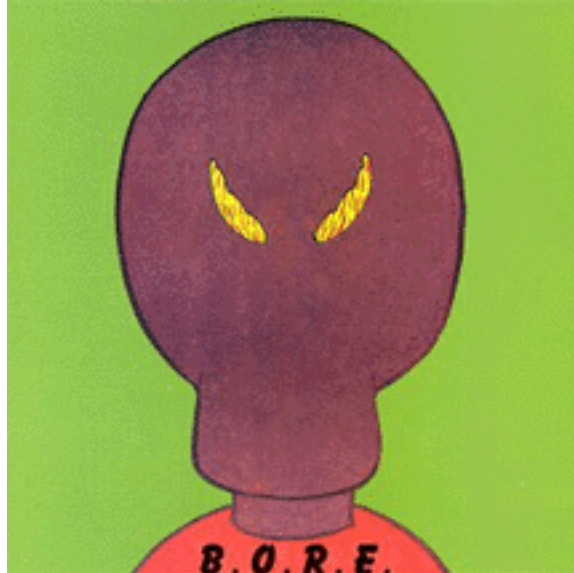


Why Hardcore Goes Soft: Adorno, Japanese Noise, and the Extirpation of Dissonance*

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The Rise and Fall of Dissonance

On April 7, 1805, guests at the Lobkowitz Palace retired to the performance hall after an evening of Viennese wining and dining. Herr Beethoven, already widely hailed as a masterful yet restless classicist, is to provide the musical accompaniment to their digestion. He promises a heroic symphony, in its pangs of birth a tribute to Napoleon, but now a direct affront to the newly self-proclaimed Emperor. The full orchestra begins by declaring two definitive chords in E-flat major, establishing a key and firmly placing each foot squarely within the tradition. The strings walk with the expectations of the audience's well-trained ears for four more steps, stating a theme and maintaining the key with an E-flat major arpeggio. Then, with the seventh bar, the door to the tradition closes behind a dissonant C-sharp, and the audience is dropped out of the Palace and onto the European battlefield. The netherworld of classical ideals, the safe haven frequented by the aristocracy to escape the dangerous clamor of the world they ruled, had been invaded by dissonance. A single, nasty, out-of-place noise turns their stomachs. If the patron could keep her meal down over the furious harmonic and rhythmic windings of the seventeen minute first movement, a duration longer than entire symphonies of the period, she would ultimately find relief when the initial theme is completed in an answering phrase. The final outcome, however, could not neutralize the symphony's dyspeptic

effects. Described as a "rude" and "shocking" offense against an otherwise splendid evening, reviewers likened Beethoven's early symphonies to a "crass monster, a hideously writhing wounded dragon. . . ." In addition to the work's thematic, tonal, harmonic, and rhythmic transgressions, it was simply too long, prompting one critic to advise Beethoven to abbreviate his ramblings: "If this symphony is not by some means abridged, it will soon fall into disuse." Beethoven, thankfully, did not truncate the *Eroica Symphony*. Perhaps use was not his primary objective.

Now in Osaka and New York, Boredoms performances commence with band members Yamatsuka Eye and Yashikawa sprinting toward each other from opposite ends of the stage and colliding in a direct, violent impact. This sound of crashing humans is heard precisely as *noise*. While sound connotes nothing more than the sense-data of hearing, noise, from the Latin *nausea*, suggests an unpleasant disturbance, confusion, or interference baldly lacking any musical quality. The knocking of heads, thumping of torsos, and slapping of limbs begins a show of meticulously crafted noise, and from this opening we cannot forget that the noises we hear are inextricably bound to human pain. Boredoms' compositions commingle standard musical structures, such as jazz, house, funk, tribal, heavy metal, psychedelic, punk, and classical, with brazenly non-musical elements. When, for example, a piece begins with an extended painful tone, is followed by classical guitar strumming, and then begins to sound like amplified masticating insects, the contrast of the familiar and strange flirts with our musical standards. We project themes and movements emerging from what sounds like the soundtrack to an episode of *Godzilla Meets the Muppets* played at the wrong speed. We find ourselves speculating what might be around the next corner, but the remnant conventions always mutate into something odd enough to thoroughly disappoint our expectations. Boredoms tread close enough to music and popular culture that we cannot be sure if their work can be categorized as either.

Yet however disorienting Boredoms' noise may be, Masonna, another Japanese noise artist, generates straightaway auditory disturbance and fear. In Masonna we hear something like the squeal of a dentist's suction straw, the collision of helicopters, or the thermonuclear roar of the sun's core.¹ Masonna's work sounds as if the machines of music have begun to digest the earth, and we listen to the garbage disposal run as nature is ground in technology's gizzard. One cannot listen to an entire recording without suffering effects: muscles twitch, nerves fray, the heart races, and cognition hits a wall. Unlike artists such as Godheadsilo, who pride themselves on rupturing ear drums with low frequencies at high volumes, or Buzzoven, who induce fear and disgust through extended samples of a rape beneath viscous hardcore, Masonna is not attacking our physical or moral limits. Instead, Masonna presents the simple horror of complex noise. Here music is sacrificed to the art of aural agitation.

Whereas a single C-sharp could once scandalize an entire European socio-economic class, in recent history, and indeed because of recent history, music must undergo the most radical contortions to generate even an echo of meaningful dissonance. To our ear, the charges originally leveled against Beethoven's *3rd* are laughable. *This* was revolutionary? In other works of the period, such as Goya's *Executions of the Citizens of*

Madrid (1808) or Shelley's *Queen Mab* (1813), the formal and substantive dissension remains comprehensible. But the C-sharp, to all but the most highly trained ear, passes entirely unnoticed as dissonant. Even less than one hundred years ago, riots erupted at the premieres of each of Schoenberg's first two string quartets in protest to his experiments with atonality. Yet now for music to demand our critical attention it must risk its very identity as music. Music, like all contemporary art, is, in all its aspects, entirely in question. And rather than sparking protests in the streets, music's self-effacement now merely generates revenue. Art's crisis is now its best advertisement.

How can we make sense of this situation? Why must music now risk its own identity in order to strike a critical chord with its culture? What social and aesthetic forces are at work behind the back of this seemingly anti-social and anti-aesthetic phenomenon? Does the "unlistenability" of Japanese noise mark a kinship with the now distant and inaudible shock of the *Eroica*? Is dissonance even possible in our age, and what does dissonance, in its achievement or failure, press us to confront? Just as the music of Jimi Hendrix and the Sex Pistols that once resembled alternative forms of life now find homes in soft-drink and automobile commercials, will these unbearable noises also take root in the status quo? Have they already?

I argue that such noise could only become meaningful and articulate at a time when thought and language have become somehow inarticulate. I very briefly recount T.W. Adorno's controversial claims that we live in a wholly abstract and instrumental world, where each object we encounter holds meaning only as 1) a representative of the class to which it belongs and 2) a tool for our use. As is now the convention in Adorno scholarship and cultural studies generally, I name ordering principles of such life identity thinking and the object of its inarticulacy the non-identical. Rather than devoting this paper to debating the veracity of these principles, once I unpack modern art's predicament within the confines of identity thinking I make a case for the utter sensibility of the *prima facie* senselessness of Japanese noise. But this ultimate sensibility of Japanese noise, I argue, exemplifies the crisis of all modern art: despite its efforts to frustrate sense and stall the prevailing cultural logic, it becomes sensible as a commodified cultural product. Japanese noise therefore provides a case study of the process by which a critique of a consumer culture becomes a commercial product of that culture, thereby neutralizing the critical power of the work. Within such structures the critical capacity of art in general is under threat.

Identity Thinking and the Context of Art

Japanese noise, in both its successes and failures, is best understood as the byproduct of what Adorno named identity thinking. Identity thinking approaches an object and applies the terms red, shiny, edible, sweet, fruit, and priced at seventy-five cents, classifies it according to these attributes, and ultimately subsumes these qualities under the concept of "apple." The actual thing, as a concrete, specific, and particular entity, is seen as nothing more than an example of the concept of apple, and I relate to it as sum of its apple-esque predicates. Our knowledge of the thing extends only as far as we can

standardize it with its kind, and therefore the possibility of encountering a genuine individual, something more than merely an example of a concept, is lost. Nietzsche found this denial of singularity behind the earliest drive to formalize:

the concept leaf is constructed by an arbitrary dropping of individual differences, through a forgetting of what differentiates; and this awakens the idea that there is something in nature besides leaves which would be 'leaf', that is to say an original form, according to which all leaves are woven, drawn, circumscribed, coloured, curled, painted, but by clumsy hands, so that no example emerges correctly and reliably as a true copy of the original form. . . . The overlooking of the individual gives us the form . . .²

All thought, since bound to concepts, will disregard particularity and accentuate generality by classifying objects into categories, and for these categories to function they must deny uniqueness. All thought, since bound to concepts, will disregard particularity and accentuate generality. "Every word must not serve simply for the absolutely individualized original experience," writes Nietzsche, "but must straightaway serve for countless more or less similar cases, and that means must be matched to purely dissimilar cases." For Adorno, the process of conceptualization has created a situation where "bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence," and where "the dissimilar [becomes] comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities."³ Like the piece of fruit, Adorno claims, "any person signifies only those attributes by which he can replace everybody else: he is interchangeable, a copy. As an individual he is completely expendable and utterly insignificant. . . ."⁴ After being decontaminated of their uniqueness and particularity, a human "is one among many representatives of his geographical, psychological and sociological type."⁵ Accordingly, we relate "to nature and man . . . as the insurance company . . . relates to life and death. Whoever dies is unimportant: it is a question of ratio between accidents and the company's liabilities."⁶

The most pervasive social expression of identity thinking occurs in the process of commodity exchange. In the exchange of labor for wages or currency for products, goods are reduced to an abstract worth, or exchange-value, which provides the uniform measure that enables the transaction. Once ground down to a common denominator, all things can be weighed along the same scale and priced accordingly. As goods convert into exchange value, their particularity, their non-translatability into currency, must be denied. They become identified and valued solely by their scalable exchange value, and this quantification allows different things, genuinely incommensurable goods, to be traded as if commensurate.⁷ Abstract identification forges links between the most distant beings, uniting them under the lights of the conceptual display case where they are presented as a line of interchangeable wares.

"That which does not reduce to numbers," therefore, "becomes illusion. . . ."⁸ The very notion of something resistant to interchangeability, of a truly particular object, induces a conceptual allergy, and this inability to engage that which lies outside marks the object of thought's inarticulacy. Gillian Rose explains the patent irrationality of this

practice: "[i]dentity thinking makes unlike things alike. To believe that the concept really covers its object, when it does not, is to believe falsely that the object is the equal of its concept."⁹ Since identity thinking pretends that its concepts exhaust the entity, the thing's particularity will remain overlooked and in reason's blindspot. When Adorno enigmatically claims that the "splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass," it is precisely this blindness to particularity that the splinter marks.

Our dependence on the concept, with all of its exclusions, is born of the utility that keeps us alive, since effectively wielded concepts enable the means-end calculation which allows humans to manipulate nature. As Nietzsche lamented: "There is a kind of error without which a certain species of life cannot live."¹⁰ The Enlightenment, however, refuses to recognize this inadequacy in its rationality, and therefore it maintains the façade of its own myth: that the concept truly accounts for things. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* exposes this deception by documenting how reason drives out and turns its back on its most complex elements, and herein lies the goal of Adorno's metacritique: to enlighten Enlightenment about itself.¹¹ We recognize identity thinking as irrational when we realize that a part of reason, instrumental means-ends rationality, now encompasses the entire range of reason.

Just as the limited reason of identity thinking does not interrogate its origins, neither can it reflect on the ends to which it aims. "Reason is the organ of calculation, or planning; it is neutral in regard to ends; its element is coordination," and as such reason is wholly instrumental, incapable of evaluating its own objectives.¹² Here reason is an automated tool, chugging toward pre-programmed ends through the deployment of concepts that must deny the particularity of its subjects. "What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order to wholly dominate it and other men," and this objective of knowledge cannot reflect on its own meaning and justification. Unable to interrogate its validity, identity thinking becomes mechanical, unreflective, and self-perpetuating, and thus "[d]omination survives as an end in itself, in the form of economic power."¹³ "Domination itself," Adorno claims, "becomes its own purpose . . . it becomes purpose as such."¹⁴ Concepts convert all of nature into material for its use, and the violence of such enslavement of the particular must be understood as the domination:

The abstraction implicit in the market system represents the domination of the general over the particular, of society over its captive membership. It is not at all a socially neutral phenomenon, as the logistics of reduction, of uniformity of work time, might suggest. Behind the reduction of men to bearers of exchange value lies the domination of men over men. . . . 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.¹⁵

Ultimately, Adorno claims "Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them only in so far as he can manipulate them."¹⁶

For Adorno, no modern subject can break the spell of identity thinking. As Adorno claims of himself that "[e]very visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse," all humans have been similarly stupefied by the culture industry.¹⁷ Whether idolizing Rocky Balboa or Cool Hand Luke, the public learns the cultural maxim that taking hits, absorbing domination, is not only basely the minimum condition for survival, but a virtue in itself. This lesson begins with children taking their ideological medicine with their morning television: "Donald Duck in cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their trashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment."¹⁸ Muhammad Ali best embodies the situation as he holds aloft the commemorative flame at the opening ceremonies of the 2000 Olympic Games with shaking arms. He flies the flag of the very institution that beat him senseless, and we find this admirable. Since the masses "insist on the very ideology which enslaves them," the momentum of exploitation of commodification becomes a force more powerful than any other in society.¹⁹ As instrumental life picks up speed, Adorno, as if calling a race between technological cretinization and critical thinking, declares a winner: "thought has lost the element of self-reflection."²⁰

Without the ability to think qualitatively, the possibility of changing the course of human life is eliminated, and we are now only along for the ride. Even the very principle of nonconformism is inscribed with the process, making the crisis still more difficult to expose. "Pseudo individuality is rife" claims Adorno to dispel naïve claims to freedom, for only the semblance of originality can be found in

the standardized jazz improvisation [or] the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eye to demonstrate her individuality. What is individual is no more than the generality's power to stamp the accidental detail so firmly that it is accepted as such. The defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show is massproduced like Yale locks, whose only difference can be measured in fractions of millimeters.²¹

And he continues: "The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions."²² Those who seek salvation from synthetic, processed life in organic food, independent film, world music, or holistic medicine find these "alternatives" just as prepackaged and at the inflated prices of all social novelties. Commercial mediation constitutes all experience.²³

Thus the enlightenment of Enlightenment about itself, as a revelation about degradation of thought into a solely instrumental version of itself, faces several impediments. First, the education of reason must occur within the framework of this impoverished reason, making the demonstration of the partiality of instrumentality all the more difficult with such blunt tools. Second, the concept, as the primary offender in the subsumptive practices of identity thinking, is the medium within which the realization of the limits of identitarian thinking must materialize. Third, marking Habermas' point of departure from Adorno, discursive reason has itself become rife with and inextricable

from identity thinking, making ideology and communication synonymous.²⁴ These obstacles compound to force Adorno to hold a hard line: "When public opinion has reached a state in which thought inevitably becomes a commodity, and language the means of promoting that commodity, then the attempt to trace the course of such devaluation has to deny the allegiance to current linguistic and conceptual conventions . . ."²⁵ In this situation, where "relationships between men . . . have grown increasingly independent of them, opaque, now standing off against human beings like some different substance," a new substance must be interposed, snapping the limitations of conceptuality into focus.²⁶ Enter the modern work of art.

Historically, scientific inquiry drove the distinction between "is" and "ought" or "fact" and "value," relegating aesthetics, as an aspect of value theory, into a realm of inferior cognitive certitude. Within value theory, ethics and aesthetics were differentiated, and three distinct categories of reflection entrenched and developed around each of Kant's *Critiques*.²⁷ Yet despite this sequestration of art from cognition, and indeed because of this forced leave, Adorno claims that "art may be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering. As the real world grows dark, the irrationality of art is becoming rational. . ."²⁸ While identitarian thinking pervades the first two disciplines, works of art present the possibility of a different relationship to sensuous particulars. The cornerstones of this alternative are set in place in Kant's account of the aesthetic experience in the *Critique of Judgement*, where he describes our deliberations over the animating principles in works and attempts to formulate an *ex post facto* law for aesthetic judgement. Any such law, however, necessarily falls short, for it is in the very nature of art, Kant argues, to exceed such a conceptual blueprint. Just as aesthetic meaning overwhelms conceptual comprehension, Kant's famous claim that "beauty is an object's form of purposiveness insofar as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose" problematizes the universality of instrumentalization, for the existence of the "purposeless" appears to harbor the non-instrumental. No enumeration of the rules of production or reception can delimit the affective range of the work, and precisely where we find this abundance of meaning beyond conceptual understanding do we mark the work of genius. While appearing beyond conceptual meaning, the work manages to itself become meaningful, hinting at a form of insight other than what concepts can know. As meaningful objects that openly balk at their subsumption under a concept and take their very value from their resistance to and exceeding of formal laws of explanation, art, according to Adorno, stages a form of protest against the inadequacies of the identitarianism of pure and practical reason.

Japanese Noise and the Struggle of Material

Much of the veracity of Adorno's theory of art lies in its ability to explain the cultural tension played out in the conflicting responses to Japanese noise. Perhaps due to the listlessness implied by their name, critical reviews of Boredoms' performances and recordings typically hold one of two positions: either 1) the artists pander to short attention spans²⁹ or 2) critics who claim Boredoms lack an adequate attention span are not listening closely enough.³⁰ Strangely enough, both of these views are accurate.

As soon as we encounter Boredoms, we are engaged in a struggle to make some sense of what we hear. Unable to categorize the stimulus within any known musical genre, incapable of interpreting lyrics or recognizing sounds, and generally bereft of aesthetic orientation, the work commands our full attention. With our ear tuned and focused to hunt out some structure and reason in the work, micrologics emerge, and like Schoenberg and Berg's rigid expressionistic compositions under the twelve-tone system, the work's elaborate and exact structure is not readily apparent. On *Chocolate Synthesizer*, named as a fecal counterpoint to DuChamp's *Chocolate Grinder*, something resembling a seventeen-note theme repeatedly turns up in degraded and barely recognizable forms. The duration of *Pop Tatari* at first seems like a fragmented musical bazaar, but after a few listenings we can make out a carefully structured aural collage. The internal logics also answer to meta-logics across albums: *Super Roots 6* is preceded by *Super Roots 5*, an hour of static, *Super Roots 4*, which purposefully doesn't exist, *Super Roots 3*, the repeated pounding of one riff, *Super Roots 2*, improvisation, and *Super Roots*, which sets the logic in motion. Likewise, at points in Masonna's *Super Compact Disk M.A.S.O..N.N.A. Numero 5* the noise breaks for a few seconds, as if the blinds to the horror were closed for a moment, to reveal the tinkling of windchimes. Like the vertical zips in Barnett Newman's otherwise monochrome paintings that mark the very origins of the universe, such a quiet landmark amidst this otherwise undifferentiated sonic topography becomes a potential site for infinite meaning. We're intrigued: if there's some form, there must be more. Reconciliation, it would seem, must follow somewhere in the wake of structure.

Yet the more deeply we listen, the more systematically we are confounded.³¹ Just when we think we have our sea legs about us, our new sensibilities are thwarted and whatever interpretive confidence we have gained is lost. Like Beethoven's coddling of his audience's assured ear only to amplify his dissonance with the element of surprise, Boredoms maintain a keen awareness of the musical landscape within which their attack is leveled. Just when we begin to walk with some groove up the stairs toward reconciliation in this aesthetic darkness, our next step finds no place to land and we lie on our face feeling entirely foolish for having trusted our instincts. Like the guests at the Lobkowitz Palace, we find the aesthetic affronts coming too quickly for us to defend our tired conventions. Thus Boredoms owe their newness to their dialectical relationship to the musical stew they both live in and defile, for like Beethoven leaping to the new only from the fugal compositions of the old, Boredoms can only transgress the boundaries of their heritage.

The most disturbing aspect of Boredoms' work must be its technical perfection. Despite the *prima facie* appearance of chaos, the noise abides by the strictest ordering principles. When a Boredoms fragment takes hold of musical form or trope, such as in "Bo Go," "Moleciccio," "Cheeba," and "Hoy" on *Pop Tatari*, they are compulsively tight. With two drummers, a cadre of up to a dozen performers producing noise with their bodies, a full arsenal of instruments, and intensive computer production and recording effects, the pieces fit together like a massive Rube Goldberg contraption that does not accomplish anything. Their precision alone stands, according to *New Music*, as a "technical feat." We have an exactly calculated and efficient piece serving no end, and

thus we see the image of modern life: the increasing efficiency of instrumental rationality without a meaningful end in sight. Thus Boredoms exemplify Thoreau's description of the industrial revolution as "an improved means to an unimproved ends."[32](#)

But now all of these considerations, mounting the defense to the charge that Boredoms lack an attention span, bring us to reinstate the claim, for it is exactly Boredoms' impressive breadth of concentration that leads them to purposefully dissolve musical structure in the name of concrete and particular noises. Our attention funnels into the work's singular moments, prompting the *Boston Phoenix* to label the works "oblique musique concrete." Once we realize the noises are not here to fulfill a macro-structural objective, they become something like ends in themselves. Instead of singular noises existing for the abstract achievements of the whole, the whole is composed to throw us back onto the horns of the noises. Now very much unlike Beethoven, whose dissonance always serves a higher abstract order, here the very material of composition steals the show. The singular, particular, and visceral noises fully consume us. We realize we have no idea what we are hearing, for example, when what seems to be an abused synthesizer turns out to be an undistorted human larynx. Even the jarringly ordinary becomes momentous on *Super Roots 6*, for example, when a drum and base track is interrupted by a bell, as if an elevator to the heightened scrutiny of each noise had arrived, and the piece slows to half its previous tempo to allow for closer consideration. Every noise takes on a specifically strange meaning, and no clear hierarchy exists between them. Each noise, just as Adorno described each sentence of *Aesthetic Theory*, is equally close to the center. Yet equality does not slip into interchangeability, for each noise remains painfully particular. Thus we find a possible exemption to Adorno's claim that the "history of music at least since Haydn is the history of fungibility: that nothing is in-itself and that everything is only in relation to the whole."

The compositions of Boredoms and Masonna must be considered alongside modernist works of art which, Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory*, achieve the status of the "semblant particular." Such works demonstrate their incommensurability with other works by overflowing conceptual determinations, thereby making a claim for particularity. Any attempt to conceptually master the material is met with a superabundance of meaning, and as a result the gap between what the work of art is and our conceptualization of it becomes difficult to ignore. This shortfall of conceptualization itself demands to be conceptualized. What identity thinking cannot dispel, the monkey wrench in conceptual operations, turns out to be the operative cognitive mechanism.[33](#) Now pregnant with meaning, the remainder to conceptual thinking demands heightened attention, and Enlightenment must reflect on the relationship between its estranged categories of thought. The work of art is cast back into a relationship with philosophy, and philosophy now needs the work of art to undertake this investigation. Whatever insight resides within art cannot be taken away from its material instantiation and transported to exclusively philosophical terrain, for only within the object can the truth survive.[34](#) Philosophy, as conceptualization, cannot "own" or paraphrase the sensuousness that provokes it. *Aesthetic Theory* mediates this relationship, narrating how art elicits what philosophy cannot deposit into conceptual knowledge and how art depends on philosophy to give voice to its unspeakable claim.[35](#)

Any cognitive or critical capacity afforded to art, Adorno makes clear, results from concrete historical and sociological conditions. While the dynamics of aesthetic experience are "transcendentally brought to rest" by Kant, Adorno lays bare the fluid sociological structures which enable art to be what it now is and what it some day may no longer be.³⁶ Adorno provides such an excavation of aesthetic experience in "Lyric Poetry and Society" where he forwards the thesis that "lyric work is always the expression of social antagonism."³⁷ Originally read before an audience of lyric poetry aficionados, Adorno anticipates their fear that their beloved "fragile" art will be "brought into the bustle and commotion" of the marketplace when it is the very task of lyric poetry to transcend such contaminants.³⁸ Purporting to stand in opposition to society and to have "escaped from the weight of material existence," lyric poetry "evoke[s] the image of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, utility, of the restless pressures of self-preservation."³⁹ Adorno, however, exposes this longing for another world as itself a social product. The demand for what transcends contemporary culture already reveals its discontented roots within culture, for it "implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work."⁴⁰ Lyric poetry, like all art, is responsive, in this case "a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed . . . since the industrial revolution became the dominant force in life."⁴¹ Thus "even resistance to social pressure is not something absolutely individual," but rather results from "objective forces . . . that are part of the constitution of the whole and not at all merely forces of a rigid individuality blindly opposing society."⁴² The "inner life" of art can only be interrogated through considerations of its relation to the outside world, until the interiority of art and the exteriority of the world are themselves thrown into question.⁴³ Therefore the "fact that art has a critical edge in society is itself socially determined."⁴⁴ Art plays this enigmatic role only because its characteristics, as beyond concepts and free from desire, coincide with a world reciprocally overrun with concepts and instrumental desire, and thus sorely lacking their opposite.⁴⁵

The disparities between Beethoven and Japanese noise can only make sense in relation to the conditions underlying each historical moment. For Beethoven, the dissonance, changes in tonality, or destruction of key stability were all registered in accordance with a belief that progress and enlightenment would prevail to resolve musical and social discord. The battles fought in music and on the fields were both thought to be winnable.⁴⁶ Themes became more difficult so that their resolution could demonstrate the capacity to incorporate even the most violent moments into a happy ending. The revolutions brought humans to a higher order, and the excessive length of the symphonies taught its listeners that endurance could prevail over all hardships. What once seemed like an impossible concentration of turmoil could, as the *9th* teaches us, lead to previously unknown joy.⁴⁷ Thus the excessive duration of the *Eroica* that was once seen as its terminal flaw came to be heralded by Shumann as a "heavenly length." Likewise, the opening of the *5th*, which at first seemed like a demonic, repetitive, and obsessive rant against the knock of fate, found its first four notes translated into the letter V for victory in Morse Code.

In a modern world where the brook that inspired the *Pastoral 6th* is now flanked by high rent real estate, neither Adorno nor Japanese noise artists share Beethoven's optimism for reconciliation. Whereas Napoleon provided an enemy that could be fought directly, identity thinking and the tyranny of exchange value seem ubiquitous and immune to all weapons. Indeed so successful is this incursion that its subjects fail to realize their subjection, and therefore the most music can accomplish is the exposure of violence and domination as such. While the subordination of each member of the orchestra to the conductor exemplifies and affirms the authoritative integration of the otherwise isolated workers in industrial life and the arrangement of Indian performers enacts the ranks of the caste system, noise plays out the logic of such a world. While that seventh note of the *Eroica* sounded the warnings of invasion, noise narrates the hostile occupation of the world. Yet in a place already overrun with the noises of cellular phones, traffic, air conditioners, and the machines of six billion people, making a noise that could be heard as dissonant above such an already dissonant din becomes a project worthy of the artist.

With art having been stripped of its communicative powers during its excommunication from cognition, it must express its "second-order truth about first order-truth" along a different register.⁴⁸ In response to Romanticism, where all art followed literature by attempting to convey a message, the avant-garde fought off the infusion of ideology into its works by making itself into a site where no meaning could be inscribed.⁴⁹ In lyric poetry, the work is chased back into its medium in search of pure language free from the ideology that accompanies discursive communication. At the historical moment when "the contradiction between poetic and communicative language reached an extreme, lyric poetry became a game in which one goes for broke."⁵⁰ Beckett similarly longed for ideology-free discourse. *Endgame*, Adorno writes citing Beckett, "is a 'desecration of silence' wishing it were possible to restore that silence."⁵¹ *Endgame* does all it can to block its own meaning as it undertakes a self-unraveling whereby "[c]ommunication, the universal law of the cliché, proclaims that there is no communication any more."⁵² Hamm and Clov speak in the "second language of those who have fallen silent, an agglomeration of insolent phrases, pseudo-logical connections, and words galvanized into trademarks, the desolate echo of the world of advertisement" where "human beings' words and sentences have swollen up within their own mouths. . . ."⁵³ Despite the vigilance of these attempts, the work cannot leave behind the aporia riddling all critiques of representation: "that even where language tends to reduce itself to pure sound, it cannot divest itself of its semantic element, cannot become purely mimetic or gestural, just as forms of painting that are emancipated from objective representation cannot completely free themselves of resemblance to material objects."⁵⁴ Art necessarily participates in the subsumption and domination rampant in the culture of identity thinking writ large, but in the aesthetic act it lobbies a protest against its own complicity in these practices.⁵⁵ Art cannot express the inexpressible, as Romanticism would have us believe, and so it instead dramatizes its own "groping in the dark."⁵⁶ Art sacrifices the non-identical in order to preserve its memory, and grieves this loss: "The grief that art expresses results from that fact that it realizes unreal reconciliation at the expense of real reconciliation. All that art is capable of is to grieve for the sacrifice it makes, which is the self-sacrifice of art in the state of powerlessness."⁵⁷

Schoenberg has done much to prepare us for noise by dismantling the standing regime of tones, utilizing alternate pitches, blurring the distinction between consonance and dissonance, and reducing harmonics to mere simultaneity. Yet Schoenberg's method, the formal, mathematical twelve tone technique, like the Enlightenment, "represents a process of relentless subjectification in which 'nothing may remain outside' the will of the composer."⁵⁸ Thus, concludes Simon Jarvis, Schoenberg's "relentless extension of this musical domination becomes a critique of the real advance of the domination of nature."⁵⁹ With both *Boredoms* and *Masonna*, on the other hand, we sense that the noise might be fighting back against its organization. Each particular sound demands its release from the convention that holds it, and we hear the very struggle of material. The work does all it can to not be art, transgressing every available aesthetic norm in order to direct our attention to the material itself. Paradoxically, it is the work's success, i.e. its achievement of the status of art, that marks its failure in becoming a real, free, particular thing. According to J.M. Bernstein, therefore, "modernist art must insinuate its desire to be more than art; it must include within itself a moment of anti-art, a moment in which art is risked for the sake of what art promises."⁶⁰ When music abandons storytelling and representation, the state of its medium becomes its content, and as it has been said that opera and poetry are best appreciated in a language foreign to the listener since an alienation from content heightens awareness of form, alienation from form heightens awareness of material. *Masonna*, and occasionally *Boredoms*, deny the audience even the most basic musical form, rhythm, a practice grounded in the representation of the basic animating principles of nature: the beating of the heart or the motion of the planets. Hence we hear music without a pulse, and we wonder about the health of humans and nature. Occasionally *Masonna*'s "distortion," this term being used loosely because we do not know if some undistorted sound lies beneath, wanes until something resembling a human squeal emerges. So while the noise may not have a pulse, it still feels warm.

The source of the new aura of the work of art, rather than unblemished Romantic beauty, is now its sheer irreconcilability. The strangeness of the object evokes a response less like the fawning admiration of the beautiful and more like the suppliant terror of the sublime. "Shudder," Adorno's shorthand for this aesthetic fear, elicits "responses like real anxiety, a violent drawing back, an almost physical revulsion," and this description captures the reflex to turn off *Masonna* as soon as it reaches our ears.⁶¹ In an age of domesticated nature, shudder taps into a prehistoric fear of the mathematical and dynamic sublimity of nature. Shudder horrifies us by inducing "a sense of being touched by the other,"⁶² and the point of contact reaches us not in a long awaited embrace, but in a harrowing shock. Unlike the angelic offering of the beautiful, the hand that grabs us from behind in shudder will be disfigured by "the scars of damage and disruption. . . ."⁶³ Thus when we encounter the possibility of a suffering, gasping, breath beneath a cacophony of unnerving noise, fear and implication are the responses. We witness something suffering and feel offended, afraid, and complicitous. As Bernstein argues, a work of art means like a body suffering means, and when confronted with such an object we feel the need to assuage the suffering and fear being overtaken by whatever has inflicted the pain. The very distinction between witnessing suffering and undergoing suffering is threatened, and the forthrightly sadistic bands do all they can to reproduce the pain of the material in the

listener.⁶⁴ And to be clear, noise is not a signifier of pain, but rather the semblance of the object struggling to be free from pain.

The attainment of a truly critical capacity for art is still further problematized. Just as Kant claimed that "beauty is an object's form of purposiveness insofar as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose," Adorno makes the parallel claim that only "in so far as a social function may be predicated to work of art, it is the function of having no function."⁶⁵ If art were deployed in the resistance to identity thinking, "used" to further the cause, then art itself would become a tool, therefore canceling its critical import as non-purposive and autonomous. Pressed into service for the cause of non-instrumentality, art itself becomes an instrument, and the critique it supposedly offered is handcuffed in a performative contradiction. The work of art, if it is to offer an image of liberation from servitude to some other end, must appear autonomous--autonomous as such, simply free.

Although identity thinking is not specific to capitalism, art's critical seed takes purchase especially well during the expansion of capitalist markets. As in the general process of the Enlightenment described above where all things become meaningful only as they exemplify a concept, capitalist forces produce a collateral effect. When entities are reduced to their exchange value in order to enable transaction, they become mere instruments to carry their value in currency. As the generic embodiment of their cash value, any object can be liquidated and exchanged for something else. All goods become fungible, and nothing holds an inherent value that renders it sacred or incommensurable with other wares. Once all things implicitly carry a price, universal commodification is achieved. If nothing appeared to resist commodification the memory of the non-identical would disappear entirely, but for concrete historical and sociological reasons the work of art presents itself as radically particular, beyond conceptual exhaustion, and non-purposive, and thus intimates the non-identical. When all other things provide meaning only in relation to their exchange value, the work of art, simply by appearing to hold value beyond the rules of exchange, enables us to imagine something other than instrumentality, and thus "in so far as a social function may be predicated to work of art, it is the function of having no function."⁶⁶ The work of art makes a claim, in Kantian terms, to be in- and for-itself. For Kant, "everything has either a price or a dignity."⁶⁷ "If it has a price," he claims, "something else can be put in its place as an equivalent; if it is exalted above all prices and so admits no equivalent, then it has dignity." Art, as the image of the dignified non-instrumental object, occupies the office once held by the notion of the thing-in-itself. But the status of art's claim to be the noncommodifiable in-itself, however, remains at the level of aesthetic presentation: the work is not actually an in-itself as such, but rather the semblance of the in-itself, ultimately an illusion. The genius creates a replica of a genuine thing that truly cannot be instrumentalized. Art works provide a "second order modified existence to something which they themselves cannot be."⁶⁸ The worship of art as transcendent thus itself becomes a fetish, the fetish against commodity fetishism, and for Adorno, "art--the imago of the unexchangeable--verges on ideology because it makes us believe that there are things in the world that are not for exchange."⁶⁹ So powerful can art be that its imaginary nature is forgotten. Boredoms' critics, for example, seem convinced that something truly otherworldly has

been created via a "Big Bang" where "conventional rules of the universe do not apply."⁷⁰ Beethoven also mastered this trick, where in the *9th*, for example, he ushers in the first movement, in Alan Rich's words, "as if from a distant planet."⁷¹ The disparate and undefined opening seems to "share its own birth pangs" with the audience as its theme materialized from the "Beethovenian clouds" and gives the impression that something really new stands before us.⁷² But to believe that noise is something more than the illusion of art is itself a dangerous delusion that merely covers the real domination of the world.

The nature of art's guise as the in-itself is still more convoluted, for it is only able to perform its magical representation of non-commodifiability because it is in fact commodified. Originally bound in service to religion or political ideology and governed by their ritualistic practices, the commodification of aesthetic culture liberates art by allowing it to take up its own task. Only as a commodity can art get its criticism of universal commodification off the ground, since otherwise it would be bound up in religious iconography or political propaganda.⁷³ Here art's heteronomy is the condition of its autonomous appearance. Art's critical capacity arises not from an authentic non-commodifiability, but from hyper-commodification, by being absolutely devoid of use value. Art flaunts its sheer exchange value, its status as nothing more than cultural gravy, earning it the status of the "absolute commodity."⁷⁴ As "that social product which has utterly thrown off that illusion of being-for-society which commodities desperately try to keep alive," the absolute commodity need not pretend to be useful, unlike the gamut of other commodities that must advertise their faux usefulness to generate a demand for their own existence.⁷⁵ Ostentatiously salable in price and fetching exorbitant sums for its blatantly useless wares, art brings the question of exchange value and use value, true and false needs, to the fore. Just as at home beside a craps table at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas⁷⁶ as in the Sistine Chapel, masterworks parade their enigmatic value.

The realization that art's critique of commodification depends on commodification itself does not handcuff the potential critical power of noise, but rather provides an opportunity for the commodification of all of life to be scrutinized. Rock, which noise has to recognize as a primary ancestor, has always been such a two-headed monster of freedom with its image of the rock and roll rebel, on the one hand, and corporate control, on the other. But this duality now seems nearly unsustainable. So outlandish has the product become that paying twenty dollars for an hour of noise that levels a critique of exchange value must appear absurd. It is precisely in this moment of deep contradiction that the critical power of the work should take hold. The critical power of modern art thus operates on two fronts, both in the power of the concrete material and the absurdity of the commercial context in which we confront it. But the question remains whether objects such as noise and the contradiction of their cultural status still hold critical import, or whether they have been entirely consumed by the culture industry such that either the work produced lacks the power to reach us or its status as an absolute commodity becomes no more than commercial novelty.

The roster of artists peddled by one label alone, Britain's Relapse Records, provides ample evidence of the advanced state of the hardcore market and its ability to target all

varieties of consumers: Mortician fills its albums with horror film samples and drum machines, Kerovnian chants ancient Persian and Greek dialects in songs titled "As They Dug Their Way Out Into The Machinery Of Death," and Agoraphobic Nosebleed crams twenty-five tracks of speed metal into twenty two minutes, including "Bones in One Bag (Organs in Another)." There are now as many genres and categories of hardcore as there are flavors of ice cream. Even musicians from mainstream bands such as Slayer, The Melvins, and Faith No More have collaborated for commercial success in *Fantomas*, a discordant noise/a cappella/punk/thrash project. It has been suggested by *New Music*, among others, that noise promises "a whole new direction for rock music in general." Noise, it seems, has found a happy commercial home for its unhappy sounds.

The course of Japanese noise has been predictable. Boredoms' *Pop Tatari*, now an ancient eight years old, has been recognized as a "landmark album" that precipitated the success of bands like Melt Banana. Another Osaka noise outfit, Melt Banana distills the tropes of Japanese noise into a perfectly marketable product. Produced by Steve Albini, the legendary founder of Big Black who has produced and engineered the commercial success of Nirvana, Nine Inch Nails, and The Pixies, Melt Banana's *Charlie* offers a new set of outlandish noises, meticulously structured and compressed hardcore structure, and the old punk scream-stop-scream format. To this mix they add a female vocalist squeaking barely decipherable English words crashing into each other. Now many of the same qualities attributed to Boredoms or Masonna are now fawned over in feature "What's Hot" sections of the internet's largest music vendors, CDNow and Amazon. Advertisers describe the "super caffeinated," "painful," "irrational," "damaged logic," "zero-attention span rock," that sounds "utterly unlike anything heard to the human ear," and "translates into music in only the loosest sense of the word" as a necessary addition to one's collection.⁷⁷ Now these very qualities of being "the most extreme music pressed on a CD since Boredoms" where "all the elements of traditional rock are maxed out," are translated into sales pitches. By shouting "What the hell are they doing?" the distributors simultaneously call for a nomination for Best New Band on MTV. Just as Beethoven's innovation to begin the *9th* without a home key, what then was also considered simple noise, came to be a common Romantic trope in Wagner and Bruckner, the initial affront of noise is now well on its way to becoming common parlance. But in addition to consumers developing a taste for noise, Japanese noise has met its audience halfway. In addition to Melt Banana, which satisfies the young metal market, Cibo Matto has achieved commercial success in New York with slightly noisy but pretty dance music featuring hip sounding non-sequiturs sung like Luscious Jackson with a Japanese accent. And even Boredoms' latest album, *Vision Creation Newsun*, is altogether ordinary high-energy dance music with extended percussion jams as predictable as something from Phish or any other college-rock band. Critics still applaud the album, but now as "warm . . . cosmic slop."⁷⁸

We can accurately track the cultural genealogy of noise. For those weaned on heavy metal, hardcore, and punk, Japanese noise offers relief from the now utterly rote conventions of these genres. "Boredoms," writes *Puncture Magazine*, "were the first noticeable Japanese band to come over here and belligerently throw poop in the face of the self-important American post-punk scene . . . [and are] a terrifying reminder that most

American punk was by comparison either dreary, soft, or void of imagination."⁷⁹ What was once heard as impossibly heavy and unlistenable, for example the rampages of a band like Napalm Death, now seems hackneyed by comparison. The atrophication of music will not end with noise, for even as the ear grows accustomed to its ways, it loses its harrowing effect. Even what now seems to be the conclusion of music, anti-music, will itself be reproduced and formalized until the material dies entirely within its shell. All music, and all art, eventually becomes, if it is not already at its inception, a parody of itself. Only when this contradiction between the seemingly unexchangeable work and its blatant actual exchangeability becomes entirely evident does the critical power of art take root.⁸⁰

Perhaps just as telling is the theoretical treatment of works like those produced by Masonna. Despite my attempts to avoid simplistically casting noise as a signifier of pain and reinforcing the binary opposition between the identification of noise and terror, on the one hand, and music and beauty, on the other, I have drawn a distinction between *meaningful* noise and *meaningless* noise. Once the physical noise becomes conceptualized as meaningful, its brute particularity is muted and integrated back into the standard conceptual system. Regardless of any insight enabled by the conceptualization, the very process of making sense of the noise facilitates its commodification. The translation of the material from meaningless noise to meaningful noise is itself an inadvertent sales pitch made by the critic, both escorting noise into the market and broadening the tastes of consumers. Any such analysis is thus at inevitable cross-purposes, but fortunately the import of the work does not reside in our attempt to understand it but in our confrontation with its refusal to be understood. Thus the metaphors we use to understand noise, thinking of it as without a pulse or otherwise alluding to human suffering, are merely anthropomorphic shadows we cast upon objects that we cannot directly cognize. The theorist can only hope that the gap between the work and the conception of it becomes more noticeable.

The question now seems to be where the art of sound can go from here. From an Adornonian perspective, noise held promise because of its emphasis on concrete materiality. Like monochrome painting, noise attempted to break its genre from its concepts in service of its medium. But when the very question of the identity of art becomes a question of the culture industry, when art's failures become its most effective advertisement, then the critical import of art may be at an end. In other words, the standard track for modernist works is to be perceived as strange and dissonant, then to be appreciated as somehow artistically meaningful, and then to slip into cliché. When these stages are conflated and the strange and dissonant is immediately taken for the cliché, then art never hints at anything beyond one-dimensional instrumental culture. The rate at which this process now unfolds is a signature of our information age. Thus when advertisers claim that if one plays Melt Banana "at any party, it's likely to incite a riot," we can only hope the rage will be directed back at the music industry.

But, again like painting, the power of the work remains particular and bound to the object itself. Thus it is only in the pre-signifying power of the aesthetic material itself that art can hold off its co-optation, and an object may still hit us in the gut before we can

raise our conceptual guard. If the material of art can reach us through its medium, in the case of Japanese noise through the particular noises, then we may imagine a world where things would be something more than fungible commodities for our use. Whether art can continue to criticize the commodification of particulars even from its enfranchised position and defiantly hold fast to the possibility of a non-exchangeable and incommensurable dignity remains to be seen--or perhaps heard.

Notes

* I thank Gregg Horowitz, Jay Bernstein, Stefan Sobolowski, Scott Bakker, Ray Brassier and Nicole Smith.

1 I thank Ray Brassier for this last description.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralische Sinne*, vol. 1 of *Samtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: 1980), 879-80 (cited in Peter Dews, "Adorno, Poststructuralism, and the Critique of Identity," in *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments*, ed. Jay Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4:108. For another discussion of Adorno's relation to Nietzsche's considerations of the concept in terms of the drive for self-preservation, see Albrecht Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity," in *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments*, ed. Jay Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4:29-33.

3 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (Continuum: New York, 1972), 7.

4 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 145.

5 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 84.

6 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 84.

7 For a beautifully concise account of Marxian commodification, see Gillian Rose, "How is Critical Theory Possible? Theodor W. Adorno and Concept Formation in Sociology," in *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments*, ed. Jay Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3:154.

8 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7.

[9](#) Gillian Rose, "How is Critical Theory Possible? Theodor W. Adorno and Concept Formation in Sociology," in *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments*, ed. Jay Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3:157.

[10](#) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 266-7.

[11](#) See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xv: "The point is rather that the Enlightenment must consider itself, if men are not to be wholly betrayed."

[12](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 88.

[13](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 104.

[14](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 190.

[15](#) Theodor Adorno, "Society," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 217.

[16](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 9.

[17](#) Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1974), 25.

[18](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 138.

[19](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 134. The "impotence and pliability of the masses grow with the quantitative increase in commodities allowed them," Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiv.

[20](#) See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 37:

Thinking objectifies itself to become an automatic, self-activating process; an impersonation of the machine that it produces itself so that ultimately the machine can replace it. Enlightenment has put aside the classical requirement of thinking about thought. . . . Mathematical procedure became, so to speak, the ritual of thinking. In spite of the axiomatic self-restriction, it establishes itself as necessary and objective: it turns thought into a thing, an instrument. . . .

[21](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 154.

[22](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 167.

[23](#) Even those moments we explicitly carve out to do anything but work, "amusement" or "leisure time," "developed from the primitive festival to the modern vacation," only change the venue for our commercial labour:

Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again. But at the same time mechanization has such power over a man's leisure and happiness, and so profoundly determines the manufacture of amusement goods, that his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself.

Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 137. See also Theodor Adorno, "Free Time," in *Critical Models: Inventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998), 167.

[24](#) This point precisely marks Habermas' point of departure from Adorno. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985).

[25](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xi-xii.

[26](#) Adorno, "Society," 270.

[27](#) Bernstein describes the centrality of Kant's three critiques to paths available to contemporary philosophy:

If one reads the [third] Critique as moderately successful in establishing the autonomy of the aesthetic domain, one will follow the trajectory of analytic philosophy and in its pursuit of truth-only cognition. Following this trajectory amounts to the uncritical acceptance of enlightened modernity. If one reads the Critique as the radical undoing of the categorial divisions between knowledge, morality and aesthetics, one will follow the trajectory of the continental tradition. Following this trajectory involves a critique of enlightened modernity.

Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1992), 7.

[28](#) Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 27.

[29](#) See Sara Manaugh, "Super Are," *Puncture Publications* (1999); "Super Are," *CMJ New Music Report* (1999).

[30](#) See "Pop Tatari," *CMJ New Music Report* (1993).

[31](#) A reviewer aptly describes this experience in Boredoms' *Super Are*, which begins with an

extended blitz of lead bottomed guitar rumbling, a lot like the baleful buildup at the beginning of a heavy metal concert, before the lights go up and the hair begins to fly. After a few minutes of this onslaught . . . it begins to sink in that Yamatsuka Eye et al. are giggling up their trick stuffed sleeves, goofing on the tired rock conventions and pointing to the inverse relationship between popular music's promise and its payoff.

Sara Manaugh, "Super Are."

[32](#) Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

[33](#) Susan Buck-Morss likens the "critical power of art" to a somatic experience that "hits you in the gut" and "resists predatory reason, precisely because it can't be stomached, gobbled up by the mind." "If experience leaves a non-digestible residue that won't go away," she continues, "that is food for critical cognition." Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics After the End of Art: Interview with Grant Kester," *Art Journal* 56 (1997): 38.

[34](#) Adorno describes the restricted access to aesthetic cognition in his "Fragment on Music," where music presents philosophy with evidence for cognition, but neither art nor philosophy can speak the truth outright:

Discursive language wished to express the absolute in a mediated way, and the absolute escapes it every turn, leaving each attempt behind in its finitude. Music touches the absolute directly, but the very moment it does so, the absolute is obscured, just as light that is too strong may blind the eye and prevent it from seeing what is perfectly visible.

Theodor Adorno, "Fragment on Music," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (1970), 16: 254.

[35](#) "Philosophy says what art cannot say," Adorno writes, "although it is art alone which is able to say it; by not saying it." Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 107; see also Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 244.

[36](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Univ. Minnesota Press, 1997), 10. Adorno himself had already noticed that modern art had "grown old." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 476. Bernstein's position on this question becomes more evident as *The Fate of Art* progresses. He begins pessimistically but indeterminately, claiming that "when art loses its critical capacity it ends, will end, for a second time." Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 5. He continues to resist sounding the death knell of art through page 189, choosing instead to lay bare the possibility that the critical capacity of art might be eclipsed by sociological conditions: "unless some concrete intimation of non-identity existed, some experience of non-identity possible, then reflection's work would be indistinguishable from phantasy; or better, there

would be no reflection. Reflection does continue, we are solicited by the non-identical, but noting guarantees this state of affairs. For complex historical reasons, modern autonomous art categorically performs (or performed) this work of solicitation." Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 189. After explaining the contingency of art's critical power, by the conclusion of the book Bernstein marks

the disappearance of art as a determinate negation of a reified social world: 'desubstantialization of art is not only a stage in the liquidation of art but the logical development of art.' The path of modern art is from a determinative to an abstract negation of the categorial structures of modernity. But abstract negation contains nothing to inhibit its turning into its opposite; which to a large extent is the fate that has befallen modernist art: it has become a token of what it originally refused. . . . Art's short history of determinate negation is the triumph of the very logic he philosophically opposes: dialectic is the ontology of the wrong state of things. . . . For Adorno, post-modernism's tendential overcoming of the gap between high art and the art of the culture industry is another version of the triumph of identity thinking because it does not provide for a substantial reintegration of universality and sensuous particularity. . . . Over the past two decades, art's liquidation has led to its critical moment to pass to philosophy.

Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 263-64.

[37](#) Theodor Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes To Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 1:45.

[38](#) Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," 1:37.

[39](#) Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," 1:39.

[40](#) Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," 1:39-40: "While the turning inward of lyric poetry seems like a moment of individualism, this withdrawal into the I "is socially motivated behind the author's back."

[41](#) Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," 1:39-40.

[42](#) Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," 1:43.

[43](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

[44](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 48.

[45](#) Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 210: "Art would not be enigmatic if things were otherwise outside art. Art's purposiveness without purpose is enigmatic because purpose has itself

become purposeless, production for exchange without end, while artistic practice itself still has the idea of the 'work', a praxial production, before it."

[46](#) But see Adorno's claim that Beethoven's late work makes the impossibility of reconciliation explicit: "music becomes aware of the limits of its movement--of the impossibility of sublating its premise by the force of its own logic. The late style is the leap into another domain." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Univ. Minnesota Press, 1997).

[47](#) Alan Rich characterizes this strategy in the *9th*, Beethoven brings "an orchestra to an emotional crisis beyond which it could not proceed unaided- and then enlists the power of the human voice to provide that aid." Alan Rich, *Beethoven and Beyond* (New York: Voyager, 1994), 29.

[48](#) Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 5.

[49](#) Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986).

[50](#) Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," 44.

[51](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 195.

[52](#) Theodor Adorno, "Trying to Understand Endgame," in *Notes To Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 1:263.

[53](#) Adorno, "Trying to Understand Endgame," 262.

[54](#) Adorno, "Trying to Understand Endgame," 262.

[55](#) In Adorno's words, "[a]rt is rationality which criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Univ. Minnesota Press, 1997), 55.

[56](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 168.

[57](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 78.

[58](#) Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1998), 136.

[59](#) Jarvis, *Adorno*, 136 (1998).

[60](#) Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 248. This "insinuation," more specifically, is the suffering of material within the netherworld of art, and this articulated pain in art renders it invaluable to Adorno's project, in which "the need to let suffering become eloquent is the

condition of all truth." Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1992), 17-18.

[61](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 26.

[62](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 455; see also Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 222: "Shudder, within which subjectivity is already stirring, without yet existing, is the touch of the other."

[63](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 34.

[64](#) See Anal Cunt, whose album titles include *I like it When You Die*, *Everyone Should Be Killed*, *It Just Gets Worse*, and *40 More Reasons to Hate Us*.

[65](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Univ. Minnesota Press, 1997), 336.

[66](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Univ. Minnesota Press, 1997), 336.

[67](#) Immanuel Kant, *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H.J. Patton (London: Hutchinson, 1948), 96.

[68](#) Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 160.

[69](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 158; see also Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 158: "The use value of art, its mode of being, is treated as a fetish; and the fetish, the work's social rating (misinterpreted as its artistic status) becomes its use value--the only quality which is enjoyed."

[70](#) "Pop Tatari," *CMJ New Music Report* (1993).

[71](#) Rich, *Beethoven and Beyond*, 29.

[72](#) Rich, *Beethoven and Beyond*, 29.

[73](#) See Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 206-212:

Art as a separate sphere was always only possible in a bourgeois society. Even as a negation of that social purposiveness which is spreading through the market, its freedom remains essentially bound up with the premise of a commodity economy. Pure works of art which deny the commodity society by the very fact that they obey their own law were always wares all the same.

[74](#) Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 121: "Movies and radio no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce." See also Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 157.

[75](#) As "that social product which has utterly thrown off that illusion of being-for-society which commodities desperately try to keep alive," the absolute commodity need not pretend to be useful, unlike the gamut of other commodities that must advertise their faux usefulness to generate a demand for their own existence. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Univ. Minnesota Press, 1997), 236.

[76](#) The Bellagio Hotel, opened in 1998, is casino tycoon Steve Wynn's fourth gaming hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. In addition to the large-scale high glitz that accompanies all of the modern Las Vegas casinos, including monstrous replicas of the Eiffel Tower, the Campanile of San Marco, the Great Pyramid, and the New York skyline with a rollercoaster weaving between the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings, the Bellagio features a high profile gallery housing Wynn's private collection. A neon billboard in front of the hotel, advertising "Van Gogh, Monet, Cézanne and Picasso appearing nightly at the gallery," lures in hoards despite the twelve dollar charge, and after enduring the line for admission guests are treated to truly accomplished works such as Picasso's *Portrait of Dora Maar*, Van Gogh's *Entrance to a Quarry*, Monet's *Water-Lily Pond with Bridge*, and Cézanne's *Portrait of a Woman*. More Picassos, in Wynn's words "decorative Picassos--you know, nothing over three million," can be viewed with the price of dinner in the hotel's "Picasso" Restaurant. See Tom Rosenthal, "Picasso Plays Las Vegas: High Culture or Bad Taste? Tom Rosenthal Visits Steve Wynn's Astonishing Casino-cum-gallery," *The London Daily Telegraph*, 26 June, 1999, 7.

[77](#) David McGurgan, "The Schizophrenic Sounds of Melt Banana," *CDNow Feature* (1999).

[78](#) Daniel Chamberlin, "Vision Creation Newsun," *URB Magazine*.

[79](#) Jon Dolan, "Super Roots 6," *CMJ New Music Report* (1996).

[80](#) Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 123: "Art must, through its form [as absolute commodity], on behalf of the unexchangeable, conduct the exchangeable to a critical self-consciousness," making the most of the remaining implicit critical import.