. This prepares the way for a comparative coda in which Adorno's vigilance and Gadamer's play can be held together without capitulation.

In sum, Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness, his rethinking of play as ontological, and his emphasis on tradition as a medium of truth all contribute to a distinctive framework of aesthetic experience. This framework neither collapses into relativism nor lapses into formalism, but instead presents a path toward recovering the truth-potential of art as something that happens between interpreter and work, within the historical world. In the following section, we turn to a critical dialogue between Gadamer and The Frankfurt School, highlighting the philosophical tensions, overlaps, and potential complementarity between these approaches.

Gadamer and Critical Theory in dialogue

The following comparative coda makes the Adorno-Gadamer disjunction and complementarity explicit. On the one hand, Adorno defends autonomy as refusal as art's truth-content supports itself in non-identity, dissonance, and resistance to conceptual capture; in an attitude of vigilance against the subsumption of appearance by exchange and entertainment (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002: 94-102, 128-136, Bernstein 1992: 188-192, Adorno [1970] 2004: 1-20). On the other hand, Gadamer reconceives aesthetic experience as a participatory event of presentation in which the work of art "plays us", binding understanding to a form, duration, and dialogue rather than

to aesthetic detachment (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 102-135). Read together, these stances are not mutually exclusive as negativity remains a structural moment within the event of play. What I call "participatory truth" thus names a practice that holds Adorno's vigilance together with Gadamer's play: participation without acquiescence, and form without conformity. In this light, the culture industry logic survives when means are incessantly optimised and controlled while ends are presented as pre-formatted for consumption; yet the work of art's presentation can still appear as other, interrupting this administration (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002: 94-102, Horkheimer [1947] 2004: 3-6, 79-84, Gadamer [1960] 2004: 102-135).

Adorno's and Gadamer's respective approaches to art, truth, and critique converge around the shared conviction that aesthetic experience remains a privileged site of philosophical reflection. However, the paths they take diverge sharply. While Adorno's aesthetic theory foregrounds negativity, dialectics, and the artwork's autonomy as a protest against instrumental reason, Gadamer offers a hermeneutic model grounded in participation, tradition, and ontological disclosure. This section explores their points of convergence and disjunction, not to resolve them, but to suggest how their differences illuminate the stakes of any contemporary aesthetic philosophy and how play might offer a route towards overcoming the commercial and economic motives of the culture industry.

At the heart of the disagreement is the question of how art discloses truth. For Adorno, art's critical power lies in its capacity for "non-identity" – its refusal to be reduced to concept, function, or ideology. The artwork resists the world by refusing to be absorbed by it, and this resistance is rooted in its formal autonomy (Adorno [1970] 2004: 5-7). Art, for Adorno, becomes a negative image of reconciliation: it does not present a better world, but registers the untruth of this one. In contrast, Gadamer's ontology of art situates the work not in opposition to the world but within its historical unfolding. The artwork speaks not through negation but through presentation (*Darstellung*) – an event of meaning in which the interpreter and the work meet in a shared space of play and understanding (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 115-122).

Central to Adorno's aesthetics is the notion of *Wahrheitsgehalt*, or "truth-content", which refers to the capacity of an artwork to disclose the contradictions and antagonisms of the social world. Truth-content is not a propositional or representational quality, nor is it reducible to subjective

experience. Rather, it emerges from the formal structure of the artwork itself, particularly in the tension between its autonomy and its immanent critique of social reality (Adorno [1970] 2004: 124-128, Bernstein 1992: 151-153). Art becomes true when it makes visible the fractures and absences that pervade the world – when it refuses reconciliation and instead preserves the negativity of that which cannot be directly expressed. This is why Adorno insists that the truth of art is bound up with its silence, its resistance to discursive capture (Adorno [1970] 2004: 133-135). What distinguishes Adorno from Gadamer is that truth, for Adorno, is not dialogical but dialectical. The artwork does not invite conversation; it interrupts it. It does not merge horizons; it exposes the impossibility of horizon-fusion in a damaged world (Bernstein 1992: 155-157). As such, *Wahrheitsgehalt* retains the structure of negativity and non-identity: the artwork becomes the site where the suffering of the world is sedimented in form. In contrast, Gadamer's event of truth – rooted in *Spiel* (play) and historical dialogue – emphasises the unfolding of meaning through participation and understanding (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 115-122, Grondin 1997: 143-145). Both accounts affirm that art tells truth, but they differ in whether that truth is revealed through negation or emergence.

This divergence is crucial to understanding the stakes of modern aesthetic theory. While Adorno preserves the artwork's autonomy as a condition of critique, Gadamer seeks to rehabilitate the artwork's embeddedness in tradition as a condition of meaning. Their differing accounts of truth-content are not mutually exclusive, but they foreground the extent to which critique and continuity remain competing paradigms for how art might matter. This contrast often leads commentators to position Adorno and Gadamer as irreconcilable (Bernstein 1992: 150-153, Grondin 1997: 152-154). Adorno, for example, was deeply suspicious of hermeneutics, which he saw as too reconciliatory, too willing to affirm the meaning of a tradition already implicated in domination (Adorno [1970] 2004: 165-170). Gadamer, in turn, objected to what he perceived as critical theory's estrangement from experience and its overemphasis on systemic critique at the expense of understanding (Grondin 1997: 152-154). Yet this binary may obscure a deeper compatibility: both thinkers are committed to preserving the seriousness of aesthetic experience. Both reject the reduction of art to entertainment, both insist that art can tell the truth, and both are wary of the commodification of culture. The divergence, then, lies not in whether art matters, but in how it matters.

Gadamer's challenge to critical theory lies in his refusal to treat tradition and participation as inherently naïve or ideologically compromised. Prejudice, for Gadamer, is not an obstacle to understanding but a necessary condition of it – our historical embeddedness does not corrupt interpretation, but makes it possible (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 270-274). This position stands in contrast to Adorno's insistence on critical distance, where any affirmation of tradition risks perpetuating the structures of domination that art should negate. Yet, it is precisely Adorno's dialectical suspicion that allows him to diagnose how even seemingly emancipatory forms of art can become co-opted by the culture industry (Adorno [1970] 2004: 226-228). Despite these differences, both thinkers resist instrumentalism and affirm the irreducibility of the aesthetic. As Andrew Bowie (2003: 84) notes, "for both Adorno and Gadamer, the work of art opens a space in which the world can appear differently". Where Adorno leans into negation and non-identity, Gadamer finds in the experience of play a mode of shared disclosure that retains the ethical seriousness of critique without collapsing into abstraction. Thus, while their vocabularies differ – truth-content for Adorno, event of understanding for Gadamer – their stakes converge: both are animated by the question of how art might still matter in an age of aesthetic alienation. Under smartphone and AI conditions, the very conditions of appearance are themselves engineered; yet precisely here the ontological event of presentation and understanding can interrupt algorithmic pre-emption. Briefly, cultivating participatory forms, such as rituals of reception, dialogical pedagogy, and attentional practices that refuse metric capture, allows play to disclose truth while preserving Adorno's negative vigilance.

Conclusion

This article has traced the divergent yet converging paths of Gadamerian hermeneutics and Frankfurt School, specifically Horkheimer and Adorno's, critical theory in relation to aesthetic experience. Beginning with Kant's formalisation of aesthetic judgement, it followed the way in which Adorno and Horkheimer radicalised the notion of aesthetic autonomy as a negative force – preserving art's critical potential precisely through its alienation. Gadamer's intervention, however, reconfigures this critical possibility by grounding aesthetics in ontology rather than ideology, in play rather than autonomy, and in dialogue rather than negation. The key insight that emerges is not that one tradition offers the solution the other lacks, but that both respond to a shared crisis in the modern understanding of art's role in truth. Adorno's suspicion

keeps aesthetics tethered to the realities of domination. Gadamer's openness, by contrast, reclaims aesthetic experience as a space of historical participation and truth-disclosure. Each risks one-sidedness: Adorno, melancholic in his negativity; Gadamer, potentially too reconciliatory. But together, they point to a more nuanced view: that art matters because it resists reduction – whether to commodity or concept – and that its truth is enacted, not extracted. Rather than ending in a verdict, this article proposes a beginning: a line of enquiry into how art's critical function might be reimagined in light of both tradition and critique. This question becomes urgent in the contemporary context of digital media, where algorithmically controlled cultural experiences structure the public sphere. Gadamer's emphasis on participation and dialogical engagement under play invites reflection on how aesthetic experience might resist the commodifying tendencies of capitalism and sustain possibilities for democratic dialogue. Gadamer's notion of play does not escape the pressures of ideology, but it does invite a reconsideration of how we engage with art as something more than either resistance or affirmation. In that sense, the seriousness of play may yet become a resource for thinking beyond the culture industry – not by negating critique, but by entering into it, hermeneutically.

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