

MAIN SECTION

The Form of Happiness. Some Remarks on Art, Mimesis and Technology in the Wake of Adorno's Conception of Natural Beauty

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the relationship between the concepts of mimesis, technology and art in Adorno, in the light of some epistemological implications of the Anthropocene. In order to do so, it starts from the problematic concept of natural beauty, by showing its internal dialectic between social and natural moments. Then, an interpretation of the work of art is proposed, which identifies its natural moment in the peculiar kind of productive praxis that takes place within it. Art in this sense is a mimetic technology that does not only imitate nature as an object, but also imitates the productive process of nature. Finally, on the basis of this mimetic moment, the article analyses the emancipatory potential of art, interpreted as a form of transformative praxis, which modifies the relationship between technology and nature.

KEYWORDS

Theodor W. Adorno, Natural Beauty, Artwork, Technology, Mimesis

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Works of art are thus defined as models of a nature that does not await the day, and thus does not await judgment day either; they are defined as models of a nature that is neither the staging ground of history nor a human domicile.

Walter Benjamin, Letter to Florens Christian Rang, December 9, 1923

I. Anthropocene and Adorno's program for a "natural history"

The concept of the Anthropocene has been defined in many ways. Depending on which aspect is focused, the accent is placed on the geological and natural dimension,¹ or on the specifically social and historical dimension of the phenomenon (which may lead to questioning its very definition)². It is not necessary to adopt a unilateral position, since the specificity of the concept of the Anthropocene may lie precisely in the fact that it challenges the "modern" dichotomy between society and nature, as well as any presumption to privilege one aspect over the other. Within the actual process of climate change, triggered by human productive activity, it is not possible (if it ever was) to clearly distinguish social and cultural moments from natural and environmental ones. In facing the Anthropocene, "we are gradually forced to redistribute entirely what had formerly been called natural and what had been called social or symbolic": Anthropocene forces us not simply to "go beyond" this division, or to reconcile "nature and society into a larger system that would be unified by one or the other", but rather to "circumvent" this distinction "entirely".³ If in the Western metaphysical tradition nature was "the basic word that designates fundamental relations that Western historical man has to beings, *both to himself and to beings other than himself*",⁴ the dynamic of the Anthropocene forces us to reconsider this approach. We are not anymore in the condition neither to define society (and ourselves as "human") in opposition to nature, nor to determine nature as opposed to society. As Bruno Latour puts it, "where we were dealing earlier with a 'natural' phenomenon, at every point now we meet the 'Anthropos' [...] and, wherever we follow human footprints, we discover modes of relating to things that had formerly been located in the field of nature".⁵ The entire theoretical debate concerning the Anthropocene is essentially focused on reconsidering the dichotomy between history and nature, i.e. between human agency and

1 Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, 'Defining the Anthropocene', *Nature* 519 (March 2015): 171–80, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258>.

2 Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

3 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 120.

4 Martin Heidegger, 'On the Being and Conception of Φύσις in Aristotle's Physics B, 1', *Man and World* 9, no. 3 (1976): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01249371> [my emphasis].

5 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 120.

natural processes. In Chakrabarty's words, "anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history".⁶

This need to overcome the dichotomy between nature and culture repeats almost verbatim the philosophical project that Theodor W. Adorno explained in 1932 in *The Idea of Natural History*:⁷ the explicit goal that Adorno made clear at the very opening of this conference was namely that of "pushing" the concepts of "nature and history [...] to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference".⁸ The idea of "natural history", which Adorno presents as an alternative to the interpretation of history and nature as ontological structures, consists precisely in a dialectical understanding of their "concrete unity".⁹ Its methodological maxim is "to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature".¹⁰

In order to fully understand the relationship between Adorno's position and the methodological turn implied by the Anthropocene, it is necessary to precisely distinguish the general process of anthropization of the environment from the specific process of integration between nature and culture that characterizes the Anthropocene. In other words, in order to understand the specific exploitative relationship to nature that characterizes our current form of life and production it is necessary to distinguish it from the more general process of anthropization. As we will see, in fact, it is only from the specific exploitative relationship that characterizes the Anthropocene that it is possible to understand also how artworks and the aesthetic experiences may play a crucial role in this context.

We can start by noting that with the concept of anthropization we indicate a much broader and general process than the Anthropocene: a process, which follows the appearance of the human species on earth. It designates the general fact that human productive and reproductive activity, as well as any other forms of animal life, affects the environment – even in a destructive way. The anthropization has significantly "reshaped ecosystems", "altered their functioning" and "changed the planet", but is the outcome of "a long history of co-evolution between humans and non-humans

6 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (January 2009): 201, <https://doi.org/10.1086/596640>.

7 Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History', trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* 1984, no. 60 (1 July 1984): 111–24, <https://doi.org/10.3817/0684060111>; See also Anders S. Johansson, 'Why Art? : The Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, and Adorno's Concept of Natural Beauty', *Adorno Studies* 3, no. 1 (2019): 66.

8 Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History', 111.

9 *Ibid.*, 117.

10 *Ibid.* See Mario Farina, 'Adorno e l'idea della storia naturale', *Intersezioni. Rivista di storia delle idee*, no. 2 (2018): 239–64, esp. 251 ff, <https://doi.org/10.1404/90481>.

that has proceeded uninterrupted for the last 200,000 years".¹¹ From a methodological point of view, the recognition of anthropization simply implies that it is not possible to strictly distinguish between "anthroposphere biosphere, and geosphere".¹² At first glance, the concept of the Anthropocene seems to share the same characteristics. As already mentioned, the concept of Anthropocene forces us to consider the three spheres of human, biological and geological activities in a unified perspective; moreover it seems to describe the same anthropological impact on the environment, designated by the anthropization. And yet it indicates a radically different phenomenon, not only in quantitative but also in qualitative terms. The Anthropocene not only "denotes a more global, systemic effect", but it can also be considered as a specific declination of a more general process, related to a specific mode of production and to a specific relationship between nature and human. The fact that its beginning is usually dated between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries tells us that the Anthropocene has a special relationship with modernity. Anthropocene "may become the most pertinent philosophical, religious, anthropological, and [...] political concept for beginning to turn away for good from the notions of 'Modern' and 'modernity'",¹³ precisely because it describes the very process of "modernization" from a non-modern point of view. For our argumentative purposes, we can define modernity in very general terms as a historical epoch characterized by two distinct and yet simultaneous processes: the affirmation of the capitalist mode of production on the one hand, and the imposition of the scientific-naturalistic interpretation of the world on the other. From an epistemological point of view, modernity establishes a radical distinction between the human subject and the natural object. As Descola puts it, the naturalistic view of the moderns is "founded on the claim, unprecedented in all the history of humanity, that there is a difference in kind between humans and non-humans".¹⁴ Fighting against the mythical, magical interpretation of the natural world, in which it has always seen a form of "anthropomorphism, the projection of subjective properties onto nature",¹⁵ modernity transforms nature into "mere objectivity".¹⁶ As is well known, the connection between this process of objectification of nature accomplished by the natural sciences and that of material domination and value extraction exerted by the capitalist mode of production, is emphasized by Adorno and Horkheimer: "technology is the essence" of modern "knowledge", but it aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method,

11 Philippe Descola, 'Humain, trop humain', *Esprit*, no. 12 (2015): 11, <https://doi.org/10.3917/espri.1512.0008>.

12 Ibid.

13 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 116.

14 Descola, 'Humain, trop humain', 15.

15 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 4.

16 Ibid., 6.

exploitation of the labor of others, capital".¹⁷ Capitalism requires a very particular integration of nature within its production process: on the one hand, nature remains the source of all value; on the other hand, nature, as living labor, is assumed exclusively as passive material of the production process. Nature is both the condition of possibility implicit in the process of production and its repressed (*verdrängte*) moment. The material level of production and the epistemological level of science are different aspect of the same form of life: on the productive level, nature is the necessary material of all work activity and the source of all value; this corresponds, on an epistemological level, to the reduction of nature to an indeterminate and passive entity, which is no less a presupposition of all experience. The rigid distinction between the human domain of the spirit on the one hand, and the realm of nature on the other, is thus functional to achieve the subsumption of the latter into the productive process.

It is precisely on the basis of this philosophical-historical context that it becomes possible to understand the qualitative difference between anthropization and Anthropocene: the Anthropocene, as an outcome of capitalist modernity, differs from the more general process of anthropization precisely because of its specific way to incorporate nature within the production process. The decoupling between exchange value and use value and the primacy of the former over the latter, have made possible to render everything "convertible into anything else through the equalizing power of money"; this, in turn, has generated the "great illusion of the last two hundred years: the idea that nature is an infinite resource, allowing infinite economic growth based on infinite technological advances".¹⁸ The Anthropocene is the result of a civilization that reduces nature to the material of an infinite process of valorization. Nature, from active subject, becomes purely passive object; human reason, from the faculty of understanding and setting rational ends becomes purely instrumental reason.

In order to understand the value of aesthetic practices and experiences with regard to this situation, I start from their definition in Adorno, for he defines aesthetic experience and artistic practice precisely in contrast to the logic we have already outlined. As we shall see, the artwork, by suspending the reified relationship between material and labor, allows to experience nature and to revoke the relationship of exploitation. The early program for a "natural history", which aimed to grasp the concrete unity of nature and history, is therefore substantiated in the late aesthetic elaboration Adorno's. The aesthetic experience, in fact, allows us to grasp nature as history and history as nature and to rearticulate their relationship.

17 Ibid., 2.

18 Descola, 'Humain, trop humain', 16.

II. The experience of nature through the artwork

As we have seen, a double movement characterizes the historical condition of the Anthropocene: on the one hand, nature is negatively defined in relation to the human, as its absolute otherness; on the other hand – and thanks to this disqualification – nature is totally integrated as passive material within the production process. In this situation, it is not possible to experience nature as “first nature”. Of course, we can visit a natural reserve, but the relationship that we will experience here with “nature” will not only be mediated by society (a fact that always occurs within all anthropization processes): moreover, it will be constructed by artificially suspending the specific social relationship that our culture and our mode of production entertains with “nature”. In other words, to make something like “first nature” possible it is necessary not only to circumscribe an “environment” defined as “natural”, but to artificially maintain this delimitation precisely through the same means that allow the exploitation of the natural element. The naturality of the nature reserve is artificially constructed: it is a product in every sense – not least in that of being a commodity. The experience of nature that takes place there is reified, because reified is the practical, material relationship that makes it possible. Even in this case, nature is reduced to a passive object, a material of aesthetic consumption.

Adorno proves to be fully aware of this fact. His critique of the concept of natural beauty¹⁹ is grounded on the recognition that “in every particular aesthetic experience of nature the social whole is lodged”:²⁰

Society not only provides the schemata of perception but peremptorily determines what nature means through contrast and similarity. Experience of nature is coconstituted by the capacity of determinate negation. With the expansion of technique and, even more important, the total expansion of the exchange principle, natural beauty increasingly fulfills a contrasting function and is thus integrated into the reified world it opposes.²¹

Yet, to make explicit the ideological character of natural beauty, “does not amount to the condemnation of the category of natural beauty *tout court*”.²² The fact that nature is “coconstituted” by society as its determined negation, does not mean that nature is “constructed” by society. The reduction of nature to a social construct would reflect the dominant ideology, which considers nature as “posed” by man, at his disposal; Similarly, its hypostatization to absolute otherness would also be false; Its being the result of a determinate negation, on the contrary, indicates a dialectical relationship toward the false totality. In the age of the Anthropocene, nature emerges

19 For a reading of the natural beauty in Adorno see Giovanni Matteucci, *L'artificio estetico: moda e bello naturale in Simmel e Adorno* (Milano: Mimesis, 2012).

20 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002), 68.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 69.

thus as internal contradiction of the social totality that points to transcend its false universality. The fact that nature may be experienced only as a determinate negation of social totality implies that its image – as natural beauty – should be considered “the allegory of this beyond in spite of its mediation through social immanence”.²³ It is important to emphasize that, according to Adorno, nature cannot be restored through a return to the past, to the origin. Nature manifests itself not as the primordial origin, but as the promise of a future reconciliation.

It is precisely from this double character of nature, irreducible to human production but internally mediated by the latter, that it is possible to understand the essential link between nature and artworks. If nature cannot be experienced as immediacy in its purity, the experience of it finds refuge precisely in the artwork. Thanks to the natural element, the artwork appears as something that, although it is the product of human work, is at the same time “something not made by human beings”.²⁴ The natural moment represents in it the “incomprehensible” enigma, “that questioningly awaits its solution”.²⁵ “Above all else it is this double character of natural beauty that has been conferred on art”.²⁶ The artwork shares with the natural beauty the same double character: on the one hand, it is history – i.e. the product of human production – on the other hand, it is nature, irreducible to human intention. The artwork is therefore capable of manifesting nature in its being socially mediated. This is why it also represents the privileged gateway to experience nature in general. However, we have to clarify how it is able to do that.

The experience of natural beauty is the reversion of the relationship of dominion over the natural element: “nature, as appearing beauty, is not perceived as an object of action”.²⁷ By suspending the primacy of instrumental reason, the artwork is able to include a natural moment and to maintain the autonomy of the latter as aesthetic appearance. “The experience of natural beauty”, as “entirely distinct from the domination of nature”²⁸ is thus possible within the mediation offered by the artwork. In this sense, “art is not the imitation of nature but the imitation of natural beauty”.²⁹ for it is only through the aesthetic suspension of exploitative activities that it is possible to revoke the relationship of dominion over nature. In artwork nature is liberated only within the aesthetic field; and only insofar as the work is performed in this aesthetic field does it become the image of a different praxis. In a recent article, Anders S. Johansson explained how the artwork in Adorno “contains another compartment

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 70.

25 Ibid., 71.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 65.

28 Ibid., 66.

29 Ibid., 71.

than the *Naturbeherrschung*”, by showing that it “provides [...] a possibility of an action that is also a passivity”.³⁰ The contemplative moment, proper to the aesthetic experience, represents here the central element for understanding how thanks to the artwork is made possible the revocation of the relationship of dominion over nature. Now it is necessary to understand in a more determined way the nature of this relationship. Such a relationship, in fact, cannot be conceptually defined only by the presence of an aesthetic-contemplative moment, understood as a moment of passivity of the subject. In this case, in fact, the determination of the practical, productive relationship with nature specific of the artwork would be subordinated to its simple revocation in contemplation. In other words, the diversity of the relationship toward nature would be defined without determining its content as praxis, but simply associating it with an antithetical moment of passivity. As such, the relationship with nature would remain unaltered, although mitigated by the contemplative moment opposed to it. Instead, in order not to fall back on a passive interpretation of aesthetic experience and artistic praxis, it is necessary to determine in what sense artistic praxis is able, as *practical relation to nature*, to revoke the relation of domination and exploitation of nature. The artwork cannot consist in a simple juxtaposition of contemplation and production, which maintains both moments without transforming them: rather it represents their synthesis, in the sense that it simultaneously transforms their essence. The artwork is not activity *and* contemplation, but a *different kind* of activity and contemplation. The experience of nature made possible by the artwork, in fact, can only be true if it does express nature not as an object, as a passive material (according to the instrumental rationality) but as an active power, as a *subject*. For this reason, it is necessary to define the practical, productive activity specific of the artwork, not negatively by opposing it to the contemplative moment, but positively.

III. Art as production

Adorno tells us that the natural moment expresses itself in “art’s renunciation of any usefulness whatever”.³¹ Adorno thus establishes a direct connection between the moment of nature’s expression in the artwork and the renunciation of the latter to serve as instrument. As we have already mentioned, the suspension of the instrumental approach is made possible by the autonomy of the aesthetic field: for the artwork “nature is exclusively appearance, never the stuff of labor and the reproduction of life”.³² Nevertheless, artistic production process is a technical and manipulative procedure: art is, in this sense, part of the process of “rationalization”. Adorno is very clear about it: “this [rationalization] is the source of all of

30 Johansson, ‘Why Art?’, 74.

31 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 74.

32 *Ibid.*, 65.

art's means and methods of production".³³ Art consequentially entertain a special relationship whit technology ("technique [...] inheres in this ideology as much as it threatens it")³⁴ as much as with rationality. The rationality of art coincides with the constructive moment, which results in the "the dissolution of materials and their subordination to an imposed unity":³⁵ "rationality in the artwork is the unity-founding, organizing element, not unrelated to the rationality that governs externally".³⁶ In this sense, art does not suspend instrumental rationality. On the contrary, art radicalizes it, by exhibiting the irrationality of an absolutely instrumental rationality: "for the aim of all rationality – the quintessence of the means for dominating nature – would have to be something other than means, hence something not rational".³⁷ Moreover, the imposition of unity exercised by art does not "repress" the material, reducing it to a means, instead it draws from it its own principle, its own formal law, making construction and expression coincide: "artworks do not repress; through expression they help to make present to consciousness the diffuse and elusive without [...] 'rationalization'".³⁸ Thanks to the aesthetic field constructed by the artwork, rationality expresses itself here as form, that is to say as "nonviolent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as what it is in its divergences and contradictions".³⁹ The aesthetic production of art is still "a type of productive labor modeled on material labor":⁴⁰ a labor that, however, organizes its own material according to the material itself, making the latter its own working principle. A work that, in other words, handles the material as an end, and not as a means. The synthesis imposed by human labor and rationality, is here "not simply forced on its elements", i.e. on the material; "rather, it recapitulates that in which these elements communicate with one another; thus *the synthesis is itself a product of otherness*".⁴¹ In other words, synthesis is obtained by artworks not through the primacy of the spirit over nature, but "in the spirit-distant material dimension of works, in that in which synthesis is active".⁴²

This rearticulation of the relationship between labor and its material enables the artistic activity to prefigure a different relationship between human and nature. Art in this sense is not only an aesthetic experience of nature as mediated through human production: it is at the same time a different *practical relation* to nature. In this sense, it is possible to interpret

33 Ibid., 54.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 57.

36 Ibid., 55.

37 Ibid., 54.

38 Ibid., 55.

39 Ibid., 143.

40 Ibid., 77.

41 Ibid., 7 [my emphasis].

42 Ibid.

the works of art as *practical objects*, insofar as “they provoke us to negotiate new practices”: “in art, objects provoke various activities by means of which humans seek to define (or redefine) the rest of their activities”.⁴³ In my reading, artworks provoke such activities not just because they are a “practice that is self-determined”, intertwined with self-reflection and “interpretative practices”,⁴⁴ but primarily because of the peculiar relation that they establish between human productive activity (labor) and its material (nature): in art labor is neither directed to the satisfaction of a need, nor to a particular, instrumental goal, but, so to speak, it is carried out for the sake of the material itself. The formal synthesis, brought by labor over its material, is directed to let the material to express itself. Because of this, “the process enacted internally by each and every artwork works back on society as the model of a possible praxis in which something on the order of a collective subject is constituted”.⁴⁵

In order to clarify the artwork as transformative practice and, most importantly as alternative model of production in the context of Anthropocene, we have to trace back its structure within the frame of the peculiar rationality emerged with the modernity, characterized by the autonomization of art, as distinguished from the broader concept of *τέχνη*. As we shall see, the renounce to the mimetic element of *τέχνη* is an essential step for establishing technology as the model of rationality itself.⁴⁶

IV. The mimesis and form of happiness

According to an interpretation essentially shared by Adorno (and Horkheimer), the modern productive and technical rationality is based on the dismissal of the mimetic character of the *τέχνη*⁴⁷ and on the consequent decoupling between mimetic and mechanical arts. As we have already seen, the new rationality embodied in modern technology is achieved by reducing natural phenomena to passive objects devoid of any intrinsic agency. Whereas “magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object”,⁴⁸ modern, enlightened rationality “is altogether

43 Georg W. Bertram, *Art as Human Practice: An Aesthetics*, trans. Nathan Ross (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 159, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350063174>.

44 Ibid., 160.

45 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 242 (my emphasis).

46 See Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments*, 2.

47 For what follows see Hans Blumenberg, “Imitation of Nature”: Toward a Prehistory of the Idea of the Creative Being’, trans. Anna Wertz, *Qui Parle* 12, no. 1 (1 June 2000): 17–54, <https://doi.org/10.1215/quiparle.12.1.17>.

48 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments*, 7.

the demythologization of mimetic modes of procedure".⁴⁹ In this sense, in the modernity "art is a refuge for mimetic comportment",⁵⁰ or to put it differently, the attempt to preserve the mimetic, imitative character of τέχνη. Classically, what distinguishes art from technology is considered the imitation of nature as an *object* of representation: art is mimetic in the sense that it imitates natural objects in their aesthetical appearance. But art's mimetic approach toward nature is not limited to its *representative* motives: in the Anthropocene epoch and after the eclipse of the figurative character of artworks it is now possible (and necessary) to focus on the productive and practical dimension of mimetic art. It is art's operative procedure that, in this case, should be interpreted as the "refuge" of the mimetic dimension: a mimetic dimension, which marks technology's productivity from the very beginning⁵¹ and that, according to Adorno represent the first emergence of rational procedures. As is well known, for Adorno the mimetic moment is not opposed as such to domination. On the contrary, it represents its presupposition and one of its preparatory stages: mimesis shares with rationalization precisely the same attempt to dominate natural forces.⁵² And yet, by exercising its dominion through imitation, mimesis implies a unity of subject and object that precedes their separation in the form of objectification and thus manifests their "affinity".⁵³ In fact, "the mimetic element of knowledge" expresses "the element of elective affinity between the knower and the known",⁵⁴ through which the human being experiences itself as nature. The experience of this affinity is the necessary presupposition to transcend both the submission of human being and the one of nature. It is in fact as *nature* that man becomes the object of exploitation. The "denial of nature in the human being for the sake of mastery over extrahuman nature and over other human beings"⁵⁵ implies that only

the self which, after the methodical extirpation of all natural traces as mythological, was no longer supposed to be either a body or blood or a soul or even a natural ego but was sublimated into a transcendental or logical subject, formed the

49 Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1982), 142. "The mimetic motif", so continues Adorno's argument, "survives in reflection on cognition. This is perhaps not simply an archaic holdover, but is rather due to the fact that cognition itself cannot be conceived without the supplement of mimesis, however that may be sublimated. Without mimesis, the break between subject and object would be absolute and cognition impossible".

50 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 53.

51 See Gianni Vattimo, 'Il concetto di fare in Aristotele', in *Opere complete I. Ermeneutica* tomo 1 (Milano: Meltemi, 2007), 39ff. The attention to these aspects of the Greek concept of τέχνη is crucial in Benjamin's understanding of the "the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction". See Fabrizio Desideri, 'The Mimetic Bond: Benjamin and the Question of Technology', in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. Andrew E. Benjamin (London ; New York: Continuum, 2005), 108–20.

52 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments*, 6ff.

53 On the concept of "affinity" see Matteucci, *L'artificio estetico*, 129 ff.

54 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973), 45.

55 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments*, 42.

reference point of reason, the legislating authority of action.⁵⁶

The split between empirical, natural individuality and abstract transcendental subject pointed to the necessary subordination of the former to the latter.⁵⁷ Man, as a natural being, becomes enslaved to the same abstractions that allow the dominion over nature. Thus, the recognition of the affinity between human being and nature is the presupposition of their mutual liberation: the emancipation of nature passes through that of the human being and vice versa.⁵⁸

Now this affinity emerges through artistic practice, insofar as here a mimetic, *but not representative*, kind of *productive praxis*⁵⁹ to nature is enacted. The utopia of art is therefore not so much to imitate nature as object of representation, but rather to imitate nature as subject, that is, as living force, as autonomous process of production and generation. In his influential monograph, Bernstein linked this revival of non-anthropocentric teleological thinking to a rehabilitation of the fundamental insight of animism: “The idea of things having ends ‘for themselves’.”⁶⁰ To consider nature as agent thus means to overcome not only “the split between animate and inanimate”, but also “the division of subject and object is prefigured in it”.⁶¹ In this sense, mimesis does not *represent* nature as object, but *enact* it as agentic subject. Strictly speaking, “the mimesis of artworks is their resemblance to themselves”⁶² and not to nature, since it does not consider the latter as an object, but as an autonomous productive process that the artworks re-enact. “The excess beyond phenomenal appearing” that artwork’s appearance entails, “relates to what has powers of resistance to the subject and its own ends, possesses a ‘life’ of its own”.⁶³

In artistic productive praxis, natural and technical processes appear to be mutually intertwined through mimetic procedures. The artwork in the age of the Anthropocene can emerge as the attempt to reactivate the mimetic

56 Ibid., 22.

57 See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘On Subject and Object’, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford Introduction by Lydia Goehr (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 248: “The doctrine of the transcendental subject faithfully discloses the precedence of the abstract, rational relations”.

58 See Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: Verso Books, 2013).

59 Art as reconciled production would simultaneously overcome of the aristotelian split between production and action: that is, it would be a production that is simultaneously an action, insofar as it makes happiness its immanent end. See Henry W. Pickford, ‘Poiësis, Praxis, Aisthesis: Remarks on Aristotle and Marx’, in *Aesthetic Marx*, ed. Samir Gandesha and Johan Hartle (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 23–48.

60 Jay M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 192, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139164276>.

61 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments*, 11.

62 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 104.

63 Bernstein, *Adorno*, 193. For a critique of Bernstein’s identification of nature and life see Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (London/New York: Routledge, 2014), 42 ff, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315730141>.

tension out of τέχνη, understood as the consummation (perficere)⁶⁴ of nature. It is in this sense, that Benjamin defines art as the “perfecting mimesis” (*vollendende Mimesis*), namely as “a suggested improvement on nature: an imitation [*Nachmachen*] whose most hidden depths are a demonstration [*Vormachen*]”.⁶⁵ Here Benjamin seems to recall the famous passage in *Protrepticus*, where Aristotle writes: “nature does not imitate the art, but it imitates nature, and it exists to help by filling in even what nature has omitted”. In the context of modern rationalization, in which the indefinite enhancement of the means has lost any τέλος, artistic “perfecting mimesis” inevitably implies the re-appropriation of the ability to set ends to production. Whereas the ends of production in the actual mode of production are extrinsic as much to the use-value as to the natural material, artistic creation works by deducing its ends in relation to the material: so to speak, by making them spring from it. The purposefulness without a purpose of modern artworks, “takes sides with repressed nature, to which it owes the idea of a purposefulness that is other than that posited by humanity”.⁶⁶ By reactivating the idea of a purposefulness “other than that posited by humanity”, art’s mimetic comportment “draws on an unrestrained rationality in its technical procedures, which are, in the supposedly ‘technical world’, constrained by the relations of production and thus remain irrational”.⁶⁷ The “aesthetic comportment”, defined as “the capacity to perceive more in things than they are”,⁶⁸ is thus closely connected with the capacity to set scopes that transcend the given reality and thus to overcome the actual relations of production. The artistic rehabilitation of the suppressed mimetic moment in technological rationality would mean to “possess in technology not a fetish of doom but a key to happiness”.⁶⁹ However, while for Benjamin the natural moment inheres the reproductive powers of modern technology,⁷⁰ for Adorno the former is expressed in the qualitative, irreproducible moment of the latter. There

64 I understand “consummation” following Dewey’s use of the term, as an “active and dynamic field of integrated participation” (Dinesh C. Mathur, ‘A Note on the Concept of “Consummatory Experience” in Dewey’s Aesthetics’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 63, no. 9 (28 April 1966): 225–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2024608>).

An “experience [...] is carried to consummation”, when “the experience of an event, object, scene, and situation [is carried] to its own integral fulfillment” (John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (London: Perigee Books, 1980), 137 ff.), and yet “the time of consummation is also one of beginning anew” (17).

65 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Pierre Klossowski (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 1047.

66 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 288.

67 *Ibid.*, 289.

68 *Ibid.*, 330.

69 Walter Benjamin, ‘Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays War and Warrior’, Edited by Ernst Junger, *New German Critique*, no. 17 (1979): 128, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488013>.

70 Desideri, ‘The Mimetic Bond: Benjamin and the Question of Technology’, 112: “The technological-reproductive instance here actually rivals the auto-poiesis of nature, directing its internal finalism to include even this feature in the automatic reiterability of its procedures. As a result [...] technology – independently of the perfective or mimetic character of its products and even in the case of their perfect artificiality – attests to its mimetic bond with the auto-generative process of *physis*”.

is namely a close connection between the re-appropriation of the teleological moment and the qualitative, mimetic attitude, since “ends, the *raison d’être* of *raison*, are qualitative, and mimetic power is effectively the power of qualitative distinction”.⁷¹ In reactivating the qualitative moment of rationality and technology, art unveils both the renounce to happiness of our technical, instrumental apparatus, and the false self-referentiality of identifying reason. The renounce to “happiness” and the removal of the qualitative, non-identical moments within the conceptual frame of the modern rationalization – i.e. its falseness – are two sides of the same process. The telos of reason is namely “a fulfillment that is in-itself necessarily not rational”, since “happiness is the enemy of rationality and purpose, of which it nevertheless stands in need”.⁷² By making “this irrational telos its own concern”,⁷³ art “represents truth in a double sense: It maintains the image of its aim, which has been obscured by rationality, and it convicts the status quo of its irrationality and absurdity”.⁷⁴ Art shows the irrationality of the purposeless enhancement of productive capacities, by showing the irrationality of a rationality that has renounced to mimesis.⁷⁵ And yet, being possible only as appearance, “art is the ever broken promise of happiness”:⁷⁶ only its concretization as form of production could fulfill that promise.

With regard to the challenges posed by Anthropocene, Adorno’s aesthetic theory can help us to avoid two complementary mistakes.⁷⁷ The first one, most obvious, is to maintain the traditional anthropocentric view that treats nature as a passive object and that believes it is possible to simply readjust our relation to nature in a more “sustainable” way. The second one that, seeking to unhinge modern anthropocentrism, deludes itself into the illusion that it can acquire a neutral (or “natural”) point of view, which transcends human positioning and mediation in and of nature. The understanding of the work of art as a mimetic technology that dialectically intertwines teleological moments, both human and natural ones, let sparkle the recover of a solidarity between man and nature, in the pursuit of common ends. This “legitimate anthropomorphism”⁷⁸ means at the same time the assumption of a radical ecology, able to refuse both the “pragmatic” attitudes that confirm the existing state of affairs and the

71 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 331.

72 Ibid., 289.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 43.

75 See Fabrizio Desideri, ‘Ratio, Mimesis, Dialectics: On Some Motifs in Theodor W. Adorno’, *Discipline Filosofiche*, 26, no. 2 (2016): 126: “A ratio that has lost the capacity of going beyond the horizon of universal fungibility that characterizes the technological dominion of the world, a ratio without mimesis, in short, is a ‘ratio that denies itself’”.

76 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 136.

77 For an overview on the possible convergence between Adorno’s concept of nature and radical ecologism see Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 121 ff.

78 Bernstein, *Adorno*, 196. According to Bernstein this represents nothing less than “Adorno’s philosophical project” itself.

natural ontologies that push for a return to an alleged natural order substantively understood. Artworks stands as prefigurations of a unity of man and nature, which is yet to come.⁷⁹ precondition to it, is the recognition of nature as history and of history as nature, that is to say the recognition of nature as autonomous agency, as a moment of human emancipation itself and vice versa.

79 See Tom Huhn, 'Heidegger, Adorno, and Mimesis', *Dialogue and Universalism*, no. 11–12 (2003): 43–52. In his interesting reading "mimesis [...] transforms imitation to anticipation" of a, quoting Adorno's *Aesthetic theory*, "thing-in-itself yet to come, of something unknown and to be determined by way of the subject" (48).

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