

**Thinking Affectively:
The Concept of Touch in Adorno's Philosophy**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis has a twofold aim. First, it attempts to demonstrate that, contrary to existing scholarship that has overlooked its central role, the concept of touch – along with the affective experience it generates – underpins Adorno’s entire philosophy. Throughout his work, Adorno indicates that the disembodied mind, cordoned off from the body by idealist philosophies, has historically relegated the sentient body and its emotions to an inferior position, causing the subject’s violent compulsion toward both internal and external nature. The overarching argument seeks to show that, although not explicitly thematized, Adorno’s repeated attempts to address this problem occur through the tactile register, framing touch as a force of resistance against the blind irrationalism of intellectualist philosophies. In this approach, I highlight the richly sensuous level animating certain tropes emerging from his philosophical-aesthetical writings – those explicitly foregrounded by Adorno, such as the shudder, the nonidentical, and mimesis, as well as those forming the unacknowledged yet ever-present backdrop of his philosophy, such as coldness and immersion – in order to bridge the gaps in his insufficiently articulated affective discourse. Second, by mobilizing the dialectical cast of Adorno’s work, the study suggests that this organizational quality of touch does not serve as a verifier of empirical presence. Instead, I argue that Adorno complicates touch significantly, drawing attention to its dialectically complex and internally aporetic character. Departing from the received haptic tradition that conceives tactility as an immediate and continuous sensation, each chapter centres on a specific facet of Adornian touch to demonstrate the relevance of his work for an emotionally informed mode of thinking – one governed by a new sense of contact, no longer motivated by a desire to possess its objects.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>A</i>	<i>Aesthetics</i>
<i>AE</i>	<i>Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies</i>
<i>AT</i>	<i>Aesthetic Theory</i>
<i>CM</i>	<i>Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords</i>
<i>DE</i>	<i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i>
<i>H</i>	<i>Hegel: Three Studies</i>
<i>HF</i>	<i>History and Freedom</i>
<i>ID</i>	<i>Introduction to Dialectics</i>
<i>KCPR</i>	<i>Kant's Critique of Pure Reason</i>
<i>LND</i>	<i>Lectures on Negative Dialectics</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Metaphysics: Concept and Problems</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Minima Moralia</i>
<i>ND</i>	<i>Negative Dialectics</i>
<i>NL</i>	<i>Notes to Literature, 2 vols.</i>
<i>NM</i>	<i>Night Music</i>
<i>OD</i>	<i>Ontology and Dialectics</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Prisms</i>
<i>PMP</i>	<i>Problems of Moral Philosophy</i>
<i>QUF</i>	<i>Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music</i>
<i>TTMR</i>	<i>Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction</i>

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Introduction

0.1. A Brief Philosophical History of the Sense of Touch

Touch lives a paradoxical life. The moment we attempt to conceptualize it, its immediate character within lived experience vanishes. To try to reduce the poetics, ethics, and aesthetics of touch to one definition of touch would betray its very nature and do it an injustice. And yet the absence of a philosophical account of touch risks condemning it to obscurity. While the work of interpretative mediation will often leave the manifold meanings of touch uncovered, it will also capture that which escapes a solely embodied experience: the accompanying body of knowledge always already informing our perception of it. By analyzing the distribution of the moments, texts, and contexts across the Western philosophical history of touch as it unfolds before us – establishing and disrupting contact, abandoning periodization, and exhausting the unity of a single notion – this introduction aims to retrace the plurality of perspectives that have contributed to the question of touch – what is it precisely and how can we account for it? – for the purpose of showing that the history of the sense(s) of touch is in fact the history of its redefinition across differing conceptual frameworks. What it ultimately presents us with has been perceptively summarized in one of Jean-Luc Nancy’s aporetic lines of inquiry announcing a new model of thinking about the sense: there is no such thing as *the* sense of touch, he claims.¹

As we depart from a narrow understanding of touch limited by an emphasis on immediate cutaneous contact, Adorno’s project appears as a strange reparative moment in the discursive history of the concept. The contextual background across which the problem of touch – namely, the apparent contradiction in answers to the question – develops is

¹ “There is not ‘the’ touch.” Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 119.

traditionally constituted by a series of gestures increasingly saturated with male fantasies of objectivity. These range from the separation of the mind from the body hitherto central to the construction of a rationally oriented, philosophical discourse, to the sheer absence of a feminine index, alarmingly encouraging the production and reproduction of a gendered type of rhetoric.² Cutting across established divisions (male/female, sensible/intellectual) Adorno's philosophy takes the form of a reaction against a predominantly intellectualist brand of philosophy that glosses reason as masculine and affect as feminine.³ The nature of Adorno's lines of theoretical discourse arguing for a quasi-sensuous, quasi-logical mode of tactility comes forth as a corrective for those accounts of a genealogy of touch that fail to grasp its dialectically complex and sometimes contradictory character. In order to locate and elaborate Adorno's philosophy within the expansive philosophical history of the sense of touch it is first instructive to investigate the terrains and disciplines upon which the problem of touch tests itself. Much of the difficulty stems from the epistemic framework through which tactility is addressed – the fact that the processes required to render touch intelligible range up and down in ascending and descending spirals: from neuroscientific studies revealing a profound connection between the sense of touch and human emotion and its importance in everyday social interaction to the formation of a haptic subject capable of serving the interests of political economy; from feminist art history that no longer cultivates a purely receptive vision, but on the contrary a modality of reason informed by tactile perception, to

² For an account of the “maleness” of reason, see: Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³ Paul Redding, *The Logic of Affect* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 1. Adorno in his *Introduction to Dialectics*, trans. Nicholas Walker, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 14, is going to oppose this tradition (precisely for its independent development with respect to the world of objects) to dialectical thought: “The dialectic realizes that it furnishes thought, on the one hand, and that which thought strives to grasp, on the other. Dialectical thought is not merely intellectualist in character, since it is precisely thought's attempt to recognize its limitations by recourse to the matter itself.”

the rise in new technologies such as haptic interfaces and virtual realities that upset the boundaries between embodied and disembodied forms of touch, suggesting new (often ideologically motivated) tactile ways of mediating everyday experience.

The body and its various senses have been historically both celebrated and condemned. However, more often than not, reading has been given increasing importance at the expense of feeling, distancing the tactile sense to the periphery of the philosophical.⁴ As Western philosophy begins to privilege positions of safe distance and detached neutrality, touch, smell, and taste come to be systematically excluded from the sensorial agenda on account of their alleged association with animality and primitivity.⁵ In contrast, the sense of sight, classically connected to notions of linearity, distance, and abstraction, presents itself as the condition of possibility for the development of “noble” disciplinary fields such as geometry and classical perspective.⁶ Across the hierarchical scale of the senses in which touch is disparaged as inferior and lowly, the abstracted vision of the eye will then be advocated for its intimate relation with cognition.⁷ Accordingly, the body of work that investigates the concept of touch is carved in two: on the one hand, there is an occularcentric discourse – an intellectual history that neglects touch in favour of vision;⁸ on the other hand,

⁴ Richard Kearney, “What Is Carnal Hermeneutics?”, *New Literary History* 46, no. 1 (2015): 100-101.

⁵ David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 5.

⁶ Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 65; 69. See also, Hans Jonas, “The Nobility of Sight,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 14, no. 4 (1954): 507-519, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2103230>.

⁷ Howes, *Sensual Relations*, 4.

⁸ In *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 3, Martin Jay produces a list of visual and aural prostheses aimed at enhancing the two senses and promoting a visual distance: the stereoscope, the microscope, the loudspeaker and the telephone, all functioned as technological enhancers of sight and hearing. Similarly, David Howes, in *Sensual Relations*, 6-7, explains how the instrumentalization of cameras and phonographs sought to record and preserve a modality of experience in a “direct, unmediated [and] objective fashion. Thus what seems to be real was devoid of scents, savours, temperatures, and textures.” Naomi Segal in

a new generation on touch literature precipitates a form of nostalgic revival and attempts to philosophically excavate the forgotten sense.⁹ At the same time, recent neuroscientific studies begin to make increasingly clear that what was previously regarded as universal and unchanging is in fact shown to be relative and unstable. In this sense, Linden writes: “there is, in fact, no pure sense of touch sensation, for by the time we have perceived a touch, it has been blended with other sensory input, plans for action, expectations, and a healthy dose of emotion.”¹⁰ In order to be addressed then, the question of touch has to pass through social, historical and political registers, respectively.

One of the earliest extensive treatments of the sense of touch is to be found in Aristotle’s *De Anima* and *De Sensu et Sensibilibus*. The two treatises engage in discussions on the relation between the body and soul whereby the sense of touch is defended against other philosophies that dismissed it as immediate and secondary, such as those of Plato, or the materialists Democritus and Empedocles.¹¹ As such, Aristotle’s perspective departs from the then-current physical theory of atomism that conceived of all sense-perception as reducible to touch perceptions.¹² His view equally rejects a ‘literalist’ understanding of sensory representation whereby the organ becomes literally similar to the perceived object.¹³ With Aristotle, the horizon across which touch develops widens in order to accommodate not only

“Touching and Not Touching: The Indirections of Desire”, *Touch* 3, (2020): 64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11cvxbx.4>, traces the development of such technology which culminates in the military context with the advent of the bomber-plane (and of the drone, more recently) whose fantasy is that of “violence without sacrifice; or rather, a body without a sense of touch.”

⁹ David Parisi, *Archaeologies of Touch: Interfacing with Haptics from Electricity to Computing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 276.

¹⁰ David J. Linden, *Touch: The Science of the Sense that Makes Us Human* (London: Penguin, 2015), 6.

¹¹ Kearney, *What is Carnal Hermeneutics?*, 103.

¹² Cynthia Freeland, “Aristotle on the Sense of Touch,” *Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2003), 229, <https://doi.org/10.1093/019823600X.003.0014>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 228.

humans but animals too, as he notes in several places that the haptic sense pertains to all animate living beings – a democratic gesture that Husserl is later going to reverse with the famous leitmotif of the manipulating – and properly human – hand.¹⁴ Although these works preserve a certain hierarchical arrangement within the catalogue of the five senses (e.g. touch figures as inferior to sight),¹⁵ touch is nevertheless provided with a fundamental capacity of grounding the rest of the senses, since its presence, it is repeatedly claimed, comes forth as a condition of possibility for the functioning of the physical apparatus as a whole.¹⁶ Aristotle speaks of a “chief sense” responsible with informing us not only *what* we sense but also *that* we sense, which “belongs especially together with the sense of touch.”¹⁷ Insofar as it lacks a specific location (unlike the other specialized organs), touch is unevenly distributed across the entire body, producing nothing other than a sense of embodiment in general.¹⁸

One of the tasks of touch then, is to furnish the subject not only with proprioception but also with a self-consciousness – what Derrida will later explain with reference to the Kantian unity of apperception as a form of self-contact or reflexive touch. To explain the role of touch Derrida translates the Kantian vocabulary in terms of a “pure auto-affection, pure ‘self-touching,’” whose function is that of enabling the analytic grasp of the I.¹⁹ The

¹⁴ Aristotle, *On the Soul and Other Psychological Works*, trans. Fred D. Miller, JR. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 23; 25; 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26; 68; 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁸ Pascal Massie, “Touching, thinking, being: The sense of touch in Aristotle’s *de anima* and its implications,” *Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy* 17, (2013): 79.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 46. A similar theory of auto-affection whereby touch is understood as the motor force of the schematism is gesturally developed by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 255: “The corporeal schema would not be a schema if it were not this contact of self with self.” This argument, which postulates the presence of a fundamentally split subject in permanent touch with itself as the precondition for self-relation, is taken up by Luce Irigaray’s feminist critique of phalocentrism. By engaging with the subject’s double structure, Irigaray’s work aims to develop a form of feminine

philosophical function of Kant's schematism becomes that of providing a metaphorical bodily sensation of feeling oneself think, or in other words, a sense of being in touch with oneself. Analogously, the treatment of touch perception as a kind of soul's self-intuition permits Aristotle to contend that the objects of touch are both the tangible and most intriguingly, the intangible, squaring thus the circle between thinking, touching and feeling.²⁰ In so doing, an aspect of haptic experience emerges throughout this body of work that eventually unsettles the Platonic hierarchy between essence and appearance: tactile acuity makes humans "the most intelligent of animals," allowing in this way the sensible to participate in the intelligible.²¹ This account of thinking as a sharpened mode of touching ultimately leads Aristotle to stage the question of touch according to a paradoxical structure: "there is not one sense of touch but several," a line of thinking echoed in Nancy's refutation of the unity of touch indicated above.²²

Drawing upon one of Freud's aphorisms that recalls the image of Psyche, the ancient Greek personification of the soul – 'Psyche ist ausgedehnt – Weiss nichts davon' (Psyche is extended – knows nothing about it) Nancy questions the Aristotelian aporia of the possibility of a soul extended in space and that has a weight, and conceives of touch as the condition of self-awareness.²³ The figure of the unconscious soul once again echoes the Kantian unity of apperception of which the "I think" can only be aware analytically. Nancy is here interested in the psychoanalytic attempts of making the I available to itself as synthetic process by

autoeroticism that no longer has to pass through the patriarchal denial of women's desire: "Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two but not divisible into one(s) – that caress each other." *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 24.

²⁰ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²² *Ibid.*, 42.

²³ Nancy, *Corpus*, 21.

reaching beyond consciousness to the unconscious and in its capacity to place the soul (psyche) in touch with what is around it (peri), namely, the body, actualizing the Greek etymology of Aristotle's title (*Peri Psyches*) at the expense of the Latin (*De Anima*). Nancy further confronts the enigmatic nature of touch previously addressed by Aristotle and opens an account of touch as a negatively determined sense. In his project of deconstructing Christianity the motif of touching is considered from the perspective of a tangency devoid of contact. Nancy returns to the *Noli Me Tangere* biblical scene in order to investigate the contradictory fate to which touch has been exposed across the tradition. For Nancy, "Christianity will have been the invention of the religion of touch," as reflected in the Christian eucharist and its accompanying phrase – *Hoc Est Enim Corpus Meum* – this is my body, an invitation to both tasting and touching.²⁴ However, throughout the phenomenological analysis Nancy seeks to expose how this particular model of Western sacrality reconfigures the relation between the touchable and the untouchable. The provocative phrase spoken by Jesus to Mary Magdalene outside his empty tomb after the resurrection – "touch me not" – constitutes a unique prohibition of touch that confirms, Nancy seems to suggest, a multiplicity of ontological orders governed by the principles of presence and absence, wherein touch unfolds itself.

Anchored in Nancy's logic of sense, Derrida's *Le toucher* develops as a response to those philosophies that accord an absolute privilege to human touch, such as Husserl's analysis, which translates the experience of touch into a vocabulary of what Derrida settles on calling "humanualism" (a term formed by the juxtaposition of the words human and manual). In respect to the question of the primacy of the human hand, he remarks: "As if the only way

²⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, trans. Sarah Clift et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 14.

we ever touched were with our hand and as if the fingers were all our hand were made of.”²⁵ By turning away from an understanding of touch as an immediate and continuous activity hanging on a certain experience of proximity, and by enhancing a negative determination of tactile intuitionism, Derrida’s investigation attempts to work open a fissure in the core of touch. In fact, Miller explains, “I never make direct contact with the other, and I never even make direct contact with myself, as the Western tradition of ‘humanualism’ falsely assumes.”²⁶ Accordingly, Derrida introduces the concept of the syncope to explain the nature of the performative gesture. For Derrida the pivot around which the concept of touch will turn is constituted by an ineliminable moment of disruption – the “opening up” of a “gap” or a “hiatus” – that permanently threatens to disband its integrity.²⁷ In this sense, what previously appeared as an uninteruptable connection becomes subject, in Derrida’s reading strategy, to the following aporia: “contact”, against all expectation, “always intervenes between x and x.”²⁸

In contrast to the post-structuralist schemata that permanently shakes the stability of a discourse of touch claiming unbiased objectivity, the form that touch takes with Husserl’s phenomenology is shadowed by an anthropocentric self-certainty. Across the phenomenological descriptions of the experience of touching it is above all the role of the hand that is systematically emphasized to suggest the primacy of constitutive subjectivity. Such poverty of experience is the consequence of Husserl’s decision to model the double phenomenon of touching and being touched on the position of what is termed throughout the analysis “the solipsistic subject,” a mere vessel whose methodological paradigm is to

²⁵ Derrida, *On Touching*, 162.

²⁶ J. Hillis Miller, *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 320.

²⁷ Derrida, *On Touching*, 221.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

positively register the phenomena as they present themselves to the subject.²⁹ Examples of the exaltation of the manipulative hand into the substance of humanity abound.³⁰ As it becomes an instrument of exclusion of non-human nature touch's entire range of determinations reemerges problematically to support the project of examining "the constitution of man as he presents himself to a naturalistic point of view."³¹ Despite the emancipatory structure of Husserl's famous motto "to the things themselves" that promises to establish a link with concrete phenomena the technical bracketing required to secure this realist goal serves to revert touch back into a device of abstraction.

This particular line of thinking capable of evacuating the sphere of phenomena from the experience of touch first matures in a particular Heideggerian expression. Reporting on a personal episode Heidegger evokes the image of a man as the "shepherd of being,"³² whose unassuming hand gesture gains a certain metaphysical significance:

Recently I got a second invitation to teach at the University of Berlin. On that occasion I left Freiburg and withdrew to the cabin. I listened to what the mountains and the forest and the farmlands were saying, and I went to see an old friend of mine, a 75-year old farmer. He had read about the call to Berlin in the newspapers. What would he say? Slowly he fixed the sure gaze of his clear eyes on mine, and keeping

²⁹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. Second book: studies in the phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 168.

³⁰ Whether invoked to account for the immediacy of proprioception ("If my hand is touched or struck, then I sense it [...] From the very outset it is apperceptively characterised as a hand with its field of sensation"), the distinction between proximity and distance ("The 'far' is far from me, from my Body; the 'to the right' refers back to the right side of my Body, e.g., to my right hand"), kinaesthetic sensation ("I experience the mechanical movement of the Body [as] I move my hand"), or the feelings of pleasure ("the sensation of warmth follows the heating of my hand") and pain ("If a heavy body is resting on my hand," "If I cut my finger with a knife"), it is invariably with the image of the hand and its digital manipulations that Husserl limits his tactile experiments. Husserl, *Ideas*, 163-168.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

³² Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 210; 221.

his mouth tightly shut, he thoughtfully put his faithful hand on my shoulder. Ever so slightly he shook his head. That meant: absolutely no!³³

By concentrating the entire weight of the narrative on the gesture of the hand, Heidegger injects tactility with a profound, yet unfounded, existential weight. The methodological ideal of bracketing, blind to the notion of material content, purifies touching of any historical context, local practices, social customs, and economic antagonisms until it splinters into an undetermined and empty form. As soon as the material core of touch is suspended, as dictated by the body of techniques with which phenomenology operates, its content shifts into a framework within which ideology can readily take shape.

By the same token, the practice of touch therapy, a field emerging alongside the development of trauma studies, positions itself as a method for achieving what Kearney describes as “somatic integration.”³⁴ This process refers to the recovery of a sense of the self through the intimate connection between feeling and interpreting bodily sensations. By emphasizing the role of tactility in treating patients with PTSD symptoms, touch therapy underscores a belief in the healing potentials of touch. Somatic therapy contrasts sharply with Freudian psychoanalysis, which its proponents critique as epitomizing a broader cultural taboo against physical contact. Similarly, it opposes Lacanian psychoanalysis, which it reproaches for privileging “floating signifiers” over the embodied realities of suffering individuals.³⁵ In tactile therapies, touch functions as a means of reinscribing what has been repressed, not solely through “talking cures” that rely on linguistic structures, as such approaches are seen as reinforcing a conceptual framework that subsumes the subject into determinate categories. However, touch therapies seem to base their approach on a single

³³ Martin Heidegger, “Why do I Stay in the Provinces?” *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. T. Sheehan (Chicago: Precedent Press, 1981), 29.

³⁴ Richard Kearney, “Healing Touch: Therapies of Trauma and Recovery,” *Touch: Recovering our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 93.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

principle, uncritically asserting their ability to circumvent what is seen as the reductive process of conceptualization that sacrifices the sensory and affective dimensions it aims to restore.

As a result, the concept is able to unite mutually opposed areas in a single space: touch discloses a latent desire for inclusivity manifested by the virtual reality systems that promise total immersion and make available what Grau terms “a space of possibility or impossibility formed by illusionary addresses to the senses.”³⁶ However, the system of illusions advanced by capitalism exploits touch’s potential as a liberating sense in order to falsely posit social equality. In the early days of the haptic interfaces’ expansion, a strange phenomenon occurred that demonstrates this double character animating touch. The market’s unconscious advances under technological form a peculiar desire to recover the totality of the lost sense that humanity had supposedly neglected and whose reawakening was the duty of the consumers to enact.³⁷ By projecting science onto a technological future, Apple’s advertisement for iPhone and iPod Touch, stating “Touching is Believing,” reveals such a form of mythical ambiguity, which employs the figure of immaterial touch in order to combine two, previously conflicting spheres: the sway of unchanging fate and the scientific ambition of perpetual innovation. Reminiscent of Benjaminian wish-images, Apple’s

³⁶ Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press Cambridge, 2003), 15.

³⁷ Parisi, *Archaeologies of Touch*, 264. Similar to Foucault’s argument in *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. By Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), 49, that “we must abandon the hypothesis that modern industrial societies ushered in the age of increased sexual repression. We have not only witnessed a visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities but [...] never more sites where the intensity of pleasures and the persistency of power catch hold, only to spread elsewhere,” Parisi applies the same gesture of inversion to the sense of touch and its alleged absence from Modern history: “Against the backdrop of these developments, the common refrain that the sense of touch was neglected in Western culture, echoed throughout a range of disciplines that includes psychology, aesthetics, computer science, communication, and anthropology, seems to be obsolete.” In this sense, Parisi argues against the premise that frames touch as a “sense left behind by Modernity.” *Archaeologies*, 264; 14.

advertisement blends the two registers to manipulate a utopian impulse that unites individuals as consumers in a common dream of societal refurbishing.³⁸ The goal of touch displays, however, seems to distill the essence of positivist fantasies advanced by augmented realities. Computer scientist Ivan Sutherland's project for what he called "kinaesthetic displays" employed the force feedback system to operate with such precise acuity that, as he proposed, "a chair would be good enough to sit in," "handcuffs [...] would be confining," and bullets "would be fatal."³⁹ By enhancing tactility through immersive simulation a striking death-drive glossed by the notion of total touch is ultimately revealed.⁴⁰ As touch is driven beyond itself what attends its presentation is the figure of a dematerialized subjectivity declined either by the fatal form of self-obliteration or in the double fantasy of flying and hovering above.⁴¹ Both actions are informed by an ambition to forge a new relationship to the concept of the limit. In confronting the impossibility of its realization what comes forth is a recognition of an "inability to touch."⁴² The acknowledgement of this failure, argues Segal, enables Baudelaire's poem *Élévation* to present us with the inversion of touch and to invoke the image of perpetual postponement, whereby "flying never reaches a goal."⁴³ In addition to

³⁸ Another example inspired by a similar drive is articulated by Hewlett-Packard's commercial for touchscreen laptops, "Touch the Future", and Barnes & Noble's "Touch the Future of Reading" slogan, instrumentalized for popularizing their e-Readers. Cited in Parisi, *Archaeologies of Touch*, 267.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁰ The impossibility of such total touch is going to be expressed in Derrida's recognition, rehearsed throughout his *On Touching*, 267, that even by touching the most intimate interiority of the other, as happens with the surgeon's hands when conducting a heart operation, a limit is immediately erected to remind one of the untouchability residing at the very heart of touch.

⁴¹ Perhaps the pinnacle of this abstraction is reached by the idealist longing to segregate the body from the mind, namely in Descartes' mental experiment in the First Meditation: "I will consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses." *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.

⁴² Segal, "Touching and Not Touching," 60.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

portraying the decay of tactility, the poet of synaesthesia protested against the desensitized, abstract experience prevalent during an increasingly industrialized epoch:

Ink smudged scholarship, a bastard taste, more barbarous than the barbarians, you who have forgotten the colour of the sky, the shape of plants, the movement and smell of animal life, and whose fingers, stiffened, nay paralysed, by writer's cramp, can no longer run nimbly up and down the vast keyboard of nature's correspondences!⁴⁴

As a consequence, his poems mark the intoxication of the senses of the mid-nineteenth-century society that linked utopian socialism with the phantasmagorias of early consumer capitalism.⁴⁵ New urban experiences capable of blurring the boundaries between the previously clear and distinct perceptions emerge in consonance with a tactile modernity able to emancipate the meaning of touch by rendering it fluid, fleeting, and transitory.

Thinkers have often isolated separate senses in many and varied ways: either engaging them in forms of moral posturing as is the case with Schelling for whom the sense of hearing signified the true meaning of humanity, through which reason can be revealed directly (“durch welchen sich Vernunft unmittelbar offenbare kann, der eigentliche Sinn der Humanität”),⁴⁶ or enlisting them in the actualization of rationality such as Hegel's emphasis on the role of the five senses in the logical movement of thought towards self-consciousness: “Now although it is known that we have precisely five senses, and that neither more or less are to be distinguished, philosophical consideration demands the demonstration of the rational necessity of this, which is demonstrated in that we grasp the senses as representing

⁴⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P.E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 2006), 117.

⁴⁵ Erika D. Rappaport, “The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control,” *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Empire*, ed. Constance Classen (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 71-72.

⁴⁶ F. W. J. von Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Elke Hahn, (Berlin: Total Verlag, 1997), 2519.

moments of the Notion.”⁴⁷ Across this sensuous palimpsest touch no longer develops independently, but according to a social context that invests it with cultural fantasies and anxieties, making the positioning of touch in relation to the other senses more decisive than its segregated development would disclose. Thus, Schopenhauer presents us with the invention of a new organ namely, a dream-organ characterized as “a faculty of intuitive perception which has been shown to be independent of the external impression of the senses.”⁴⁸ At the same time, Marx supplements the catalogue of the five senses with the “sense of having” and identifies it as “the sheer estrangement of the senses,” suggesting a bourgeois perversion in the human sensorium.⁴⁹

Touch then, comes forth neither as being apolitical, nor transhistorical, but in complicity with social phenomena whereby the categories of gender, race, and class play constitutive roles.⁵⁰ While touch is a crucial element in interpersonal communication, its positive effects are contextually dependent:⁵¹ “the very same touch sensation can convey a very different emotional meaning, depending on the gender, power dynamic, personal history, and cultural context of the touch initiator and receiver,” explains Linden.⁵² To support its

⁴⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of the Subjective Spirit. A German-English Parallel Text Edition, Vol. 2*, ed. M. J. Petry (Dordrecht and Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1978), 167.

⁴⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, trans. E. J. F. Payne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 239.

⁴⁹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 107.

⁵⁰ Cathryn Vasseleu, “Resistances of Touch,” *Signs* 40, no. 2 (2015): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1086/678281>.

⁵¹ Alberto Gallace and Charles Spence, “The science of interpersonal touch: An Overview,” *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 34, no 2 (2010): 246–259, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2008.10.004>.

⁵² Linden, *Touch*, 31. Multimodality theory explores the meanings and uses of touch in social contexts. “For example, a multimodal study might explore what is counted as touch by a social group in a given context and what semiotic meanings appear to be associated with the dimensions of touch (location, duration or pressure), and how these are used. For instance, to place one’s hand on the shoulder of another person, to hold it there for a long

demystification and to highlight the implications of law and normativity in the historical formation of embodied perception, Nyffenegger discusses the concept of “illicit touch” in relation to two narratives of abused human skin. One instance that serves to denounce the notion of gendered touch and the forms of epistemic violence it inevitably provokes is the discovery of a medical volume printed in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century whose covers were bound in the skin of an unnamed woman.⁵³ The function of gendered skin that can be passively touched, caressed, or grabbed in the space of scientific knowledge production draws attention to the political underpinnings of touch and calls into question the category of pure or innocent touch.⁵⁴ Written in Latin by men, the book broaches questions of feminine subjectivity such as “virginity, female diseases, pregnancy and childbirth,” demonstrating the way in which tactile knowledge about women’s health was collected, regulated, and disseminated by masculine power structures in a language to which women did not have access at the time.⁵⁵ Nyffenegger next invokes “boundary-transgressing touches” to extend the account of touch’s illegitimacy embedded in the concept of gender to one informed by the concept of race: the Nazis’ punitive gesture of marking the Auschwitz prisoners’ skin with number tattoos

time, with pressure, can be used to communicate intimacy and reassurance, or power and control.” More specifically in relation to touch: “Multimodality asks if and when touch can (and cannot) be considered a representational and communicational mode.” Carey Jewitt and Kerstin Leder Mackley, “Methodological Dialogues across Multimodality and Sensory Ethnography: Digital Touch Communication,” *Qualitative Research* 19, no. 1 (2019): 95; 98.

⁵³ Nicole Nyffenegger, “The Illicit Touch: Theorising Narratives of Abused Human Skin,” *Touch*, ed. Nirta Caterina et al., (London: University of Westminster Press, 2020), 201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11cvxbx.8>.

⁵⁴ We should be equally cautious about prioritizing the extreme opposite pole of illicit touch – absolute untouchability – as it ultimately comes to share similar elements of harm. Excluding untouchables from the realm of touch as a modality of punishment subjects them to a comparable degree of brutality as that inflicted by defiant acts of touch. While Aumiller points out that “the excess of touch is inherently disruptive and even threatening,” this exclusion places untouchables “out of the reach of transformative touch, while often making her vulnerable to acts of violence.” “Sensation & Hesitation: Haptic Scepticism as an Ethics of Touching,” *A Touch of Doubt: On Haptic Scepticism*, ed. Rachel Aumiller (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 11; 12, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110627176-002>.

⁵⁵ Nyffenegger, “The Illicit Touch,” 201.

illustrates how the experience of touch can no longer be formulated as neutral and objective.⁵⁶ On the contrary, this episode gains the ontological magnitude of an event after which the very framework we normally employ for describing touch is forever altered. The unmitigated horror before this event is capable of facilitating the passage that pushes touch into the state of a wound, away from an objective presentation.

Touch's unresolved status as internally divided is lifted to our attention by the psychoanalytical plurality of perspectives that on the one hand conceives of it as foundational in the formation of the reality principle and on the other hand, as proscriptive in accordance with the oedipal taboo.⁵⁷ The binary opposition in the history of childhood is inseparable as the injunction to touch only that which is *familiar* in the interest of self-preservation is inverted in the prohibition to touch precisely that which is *familial*, to avoid the risk of incest and parricide.⁵⁸ A discourse that undermines the oedipal prohibition is illustrated by the sales strategies employed by video game companies, generally targeted at a male, rather than female audience.⁵⁹ A case in point is the Nintendo DS 2005 publicity campaign, marketing a portable gaming system that captivated the public's attention by pressing into service precisely the fascination with tactile interdiction. The print advertisement functioned as an invitation to touch, to transgress the taboo, and hence, dangerously suggested that one can

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁵⁷ Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Naomi Segal (London: Karnac, 2016), 153.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵⁹ Touch is constructed as a restrictive and distinctly gendered notion as early as the writings of the New Testament where the prohibition on touching is aimed at a woman, rather than a man. In the Gospel according to John, Thomas is depicted as trustful of the resurrected Christ only after he had been invited to touch him: "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side." As opposed to the encouragement to touch directed at satisfying Thomas's doubt, Mary Magdalene is denied touch in the biblical *noli me tangere* episode that aims at keeping femininity outside the space of sexual desire, coding neighbourly love as invariably male. Cited in: Didier, *The Skin-Ego*, 157.

liberate oneself from the disciplinary codes governing the reality principle by simply buying one's ability to touch unrestrainedly:

Touching is not good. Or so we're told. Please do not touch ... yourself, your nose, wet paint, that zit, grandma's best china. You name it, you can't touch it. We think that's wrong. Why shouldn't you touch what you want? What if you could touch the games you play? What if you could make something jump or shoot or run just by touching it? Let's face it, touching the game means controlling the game. And when we say control, we mean precision control. One right touch and you're master of the universe. One wrong touch and you're toast. Forget everything you've ever been told and repeat after us. Touching is good.⁶⁰

One artwork that uses as an anchoring point precisely the socially repressed nature of touching is Valie Export's 1968 street performance "Tap and Touch Cinema," a piece that tackles the issue of the master sense: vision, in its relation to touch. To revoke the proliferation of a subject shaped by the visual and to emancipate a sensory experience informed by the tactile, the artist wanders around the streets and encourages participants to reach with their hands behind the curtains of the miniature theatre box placed over her breasts. As Export explains: "the curtains which previously had been drawn up only for the eyes are also finally raised for the hands. Tactile reception counteracts the fraud of voyeurism."⁶¹ The literalist account of touch denounces the Sartrean caress whose appropriative and possessing visual touch violates the visible and tangible body of the other.⁶² As soon as the proscription is removed, the distance between the subject and object of knowledge previously shaped as a gap by the cinema screen vanishes and the participants are immediately confronted with the ineliminable uncomfortable proximity of physical contact. By replacing eyes with hands, the gesture seeks to reveal the inadequate power relation

⁶⁰ Cited in Parisi, *Archaeologies*, 265.

⁶¹ Valie Export, "Expanded Cinema as Expanded Reality," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 28 (2003), https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/peter-tscherkassky-the-austrian-avant-garde/expanded_cinema.

⁶² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 390: "my look caresses when it discovers underneath this leaping which is at first the dancer's legs, the curved extension of the thighs."

between a female subjectivity (generally coded as “touchable, violable”) and a male subjectivity (generally coded as “untouchable, inviolable”),⁶³ thus refunctioning touch into an instrument of subversion.

And yet, despite efforts to reshape touch in order to generate a host of liberatory ends tactility itself has been undermined by its scientific rationalization that seeks to frame the manifold valences of touch according to the disciplinary structures of the laboratory. As a consequence, a wide range of “social technologies” and “scientific discoveries” isolate, measure, standardize, and ultimately “subsume into capital” the somatic data collected.⁶⁴ The path touch is sent along was facilitated by the recent coronavirus pandemic whereby the government regulated the practice of touch, enforcing social distancing measures in order to fight virus transmission. In this regard, the situation enhanced the articulation of a new determination of touch: non-touch became increasingly customary, simultaneously leading to a condition of touch deprivation among the population and to forms of abusive touch in the domestic space.⁶⁵ Despite recommendations to keep “in touch” digitally, touch remained absent from Covid-19 debates that rather prioritized a pseudo-scientific vocabulary of “social distancing.”⁶⁶ Thus, what was previously understood as normative touch is now being inverted: good touch becomes bad touch due to the threat of contagion while the absence of touch is equated with good touch or non-transmission.⁶⁷ Furthermore, at an institutional level, non-touch is already increasingly rehearsed and practiced: while a no-touch policy regulates

⁶³ Vasseleu, “Resistances of Touch,” 299.

⁶⁴ Mark Paterson, “The Biopolitics of Sensation, Techniques of Quantification, and the Production of a ‘New’ Sensorium,” *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 3 (2018): 69, <https://doi.org/10.5250/resilience.5.3.0067>.

⁶⁵ Lorraine Green and Lisa Moran, “Covid-19, Social Distancing and the ‘Scientisation’ of Touch: Exploring the Changing Social and Emotional Contexts of Touch and Their Implications for Social Work,” *Qualitative Social Work* 20, no. 1–2 (2021): 174, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1473325020973321>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

workplace behaviour in the USA in order to prevent sexual harassment,⁶⁸ British sport limits physical contact between coaches and athletes as a means of reducing the risk of child abuse.⁶⁹ Against this background, tactile prohibition becomes the stage for the mediated touch technologies deployed by virtual reality displays, cybersex devices, and the video game controllers industry. By inadvertently challenging the authority of ‘real touch,’ the digital age brings the model of disembodied touch to bear on a positively determined and narrowly empirical understanding of tactile perception. Nevertheless, when attempting to formulate its logic from an empathetic, affective standpoint, the absent body may pose significant issues with deep ontological consequences.

0.2. Passage to Affects

The current project, however, works in the opposite direction. It seeks to address Adorno’s body of work as an alternative to the philosophies predominant across the Western tradition that have undertheorized the material body in their pursuit of rationality. Responsible for holding open the mind–body distinction is the principle of separation coated with the authority of formal abstraction. From Plato’s gap between essences and appearances, to the Cartesian divorce of *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*, to the Kantian division between form and content, to Heidegger’s priority of being over beings, a fascination with the disembodied mind has relegated the living body and its feelings to an inferior position. On Adorno’s account, the fundamental product of this process of separation resulting from the archaic fear of the unknown is represented by the subject-object dualism. The process of individuation

⁶⁸ Debbie S. Dougherty and Marlo Goldstein Hode, “Binary Logics and the Discursive Interpretation of Organizational Policy: Making Meaning of Sexual Harassment Policy,” *Human Relations* 69, no. 8 (2016): 1739, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715624956>.

⁶⁹ Thomas Gleaves and Melanie Lang, “Kicking ‘No-Touch’ Discourses Into Touch: Athletes’ Parents’ Constructions of Appropriate Coach–Child Athlete Physical Contact,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 41, no. 3 (2017): 191-192, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723517705543>.

reinforces the identification of nature with an antagonistic other. The role of this uncrossable gap that delineates the subject's superiority over an object characterized as "merely natural" and hence, non-human is to justify the dominating and exploitative attitudes towards nature both within and without.⁷⁰ As Cook has pointed out, this antithesis has historically functioned as an instrument of casting "groups and individuals as Other than what the oppressor is."⁷¹ Emptied of its social content and uprooted from its historical context, dematerialized, bodiless reason turns, in Adorno's famous thesis, irrational, and serves to reproduce internally the external experience of oppression.⁷²

Insofar as enlightened thinking's reaction against these two forms of nature was shaped by violence and subjugation, philosophy has invariably entertained a suspicion regarding emotions and has perpetuated patriarchal ideas about affects treating them as vulgar, passive attributes of feminine subjectivity.⁷³ "Once the last trace of emotion has been eradicated" Adorno warns, "nothing remains of thought but absolute tautology."⁷⁴ The solipsistic subject, blind to its own repressed condition, is ultimately caught up in the web of instrumental rationality, wherein complete command over feelings and the negation of the individual form by the social form severely compromises the original promise of freedom from mythical coercion. To counter the painful social phenomena of coercion, intolerance, and subjugation among other things, Adorno envisages the conditions under which a better

⁷⁰ Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 88.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 2016). For a comprehensive study on instrumental reason, see: Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁷³ Simon Mussel, *Critical Theory and Feeling: The Affective Politics of the Early Frankfurt School* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 1-7.

⁷⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 123.

existence might take place. Although he refuses to positively endorse compassion *à la* Schopenhauer, he thinks that if individuals would be able to:

have more affects and more passions, they will have less prejudices. I would like to say, if they allow themselves more of their affects and passions, if they do not once again repeat in themselves the pressure that society exerts upon them, then they will be far less evil, far less sadistic, and far less malicious than they sometimes are today.⁷⁵

From this, we can surmise that Adorno identifies the solution to this set of problems in a form of human warmth that consists in an attempt to merely reunify what was previously divided. Nevertheless, what attends the reactivation of passion is the problem of distortion: the possibility of stylizing the form of emotions as opposed to reanimating their authentic content, the danger of privatizing the notion of individual happiness as opposed to engaging collective resistance, and finally, the risk of manipulating forms of sentimental populism as opposed to cultivating authentic modes of solidarity. The moment we pose the problem of affect as a philosophical and political resource we run the risk of aestheticizing the very unhappiness that prevails within the world as it presently stands. The polarity noted earlier, Adorno adds a further degree of difficulty, “must be critically maintained” because the moment the security of the distance between mind and matter falters “thought’s inherent claim to be total” is accomplished.⁷⁶ This is why Adorno repeatedly warned against the danger of false reconciliation that threatens to disrupt the accurate integration of affect into thinking. Instead of eliminating what he insightfully terms the “distress of separation,” philosophy should enhance its articulation and “think the dualism through to the end.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “Appendix 1: Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past’,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 299.

⁷⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 175.

⁷⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics*, trans. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 77.

In this sense, Adorno's philosophy discloses a lifelong preoccupation with the paradoxical unfolding and the structure of the experience of formal rationality – the principal consequence of the historic split – is called upon to express. In a dialectical turn, “once radically separated from the object, subject reduces the object to itself.”⁷⁸ As a result, Adorno believes that the entire program of Western thinking is represented by attempts to reunify the subject-object relationship in conformity with the doctrine of identity, itself modelled on the philosophically imperialist ideal of the concept's correspondence to the thing. This point is illustrated in a passage that calls attention to the sense of sight, traditionally linked with objectivity and intellectual activity:

Except among heretics, all Western metaphysics has been peephole metaphysics. The subject – a mere limited moment – was locked up in its own self by that metaphysics, imprisoned for all eternity to punish it for its deification. As through the crenels of a parapet, the subject gazes upon a black sky in which the star of the idea, or of Being, is said to rise.⁷⁹

As noted above, vision functions as a distancing sense, allowing it to shift into a symbolic extension of the mind, irreducible to the rest of the bodily senses associated with proximity. Consequently, the abstracted distance carving itself between the philosopher's gaze and the object of knowledge indicates the absence of the material ground of philosophizing. This method of thinking is from the outset compromised because it evacuates the concrete moment from the phenomena such as feelings, affects, and emotions, that the scientific mind concerned with higher universals deems illegitimate. For Adorno the “absolute segregation of body and mind,” historically perpetuated by Idealism in all its forms, is perceived as the precondition for the current presence of violence on both figurative and physical levels because this separation ultimately points to “a secret supremacy of the mind.”⁸⁰ In addition to a critique of pure contemplation, which privileges vision for its alleged detachment, Adorno

⁷⁸ “On Subject and Object,” *CM*, 246.

⁷⁹ *ND*, 139-140.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

condemns the polarity of reason and flesh and questions the condition of the largely neglected immediate senses. With reference to ontology – an alternative manifestation of Idealism for Adorno – he writes:

It is a philosophy which is terrified at the thought of getting its hands dirty, which would dearly like to exclude from itself all that is ephemeral, all that might be otherwise, all that reminds us of what is somehow base or lowly, of the merely material character of the senses.⁸¹

To counter the anti-emotional core of philosophy, Adorno's project aims at liberating the 'felt' from the framework of idealist epistemology, whose motor force is constituted by identitarian thinking and constitutive subjectivity. Knowledge acquisition organized around identity thinking fails to recognize the emotional components of experience because in equating the particular content of a thing with its own concept it effectively eliminates the presence of an affective, extra-conceptual supplement.⁸² Furthermore, the constitutive power of the subject across this schema cordons off from thinking the object's sensuous phenomena, strengthening in this way the subject's ontological authority. Using as an anchoring point a materialist epistemology, Adorno invokes the possibility of emotionally informed cognitive behaviour, no longer governed by the purity of the optic, whose "violence" consisted of its exclusively rational outlook. As Adorno puts it, the subject-object relation has to pass through an altogether different register in order to redress the two moments' unbalanced positions:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the

⁸¹ *OD*, 68-69.

⁸² Beyond critical theory, contemporary ontologies and new materialisms have waged struggles against an anthropocentrism indifferent to particularity. Whether in the form of speculative realism (Graham Harman), actor network theory (Bruno Latour), flat ontology (Levy Bryant), or dark ecology (Timothy Morton), recent philosophical movements have drawn attention to the disproportionately inflated human subjectivity and its inability to engage appropriately with the world of objects. However, by reaching back to a pre-subjective, and implicitly, pre-critical position they fail to address the object's suppressed sensuous phenomena as their analytical disinterestedness merely rehearses the same positivism they seek to correct.

standpoint of redemption. [...] To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from *felt contact* with its objects – this alone is the task of thought.⁸³

What Adorno suggests as an alternative to the predicament of a thinking “imprisoned” in the tautology of identity, is the reintegration into cognitive experience of a hitherto absent, somatic fold. As opposed to the optic, the role of the haptic articulated in the “felt contact” is to mobilize an aesthetic aspect of thinking such that the subject can suddenly be affected by its encounter with the object, in turn moved out of its distance from the subject. The evocation of the binary between distance and nearness corresponding to the reason/emotion distinction enables Adorno to condemn the exclusionary politics of sight thematized as the most theoretical of the senses.

0.3. Adorno and Touch

Among the various lines of thinking pursued by Adorno over the course of his philosophical activity, the question of touch then, seems to occupy a peculiarly privileged position. The materialist cast of Adorno’s body of work crystalizes in an underlying, yet only gesturally developed preoccupation with the sense of touch. Why so? Because the newly mediated character of touch sought by Adorno has the potential to forge a new relationship with the object of cognition and to offer intimate knowledge of it. This is why in a note from 1968 Adorno will return to the concept that had saturated and inspired the profound levels of his theory; herein touch will appear in its most nuanced form: “What is now left and what is not of this process of being touched? That is what we need to answer.”⁸⁴ On the basis of this declaration, the numerous and diverse lines of inquiry raised by Adorno across his critical interventions appear to converge on a single, ineliminable material point: the double phenomenon of affecting and being affected. Although across the length of his philosophical-

⁸³ *MM*, 247. (Emphasis added.)

⁸⁴ *OD*, 268.

aesthetical writings Adorno holds fast to a doctrine of sensation, suggestively called “the crux of all epistemology,” he never provides a fully developed account of touch.⁸⁵ For this reason, the task of the current thesis is to retrace the threads of the conceptual framework in which the question of touch is addressed. Its aim is to excavate and delineate the many senses of touch obliquely formulated by Adorno and left largely unexplored by the existing scholarship.

One of the most striking features of Adorno’s concept of touch is its chronic instability. Whenever a reference is made it comes to be framed through a set of principles that bring it into a categorical contravention with its own concept. Whether touch takes the form of a conceptual moment or of a concrete determination of human experience, its presence across Adorno’s writings is invariably subject to the following aporia: coming across as embodied in character while at the same time pointing beyond this condition, gesturing towards a more metaphorical form of touch – as a modality of being affected, or emotionally touched.⁸⁶ From this certain perspective, this Adornian notion of touch precipitates a series of paradoxical effects for the reader such that one of the central focuses of the thesis involves constructing a narrative that depicts the irregular distribution of touch throughout his work. On account of Adorno’s resistance to any positive or pragmatic exegesis, the concept of touch is fighting on two separate fronts: on the one hand it resists the phenomenological laws of Husserl which proceed on the basis of an immediate and

⁸⁵ *ND*, 193.

⁸⁶ This understanding of affectionate touch brings Adorno closer to Hélène Cixous’ sense of touch as the metaphor for communication that facilitates community relations: “An employee of Air France tells me on the telephone: I like your books because they touch me. We all like to touch – to be touched. Above all by the books that have a soft and violent gaze. It is with emotion and nostalgia that I touch the soft and ferocious touch of my cat [mon chat ma chatte] the cat whose cat I am, and between us no appropriation only moments of grace, without guarantee without security without a glance thrown toward the following moment. This is *jouissance*. All now.” *Stigamata* (London: Routledge, 2005), 188.

continuous notion of touch, an attempt to restore to philosophical discourse the primacy of the flesh. On the other hand, it turns away from a Derridean critique of the Western haptocentric tradition, whereby touch always stands for the syncope, for non-touch, in other words. This double negation developed by Adorno makes a discursive account of the nature of touch hardly possible without casting its meaning into one side of the divide (either framed as continuous and empirical or coming into being in a fragmented, nonempirical state). The current project does not remain indifferent to this contradiction, but on the contrary, develops in response to the difficulty of articulating Adorno's concept into a positive expression without distorting its meaning.

One way of thinking of this notion in perpetual conflict with itself is to read the way in which this term occurs across Adorno's writings as complicit with one of his own philosophical goals, namely: "uttering the unutterable,"⁸⁷ to render conceptually intelligible phenomena that nonetheless remain beyond the reach of thinking. The moment Adorno invokes a certain administrative predilection for the "elimination of the unutterable," a reference is made to those incommunicable contents that contravene a mentality predicated exclusively on the ideal of maximal communicability.⁸⁸ And we see here how in accordance with the logic of reification that reduces concrete particulars to abstract universals, aspects of experience that cannot be accommodated by rational, pre-determined arrangements are rendered superfluous and finally evacuated from the process of cognition. What all this means finally is that this gesture produces the erasure of what is inexpressible, of what escapes the notice of discursive language.

⁸⁷ *ND*, 9.

⁸⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 205.

In Adorno's reading, in epistemology the clash between concepts and non-concepts or sensations becomes acute. His injunction to abolish this unbalanced arrangement that conceives of sensation as a merely passive component of cognition, as "the basis of this hierarchy," is manifested in the recognition that reason and affect are, in fact, of one piece.⁸⁹ Affect, as the preponderance of the object in psychological form, represents the neglected "core of cognition" and for this reason can undermine the subjective claim to dominance.⁹⁰ What this line of thinking makes increasingly clear is that the unutterable instance points to that which discursive thinking cannot articulate without negating its own principle. This is why Adorno speaks of the vacuity of Husserl's dictum "to the things themselves" that falsely claims to capture the truth of human experience by faithfully reporting on phenomena. To account for the unutterable moment is to redirect the subject's contemplative efforts beyond a mere mental reconstruction of the body.⁹¹ For this to occur, thinking has to simultaneously become less and more than thinking: less, because of the awareness that the "subject's cognitive achievements are somatic,"⁹² and more, because in reintegrating the material and sensuous aspects of experience, thinking transcends "in closest contact with the objects" its present instrumental form.⁹³ Consequently, the present thesis is tasked with demonstrating that for Adorno, thinking's liberation from a doctrine of identity and the overcoming of the dualism hangs on a certain encounter with touch.

Precisely because the character of touch comes forth in the form of an enigma – Adorno insists on its epistemic role and yet denounces a purely rational standpoint through which it can be interpreted – the mode of approach to this problem is to formulate this

⁸⁹ *ND*, 193.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 193.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

question, which would otherwise remain opaque to conceptual analysis, through other categories. Touch, a vector running across all dualisms, is thus shown across the five chapters to develop five different uses and modalities, according to the specificity of each context in which it unfolds itself. In this sense, Adorno's own concepts – the shudder, the nonidentical, the notion of bourgeois coldness, the mimetic impulse, and the experience of immersion – are rearranged in constellational fashion so as to correspond to the concept of touch; they are reworked into models with which the current research begins to clarify the conceptual slippage and inherent ambiguity operating on the margin separating touching and feeling. The materialist core of Adornian philosophical aesthetics will be pressed into service in order to sever the link that has traditionally associated touch exclusively with sensation – a formula that reduces the multiple valences of touch to an otherwise flat and one-dimensional perception inherent in cutaneous contact.⁹⁴ To resolve the dilemma of touch, the current thesis attempts to disclose the passage that the concept traverses from empirical cutaneous contact that begins in the flesh, towards a metaphorical form of touch understood as being affected, and finally to a philosophical form of touch that has assimilated the somatic aspect of experience, in which the gap between touching and feeling collapses, producing an aesthetic aspect of thinking and simultaneously a thinking of touch. What it hopes to achieve is an understanding of an emotionally informed thinking governed by a new sense of contact, no longer motivated by a desire to possess its objects. Ultimately, the central question that drives forward the current thesis can be formulated as follows: how can thinking develop a

⁹⁴ For an account of the materialist turn in Adorno's philosophy, see: Christopher Conti, "Sensation at Odds with Itself: Adorno on Aesthetic Negativity," *Literature and Sensation*, ed. Anthony Uhlmann et al. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009). The accent upon materialism in Adorno, he explains, represents a protest directed against the symbolic organization of meaning, whereby interpretation of the parts would ultimately provide the subject with a total picture, in the spirit of the system. Rather, the only possibility available for the modern subject is that of conveying truth allegorically: through the dispersion of individual elements and the disintegration of such totalizing meaning – which in turn can provide a practical model for philosophy.

certain kind of tactile acuity capable of touching that which is untouchable in an approach that is at once cautious, nonviolent, and affective, in such a way that it can begin to recognize that which has for so long been disparaged as deceptive by rationalist philosophy: the *unclear* and *indistinct* perceptions? Therefore, the following chapters attempt to illuminate the often obscure, alternating rhythms that the notion of touch mobilizes across the subject-object dialectic.

It is on the margin of this extended inquiry into the question of touch that the current thesis on Adorno takes its starting point. In light of this complex account, a series of questions beg to be raised. What does it mean to say, with Aristotle, that touch forms the fundamental ground of all senses? Does Husserl's gesture of restricting tactile acuity to the human hand not point to an underlying avoidance of the animal that betrays a hegemonic anthropocentrism? How are we to think the transcendental version of touch that, according to Derrida, connects the two split sides of the self in Kant? Insofar as the intangible shapes and informs the tangible, as Nancy holds, what are the principles that govern its organization? What are the consequences of construing a purified version of touch *à la* Heidegger, thinking of it in its absolute sense, devoid of all cultural-historical perspectives that shaped it into the form we encounter today? In what ways can discourses broaching the notion of total touch be reconciled with its absolute opposite: hovering touch, immaterial touch, non-touch? What is it, in short, that the constitutive plurality of touch expresses? Adorno's writings on philosophy, art, and sociology, spanning decades, address a notion of touch that in accordance with the broader narrative in which these discourses participate, portrays it as replete with conflicting tensions, refusing to settle into a simple alternative. The guiding question of the current study, in contrast, asks what can the moment of opposition embodied by the lived, the affective, the intuited, and the "felt" offer to a dialectical thinking that reconfigures its relation to an object via a form of touch conceived as both conceptual and aesthetic?

0.4. Outline of the Thesis

The focus in Chapter 1 is represented by a particular embodiment of touch namely, the touch of the other as it manifests itself in the phenomenon of the shudder. Epitomized by the experience of the new, the concept of touch is here read as a mediator between an I representing repetition and sameness, and a not-I understood as otherness and difference. What the project examines here is the possibility of a tangibility in general that establishes the preconditions allowing the subject to expose itself before the unknown and be touched by the other – an act revealed to have both figurative and concrete implications, respectively. By reading Adorno's shuddering phenomenon as a fundamentally corporeal affect, this chapter attempts to recover an alternative form of knowledge acquisition, separate from that which is produced in accordance with instrumental reason. Similar to the Kantian sublime, meaning comes forth in the shudder in the united effort of both sensibility and cognition, facing reason with the experience of the limit. This chapter will accordingly study the domain that makes possible the apparent return of an archaic experience at the heart of the modern subject, namely, art. By introducing topics such as the Kantian sublime, which establishes the grounds for proprioceptive awareness, Freud's concept of the uncanny, disclosed here through the attentive ear, and Benjamin's theory of allegorical vision, this chapter argues that the involvement of multiple senses articulates touch in Adorno's philosophy, ultimately leading to a multisensory experience that extends beyond the merely cutaneous.

Chapter 2 inquires further into the nature of the experience of touch. It interprets another implication of touch namely, the moment of non-identity – as that which, in contrast to the shudder, cannot be touched by definition, and lingers as the expression of untouchability. What will be considered here is the concept of “the more” that remains uncovered by identity thinking. As there is no direct access to the nonidentical, the chapter will pursue different tracks that Adorno himself pressed, such as those found in the spheres of

language and nature in order to offer an explanation as to why this notion cannot be reduced only to a material sensuousness but on the contrary, must be rescued by a continuous reference to a form of ethical sensitivity. As Adorno insisted, there is nothing sensuous that is not mediated by the understanding; in consequence, the present discussion will focus on the element of cognition that by refusing to be touched, engages thinking affectively and suggests novel ways of negotiating this relation. Central to the discussion is the concept of illicit touch, which I argue can illuminate in Adorno's works the violent mode of contact through which identity thinking operates. I investigate the notion of nonidentity not merely as a melancholic lament for lost sensible uniqueness but also as something that resists visibility – a moment shadowed by a dark and unsettling animism. To explore this concept, I turn to the work of Cindy Sherman, whose grotesque and repulsive imagery reflects the maimed and mutilated nature of the nonidentical. Using Bernstein's reading, I argue that her work offers a compelling interpretation of Adorno's understanding of the ugly, conceived as a form of dissonance that disrupts and negates the harmony of beauty. After evaluating conceptual pivots implicit in Adorno's lines of thinking – art's untouchability, the taboo on touch, and the notion of intangibility – this chapter concludes that these elements in fact serve to carve holes in the possibility of touch, leaving us, in light of the growing violence of identity thinking, only with an asymptotic form of touch.

Chapter 3 presses into service the phenomenon of coldness, conceiving it as the absence of touch, and explores its dialectical nature: a sensation as much as a critical attitude, capable of performing a regressive and a progressive gesture simultaneously. A category that resurfaces in Adorno's writings, coldness is understood as on the one hand an external phenomenon, alienating the social relations between human beings, but on the other hand, from the perspective of the coldness of critique, an instrument that can turn against its own conditions of possibility, dissolving the reified models of human sociability and replacing

them with authentic forms of solidarity. I address touch in its continuous imbrication of coldness and warmth, as I trace its development in phenomena that work at its fragmentation, and ultimately its “forgetting”. Here, I investigate the consequences of translating human touch into impersonal, mechanical terms of technologically mediated tactility, where everything feels the same. As a potential hint of exit, I examine Adorno’s envisioning of a process of liquidation, which melts the frozen conditions of late capitalist societies, sets into motion a kinetic experience, and reanimates the subject’s frozen faculties. The chapter concludes with a section that uses a piece of cinema to illustrate how Adorno’s philosophy presents us with a curious paradox: namely, that the radicalization of touch’s absence facilitates its passage toward coming into presence.

Reflection upon the theme of mimesis as the loss of self-touch is the topic of Chapter 4. It begins with Adorno’s observation that the mimetic impulse represents that which “moves and touches us,” and investigates the precise form that touch assumes in this framework. In doing so, this chapter traces the mimetic impulse as it manifests itself in Horkheimer and Adorno’s narrative of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: from the emergence of expressive mimesis that attests to a sensuous phenomenon in the era of magical prehistory, to its gradual demise as the subject becomes ensnared in compulsive imitation, ultimately culminating in its complete repression in the age of instrumental reason, where organized mimesis signals an increasing absence of sensuousness. Whereas the tactile structure of mimesis served as an assertion of a continuous self-relation through the identification of an other in magical cultures, this chapter shows that its function shifted to one of disjuncture operating at the heart of self-identity. More exactly, what the interpretation seeks to show is that, for Adorno, the mimetic experience corresponds to the loss of self-touch in the mimetic act. A central notion developed by the chapter is that of self-identity, understood as the haptic experience of the body’s intouchness. The concluding section examines Adorno’s interpretation of Beckett’s

Endgame, illustrating how the structure of touch in mimesis is that of a wound – a disruption of the complete circle of self-touch.

The study of the concept of immersion in Adorno's writings, conceived as a form of total touch forms the task of Chapter 5. To delineate a particular facet of touch, the chapter presses into service a central metaphor – water – alongside key elements in Adorno's theoretical discourse on immersion, such as absorption, saturation, and sinking. The chapter opens with the conceptualization of immersion as an extreme intensification of tactility, framed through the lens of aggressive physical proximity. It draws a parallel between immersion as Adorno's critical device – that encourages us to engage deeply with a philosophical text or work of art – and the social phenomenon of integration, wherein capitalism encloses individuals within its logic. This parallel foregrounds shared notions of illusion, spell, and confinement present in both contexts. The discussion then shifts to a conflict inherent in Adorno's notion of immersion: a tension emerging between the macro-logical immersion understood as a totalizing form of touch that suggests a body being submerged in the object of knowledge, and micro-logical immersion, which emphasizes the tactile acuity it fosters, a concept borrowed from Benjamin. I argue that the logic of miniaturization, by critically challenging the notion of totality inherent in immersion, paradoxically emerges to reinforce magnification as a form of integrative immersion – though one qualitatively distinct from the form exercised by the system of domination. The chapter ends with an image drawn by Adorno from *Minima Moralia*: a depiction of floating that suggests a dialectical stasis between descending and ascending – a mode of engagement that moves through the aggressiveness of sinking and culminates in the tenderness of drifting. This form of hovering touch, grounded in an immanence that closes in upon itself, is ultimately revealed to enable transcendence.

Chapter 1

Shudder and the Touch of the Other

What later came to be called subjectivity, freeing itself from the blind anxiety of the shudder, is at the same time the shudder's own development; life in the subject is nothing but what shudders, the reaction to the total spell that transcends the spell. Consciousness without shudder is reified consciousness. That shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity is the act of *being touched by the other*. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins eros and knowledge.

– Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*⁹⁵

In this first chapter, I will begin exploring Adorno's underlying concern with touch by focusing on one of the most hermetic and provocative accounts developed in his philosophical-aesthetical writings namely, the concept of the shudder.⁹⁶ What I aim to show is the way in which the shudder functions across his dialectical materialist theory as a primary placeholder for tactility in general. Furthermore, by critically examining the plurality of paths that the concept traverses, this chapter seeks to illustrate how the shudder hangs on an

⁹⁵ *AT*, 331. (Emphasis added).

⁹⁶ Adorno employs two different German words for shudder in *Aesthetic Theory*: *Erschütterung*, which refers to both physical and psychological shock or shakiness; and *Schauer*, which translates as shiver or shudder and suggests an aspect of fear. Adorno borrows from Benjamin's concept of shock organized around his accounts of nineteenth-century modernity. Herein, it designates either the experience of the subject before the urban crowd – “the shock and contact with the metropolitan masses.” “On Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 165; or the product of popular culture – “the shock effect of the film.” *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008), 32. Adorno's understanding of the shudder retains the element of self-forgetfulness, but is transposed from the sphere of entertainment to that of art: “The shock aroused by important works is [...] the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work; it is the moment of being shaken. The recipients lose their footing.” *AT*, 244.

encounter with alterity and ultimately comes to enact what Adorno terms the touch of the other – a term that remains problematically unresolved in Adorno’s writings but one that indirectly comes to designate another subject in all its manifestations (from inner nature as the somatic structure that is repressed in the human history of renunciation to the compulsively exploited external nature).⁹⁷ The significance of this particular modality of touch articulated as a relational sense in the concept of the shudder inheres in the sense’s proleptic orientation: that is to say, in its capacity to anticipate the category of the new and “to allow for the possibility of an Other” to emerge.⁹⁸ One of the main purposes of this undertaking is to interpret the shudder’s expression of an arche-tactility as the vehicle that enables Adorno to form a model of experience capable of fostering a new sensibility, thus demonstrating the centrality of affect for his thought.

What is it precisely that we shudder at when we shudder and how does Adorno account for the historical trajectory of this phenomenon? In their co-authored *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer trace the movement of the progressive domination of nature across the history of human socialization and explain how reason, the instrument used

⁹⁷ Whatever its reference, otherness consistently appears to signify a meaning connected to a form of (repressed) nature. In this context, Adorno asserts that “the beauty of nature is an other,” suggesting that nature’s beauty has been estranged from its original state due to humanity’s excessive interventions. This otherness, characterized as natural beauty, becomes possible because, as Peter Uwe Hohendahl demonstrates, the primal anxiety is progressively supplanted by enlightened rationality. This shift enables humanity to undertake an “aesthetic recovery of nature,” wherein the capacity to perceive beauty within the natural world paves the way for what becomes “the aesthetic experience of nature.” *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013), 43-44. However, this otherness ultimately “rubs on a wound,” *AT*, 61-62, as its existence relies on a mythical violence directed toward the domestication and neutralization of what was originally perceived as unruly nature. Thus, the principle of natural beauty, existing no longer as something accessible within nature but only through art, becomes the epitome of otherness. It embodies otherness first because it has been expunged from nature, and second because the realm of art – positioned as the other of rationality – becomes the sole domain where it can manifest.

⁹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 83.

to obtain freedom from natural necessity, simultaneously served to limit such freedom, by suppressing instinctual life and immediate pleasure. Adorno's interpretation locates the emergence of the shudder under the sign of this paradox, where two opposing tendencies are brought together under a single framework of governance. In his view, the phenomenon of the shudder participates in the inescapable dialectic of enlightenment that governs all rational categories, as it signals both emancipation from, and at the same time, regression to mere nature. The mythical memory conjured up by the shuddering experience unsettles the modern subject with the primordial image of terror caught in the drift between the two opposing moments internal to the dialectic. The authors' history of social anthropology presents us with a mythical, ur-historical past, prior to the consciousness of difference in all its manifestations, from the consciousness of external distinct beings to the emergence of internal self-consciousness. The shudder points to such an era antecedent to the socialization of the individual, previous to the rise of a unified consciousness, previous to the subject's separation from nature, previous even to the development of rational tools deployed in the name of exploiting both inner and outer nature.⁹⁹ As the threshold that renders the line of demarcation between the human and the natural perceptible, ancient shudder marks the beginnings of subjective differentiation. It responds to what for a subject immersed in an ontological life-world explained as homogenous 'wholeness' signified the consciousness of opposition in a primal fear of nature – the key moment that corresponds to the advent of what will later become a modern subject. In a certain sense, the shudder is produced by the rational impulse and registers a narrative of progression that enacts the disenchantment of nature and the dissolution of myth. And yet, in another sense, it amounts to nothing more than a Pyrrhic victory since this is an experience that lays the trap into which humanity will readily throw

⁹⁹ Karyn Ball, "Shudder," *German Aesthetics: Fundamental Concepts from Baumgarten to Adorno*, ed. J. D. Mininger and Jason Michael Peck (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 233.

itself, as the path of this civilizing development will later condemn the subject to its own irreversible demise. From this perspective, the shudder outlines the conditions of regression since the original separation from natural necessity coincides with the first attempt to master a hitherto undifferentiated outer nature, exposing the subject to a fate that will only ever proliferate the violence it was originally supposed to repress.

Ancient shudder, however, as an expression of a pre-rational chapter in the narrative of subject formation manifested as an overwhelming fear of nature is no longer accessible to everyday lived experience. The distant memory of that encounter between the blank identity of psychological sameness and the non-identical difference of what is foreign to the pre-I, is today preserved by art, Adorno argues, and is only fleetingly restored across individual acts of subjective participation in artworks. What modern subjects are in effect confronted with in their engagement with the content of artworks is the sensory memory of the primal conflict between a terrifying nature and its resulting human coercion. This memory recalls an underlying antagonism that modern forms of reason, aimed at obscuring or eliminating conflict and promoting a façade of reconciliation, have methodically sought to erase. Insofar as the shudder presents itself as the image of a surplus subjected to the anarchic laws of the unconscious, it works open a fissure in the conventional structure of discursive knowledge that organizes our ability to comprehend.¹⁰⁰ Whoever is caught up within the development of

¹⁰⁰ Adorno writes that “the shudder is a mimetic comportment reacting mimetically to abstractness.” *AT*, 20. From this, we can surmise that he may well have been influenced by Bloch’s use of the concept of shudder in his 1918 treatise on utopia, where it manifests itself as a reaction to indeterminacy:

If the world is a sphinx who throws herself into the abyss when her riddle is solved: this lies not within its having become (for this world is an error, and void; in the face of absolute truth it has only the right to be destroyed); rather, the enigma lies within the true image at Sais, and this image alone is the figure of the Self-encounter, the darkness of its lived moment and the shudder of the absolute question. The unknowing around us is the final ground for the manifestation of this world, and for precisely this reason does knowing, the lightning flash of a future knowledge striking unerringly into our darkness and the inconstruable question, constitute at the same

such a phenomenon is suddenly presented with an unsettling return into the present of an archaic past that threatens not only to disband the integrity of the subject's faculties of thought but also to (partially) collapse the very category of the subject. Despite its interruptive logic and reason-shattering power, participation in the shudder appears to offer temporary access to another form of (sensuously informed) knowledge that Adorno develops across his ethical epistemology. Grounded in a peculiar relation which the next chapters will further elaborate namely, the "live contact with the warmth of things,"¹⁰¹ this new mode of knowledge seeks to recover aspects of the object that have been injured or damaged by the identity principle: its individuating differences, contingencies, and specificities.

Nevertheless, this remains a challenging endeavour, as Adorno never settles on defining the condition for access to this form of rationality. He struggles to thematize it, whether as pertaining to the somatic, the sensuous, or to a physical feeling, yet it remains indissolubly entwined with the subject's capacity to affect and be affected. However, the shudder's spontaneity requires philosophical mediation since redemption of the material core of cognition always occurs within the remit of reason, for Adorno, and involves the use of concepts to "unseal the non-conceptual."¹⁰² My interpretation attempts to demonstrate that the shudder's double structure, which relies on both mind and body, articulates within Adorno's work a form of epistemology based on the sense of touch. It functions as a concept mediating eros, as the archaic and pre-cognitive dimension, with knowledge, the sphere of rationality without which the sensible would remain opaque.

time the inevitably sufficient ground for the manifestation, for the arrival in the other world.

Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 229.

¹⁰¹ *MM*, 43.

¹⁰² *ND*, 21.

Adorno recognizes at the core of the bodily experience of the shudder the emergence of a speculative moment, which he saw as acting as a power of resistance against instrumental rationality – the fully developed mechanism of domination permanently reproducing itself in advanced capitalist societies – by pointing beyond itself. In this chapter I argue that Adorno’s dialectical perspective locates the element of speculation that he recovers from Idealism, and refunctions it as an intellectual power of negation in a positive category of the subject namely, the empirical body. Touch functions across this schema not as a third, synthesizing element, as such a role would align it with the principle of affirmation inherent in totality. More precisely, in the “act of being touched by the other” subjectivity’s immediate reaction to objectivity no longer takes the form of a merely impulsive response. On the contrary, its (passive) receptive character stimulates the (active) perceptive element to come forth. How are we to understand such a reversal? As it is presently constructed, rational cognition involves a form of thinking that has entirely abandoned concrete reality. Adorno thinks that an exclusively rational attitude replaces what he calls the principle of “for someone,”¹⁰³ which can be understood as the material particularity of each individual entity, and replaces it with the logic of identity that represses particularity in the name of equivalence. This particular model of reason explains the non-conceptual in terms of predetermined concepts, divorced from their material content. In this respect, Adorno declares that “reason is pathic” and “nothing but to cure ourselves of it would be rational.”¹⁰⁴ As a symptom of the compulsion to control otherness, pure reason carves an abstracted distance between subject and object that effectively erases the affective element forming part of the encounter. In the experience of the shudder, however, the subject undertakes a double process of self-relinquishment (yielding to the object, approaching it in a closer encounter)

¹⁰³ Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 41.

¹⁰⁴ *ND*, 172.

and alienation (creating a distancing perspective that allows for the observation of other previously repressed elements). Through this process, the shudder's tactility-engaging strategies produce an impact within the subject capable of moving it out of its distance from the object, suggesting novel ways of eluding the current form of rationality that necessarily entails repression of the other.

Moreover, by engaging a tactile level of perceiving the object, the shudder facilitates the subject's escape from "the circle of identification" that "tolerates nothing outside it," and in any case, "always identifies itself alone."¹⁰⁵ Traditionally, our encounter with individual objects and their distinctive contexts is obscured by the universality of our concepts that reduce them to unity and identity in order to be cognized – a recoil to the Kantian adage that the subject can ultimately "only know itself," or its own categories.¹⁰⁶ Giving the lie to the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity that ideologically proclaims that the "Not-I is finally the I," in other words, that the subject always ends up reducing to object to itself, Adorno nuances a relationship typically understood in terms of equivalence.¹⁰⁷ In this sense, the immediate character of tactility (tainted, for this reason, by irrationality) shifts in the shudder to a mediating function that puts the subject back in touch with empirical reality and, above all, exposes subjectivity to that category without which it would regress into mere tautology namely, otherness. On account of this double front against both pure cognition and mere embodiment, the concept of the shudder is able to liberate the content of touch from a narrow understanding – what Derrida calls in his critique of Husserl's phenomenology "intuitive plenitude" and "local coincidence" – to an expansive conception (stretching beyond a haptocentric tradition) that can coordinate the perceptive with the affective element of

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedeman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 129.

¹⁰⁷ *ND*, 148.

sensorial experience.¹⁰⁸ My interpretation aims to divert horizontally the vector that previously aligned touching and sensing vertically, connecting in its path other senses of touch and irrevocably changing their meaning across the newly formed configuration. This move will allow touch to be reconsidered from the perspective of emotional affect – making room for an encounter with the previously obscured non-identity of the object, Adorno’s materialist interpretation of the Kantian thing-in-itself. In turn, touch’s enclosure in the sphere of the tangible (presently understood as being conditioned by the spectre of a fixation on the surface of the skin) will be suspended, as its development across the phenomenon of the shudder will enable it to inhabit and blend with other senses explored across the chapter, generating a multisensory experience: namely, proprioception, as the sensation of being there, advocated by the Kantian sublime; hearing, as the auditory awareness of difference; and sight, in the form of Benjamin’s allegorical vision, as the interpretive effort required for the object to unfold itself.

Nevertheless, how can the concept of the shudder escape a discourse of regression if the experience ultimately announces itself as a re-enactment of an archaic past, as a remembrance overshadowed by positivist fantasies of primordality, whose content continues to remain blind to social-historical determinations and by extension to the sensuous particularity of the object? By virtue of which emancipatory impulse is the shudder’s irrationality restricted from becoming a potentially destructive enterprise, for in a certain sense the phenomenon articulates an activity circumscribed by the proto-cognitive – a mere sensory engagement – hence always already directed against the subject’s capacity for critical reasoning? All aspects of this structure, I argue, hang upon the non-linear relationship between the two standpoints to which Adorno alludes, but never clearly delineates: between a

¹⁰⁸ Derrida, *On Touching*, 172.

past actuality and a future potentiality, two positions paradoxically lacking in any shared common reference. From this perspective, it will become immediately clear that the shudder's salvage from mythological irrationality hinges upon its distortion on the basis of an aporetic arrangement: a process that subjects its impulses to a strange inversion whereby that which once was – the edifice of the past – is suddenly beginning to comport itself as the mark of what is unprecedented, the prolegomenon of a future possibility. What will become increasingly provocative across Adorno's repeated attempts at defining the phenomenon of the shudder – and this will ultimately prevent its accurate reconstruction in philosophical discourse – is its cryptically shut character riddled with the images of another world; a character, the reader is always reminded, irreducible to the criteria of the current situation. Since on account of its traumatic character, the phenomenon would otherwise threaten to crumble the work of memory, thereby dissolving the unity of the subject, the repressed returns through a laborious detour, under a radically different manifestation, governed by the logic of 'the new.' This empty signifier, will in Adorno's understanding, be legislated by conventions similar to those accounting for a riddle: whereby the question becomes annihilated the moment its elements are reinterpreted from a different standpoint. My argument reconsiders the notion of the shudder of the new that can be understood through Adorno's various concepts such as the other, non-identity, that which is different from the subject, and stresses that the prerequisite for its apprehension is a sensuously informed experience.

Non-identity, however, as the counterpoint to the doctrine of identity cannot be accessed directly for Adorno because progressive (social and conceptual) integration incorporates all oppositional forces capable of resistance. Rather, it is through a logic of disintegration that coordinates (logical) contradiction, (artistic) dissonance, and (social)

fragmentation, that the non-identical can manifest itself.¹⁰⁹ Instead of treating the categories that make up the experience of the shudder in isolation, the task of this chapter is to rearrange them according to the model of the constellation, whose role is to portray the shudder as the act in which the subject calls up the presence of the other and is touched by that which is different; an act, further still, that turns away from the reified split between thinking and feeling, and models their immanent reunification through mutual mediation: what Adorno argues forms the “essence of dialectic,” which “tries by means of thought itself to undo that separation of spheres which is pre-eminently reflected in the common or garden cliché of the three faculties of thinking, feeling and willing.”¹¹⁰ In order to re-evaluate and recover the shudder’s status as a multisensory experience grounded in the sense of touch, I want to consider three discursive frameworks informing its nature that reveal the capacity of the sense of touch to renegotiate the boundaries between the other senses. In this sense, (1) the Kantian sublime, as the moment when inner shakiness, or visceral materiality addressing itself to the subject is confronted with the shudder of the new; (2) Freud’s notion of the uncanny, which corresponds to the emergence of the recognition that ‘something’s missing’ is analysed in relation to the estranging, shudder-producing protocols of music;¹¹¹ and finally, (3) Benjamin’s allegorical outlook that on account of its melancholic disposition perceiving

¹⁰⁹ Adorno insists on the failure of the modern subject to acquire knowledge of the whole, expressed in the image of the Hegelian system, and instead reaffirms the Romantic model which binds the encyclopaedic (the *goal* of totality) with the fragmentary, or the realization of its constitutive incompleteness. His philosophical anti-foundationalism thus informs his theory of musical reproduction, whereby the notion of musical interpretation comes to mirror the constitutive impotence operating in philosophical interpretation: “The notion of interpretation dying out must be derived from the idea of true interpretation and *fundamental* impossibility of its realization.” *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 97.

¹¹⁰ *ID*, 81.

¹¹¹ Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, “Something’s Missing,” *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988). The phrase employed across the discussion is a direct reference to Brecht’s play “Mahogany” that denotes the absence (and simultaneously, the inherent possibility) of utopia.

transience in persistence, reconfigures the riddle advanced by the shudder. Under a changed constellation, this perspective interprets the shudder as a cypher for that which lies beyond administered forms of relations, awaiting its own interpretation.

1.1. Kantian Sublime

In the “Analytic of the Sublime,” Kant outlines the essential features of the feeling of the sublime and traces the subjective progression it entails. The passage begins with the initial emergence of fear, caused by the violence inflicted by the experience upon the imagination, and moves to a gradually mastered form of pleasure, generated by the recognition of the sublimity of our own supersensible vocation for morality. When threatened by the overwhelming spectacle of unbounded nature this movement occasions in the subject the affirmation of the rational authority of the I, inseparably linked with what Kant conceives as an enhanced and unassailable mode of self-preservation, different from “that which can be threatened and endangered by nature outside us.”¹¹²

As opposed to Kant’s position, Adorno’s philosophical project fundamentally denounces the experience of the sublime as complicit in chronic domination. From the standpoint of Adorno’s materialist epistemology forged in opposition to the primacy of constitutive subjectivity, this particular section of the third *Critique* abounds in ideologically suspect references. These include the superiority and ultimate supremacy of reason, the exaltation of the subjective cognitive faculties over sensibility, and finally, the unmetaphorical conquering of outer and inner natures for the purpose of controlling them. Such references, rooted in the ideal of isolated interiority and encouragement of distance, pose challenges to the development of touch as a relational sense, one that organizes the

¹¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. by Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 145.

categories of subject and object across Adorno's body of work. Kant's concern with the disorderly activity of imagination and the reawakening of the ideas of reason at the sight of what is termed "fearful nature" recalls the unengaged detachment of vision that perceives things only at a distance,¹¹³ while the contemplative mind, removed from the governance of the senses, passes over into pure inwardness. I want to suggest that within Adorno's work, the shudder becomes the expression of a longing to re-engage the sense that has the capacity to restore proximity in the experience of consciousness: touch. Accordingly, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, the phenomenon of the shudder becomes a stage for Adorno's attempts to re-evaluate and recover the feeling of the sublime. As Kaushall has rightly shown, the shudder represents Adorno's way of refunctioning Kant's concept of the sublime into a phenomenon that serves to promote the primacy of the object, restricting the idealist deduction of the not-I from the I.¹¹⁴ The shudder, as Adorno makes immediately clear, disrupts the logic of the detached observer that dominates Kant's account and envisages the conditions under which reconciliation would take place without the violence of subordination exercised by the sublime: it is transfigured from the desolate context of isolated individual consciousness to the whole of a community, whereby the experience marks "the act of being touched by the other."¹¹⁵

Importantly, Kant distinguishes between the somatic domain of sensibility and the rational sphere of moral action, to which the feeling of the sublime pertains. The latter, he argues, "does not depend on a sensation" and "cannot be contained in any sensible form."¹¹⁶ In contrast to the constraints imposed by Kant on sensibility, Adorno develops the shudder

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹¹⁴ Justin Neville Kaushall, "Natural Spontaneity, or Adorno's Aesthetic Category of the Shudder," *Telos* (Fall 2020): 125, doi:10.3817/0920192125.

¹¹⁵ *AT*, 331.

¹¹⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 128-129.

according to his conception of morality invariably grounded in “bodily feeling” that functions in complicity with “materialist motifs.”¹¹⁷ Although it emerges as an impulse governed by rationality, namely the instinct of self-preservation noted at the beginning of the chapter, the material of shudder remains largely irrational. This will permit Adorno to shift the focus from the logos of the mind – the container of sublimity in Kant – to the eros of the flesh, the central component that can succeed in setting up a form of contact with the other. Adorno’s concern with this ineliminable physical moment represents the condition of possibility for potentially infinite meanings of touch that are not limited to the immediacy of cutaneous touch on the skin. The element of touch involved in the shudder is the name for a communicative sense that has its origin in the individual, trembling, material body, but has the function of orienting the subject toward a shared context of indeterminate sociality; a reminder that in order to prevent experience from succumbing to the power of reification the purely cognitive – any sensation in the phenomenological sense understood as a structure of consciousness – has to pass through the somatic register. Put differently, there is no psyche without soma. The intuitively strange idea that what is cannot be understood purely through concepts, and that the latter must be combined with feelings in order to acquire conceptual clarity, takes the form of an emphasis on contact, or more precisely the touch that the enigmatic category of the other exercises upon the I. This in turn, enables the mind to form a new epistemology, which in being affected by the other “assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it.”¹¹⁸

In orienting the shudder toward a touch-based experience Adorno’s critical strategy is to displace the Kantian theory from the domain of nature and to transplant it into that of art,

¹¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 116-17.

¹¹⁸ *AT*, 331.

the singular site across which the shudder is able to unfold in *Aesthetic Theory*.¹¹⁹ In transferring the phenomenon to the sphere of art, Adornian shudder comes to violate the rule that regulates the structure of the Kantian sublime, namely, the recognition, in the wake of the exposure to the sublime phenomenon, of an authoritative subjectivity. The reason why art challenges the hubristic preponderance of subject over object is because art, by definition, represents the space excluded from (inherently dominating) rationality. As the social site responsible for giving a voice to repressed nature (the central placeholder for otherness), it no longer secures a straightforward subjective affirmation. In Adorno's view, aesthetic experience has the capacity to inwardly shake those exposed to its visceral gesture, compelling subjects to abandon themselves, physically and involuntarily, to an other whose uncertainty has historically represented an overwhelming source of anxiety, as its touch can equally take the form of a stroke or of a strike.

1.2. Eclipse of the Subject

Rather than rational omnipotence triggering intellectual pleasure, the recognition of touch's ambiguity provokes "a response, coloured by fear of the overwhelming."¹²⁰ Adorno observes that the prerequisite for the experience of the sublime is the "power of the subject,"¹²¹ an aspect that brings Kant's line of thinking into an explicit confrontation with the shudder's own condition of possibility – the weakening of the subject. Interestingly, in *Notes to Literature*, Adorno takes this dialectical relationship to extremes and revalues it as "the power to be weak,"¹²² an element repeatedly announced to serve as a necessary precondition for an experience informed by touch. The process of becoming receptive to the other involves an

¹¹⁹ Kaushall, "Natural Spontaneity," 126.

¹²⁰ *AT*, 245.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Theodor W. Adorno, "In Memory of Eichendorff," *Notes to Literature, Vol. 1*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 70.

unsettling approach shared by modern art's shocking character. As Hellings explains, by shaking off the broad framework of prejudices aligned with intolerance, misunderstanding, and injustice, subjects can achieve liberation and foster a form of (mis)education.¹²³ To this, I would add that such a liberation presupposes an additional layer: the cultivation of a tactile affinity with difference because it involves a bodily impulse that resists subjugation to the authority of formal rationality. Instead of pleasure, this weakness generates "moments of weeping,"¹²⁴ followed by a peculiar, nevertheless broken, untenable happiness that cannot last, and whose "primary colour is," undoubtedly, "black."¹²⁵ The moment it installs itself, its structure is quickly ripped apart, the subject immediately finding its consciousness riddled with the inescapable prospect of guilt. This involves the experience of a shock produced by the unintelligible other which brings the subject to a consciousness of unhappiness and ultimately undermines the very foundation of the subject, namely self-identity. As Singh points out, with the collapse of the metaphysical dimension that upheld the omnipotence of the transcendental subject over the empirical subject, the possibility of reconciliation emerges – albeit a reconciliation achieved at the expense of the subject's current form.¹²⁶ This is why Adorno concludes that the shudder's "instrument is tears."¹²⁷

Thus, the problem of subjectivity is caught in the web of an antinomy, as the liquidation and the self-aggrandizement of the I announced by the shudder and the sublime, respectively, are indissolubly linked. Self-preservation and self-identity represent the essential conditions for the emergence of rational subjects. Although it degenerates into a

¹²³ James Hellings, *Adorno and Art: Aesthetic Theory Contra Critical Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 110.

¹²⁴ *AT*, 123.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹²⁶ Surti Singh, "The Aesthetic Experience of Shudder: Adorno and the Kantian Sublime," *The Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory: New Readings of Benjamin and Adorno*, ed. Nathan Ross (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015), 138.

¹²⁷ *AT*, 269.

self-destructive element, humans cannot deny self-preservation. At the same time, the corollary of the process of increasing subjectivization is reification, since in identifying itself as object, the subject ultimately negates itself as subject. In this sense, both pure identity and radical self-alienation would be death.¹²⁸ Because Adorno thinks that these structures include that gesture by which they can be broken, the problem for him will be to find a way of mobilizing the non-identical moments contained in self-preservation and self-identity. In a rescue operation that seeks to salvage the individual captive in a self-made world, Adorno will invoke a certain kind of “the disappearance of the I” that functions as a way of opening up “the possibility of letting self-preservation fall away, though it does not actually succeed in realizing this possibility.”¹²⁹ However, at the same time, Adorno’s sustained critique of the emergence of pseudo-individualism in capitalist societies is an indication of a corresponding need to retain an individual subject. This preservation is not tied to the collective image of the proletariat (defeated, Adorno’s position contends, by the crushing logic of the party in the Eastern bloc during the post-war era) but within the framework of an elementary form of individualism, tantamount to a theory of autonomy.¹³⁰ What nevertheless must be maintained is the socialized subject because without this minimal form of empirical reality there would be no intellectual experience able to register and respond to difference in the first place. This is the reason why, Jameson explains, aesthetic experience will be celebrated across Adorno’s work as a privileged site: because it remains the only locus capable of preserving subjective categories, resistant to the desubjectifying impulses of monopoly capitalism.¹³¹ The path to

¹²⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 63.

¹²⁹ *AT*, 245.

¹³⁰ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 82.

¹³¹ Frederic Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1996), 123.

envisage the outline of a better existence “beyond the prison that it itself is” goes through this “utmost tension” then, enacted in the experience of art, and not, through the culture industry’s manipulative notion of distraction.¹³² As Morgan perceptively observes, the shudder precipitates the following paradox: it desubjectifies in a way that remains compatible with a form of subjective affirmation.¹³³

Instead of reinforcing the illusion of a self-legislating, autonomous I, the shudder works in the opposite direction. It problematizes the dialectic of reification and subjectivization, the two dominant movements pulling in different directions in the formation of the modern subject. The transformation of the subject performed by the shudder ultimately serves to strengthen the I without lapsing into the regressive behaviour promoted by the culture industry, which although advocates for consumer autonomy, secretly aims at the disintegration and surrender of the ego. In a criticism levelled against the acts of mass deception and propaganda practiced by the culture industry, Adorno notes that for the latter “the idea of the shudder is idle nonsense.”¹³⁴ The strengthening of the subject via momentary liquidation is also incompatible with Kant’s affirmation of the I. Despite the triumph of the intelligible over the sensuous in the experience of the sublime, the conduct of the Kantian subject intolerant to what lies beyond positive, empirical knowledge, in fact, serves to diminish the role of the subject and its supersensible vocation. The articulation of a sensuous perception of the other and of an *intimen Erfahrung* (intimate experience) with difference presupposes neither the disembodied transcendental subject nor the immanent tendency of mass entertainment.

¹³² *AT*, 245.

¹³³ Alastair Morgan, *Adorno’s Concept of Life* (London: Continuum, 2007), 97-99.

¹³⁴ *AT*, 245.

Amid a culture of false reconciliation compelling its individuals to submit resignedly to the centralizing, but ultimately fictitious, authority of the I, the shudder released by art is able to instruct us in conceiving of a nonconstitutive subjectivity, a form of subjectivity that no longer claims its independence from the object. Furthermore, it establishes the conditions for recognizing the logic of identity and the deceptive forms of individualism that regulate the construction of such a false whole. What this amounts to is a double movement of distancing and embodiment. The dissipation of a rationally dominated subjectivity lays the groundwork for the moment of coming into a form of proprioceptive awareness. Adorno introduces the concept of the shudder in order to frame his reflections on the body's tactile experience of the world and its sensory configuration. As Elmore points out, insofar as the experience of the shudder constitutes an aesthetic experience, "the shakiness of the subject is psychologically and physically real."¹³⁵ This includes an embodied recognition of the boundaries of constitutive subjectivity, more accurately described as a form of interior touch and a giving over to the other. Faced with the ideas of "limitedness and finitude," instead of that of the boundlessness emblematic of the sublime, the subject directs the self-reflective efforts towards the uncovering of its own illusorily constructed primacy.¹³⁶ Hellings identifies in the involuntary affects of the shudder the abandonment of any fixed understandings of the self, which in turn causes a transformation of consciousness in the spectators of modern art.¹³⁷ By opening themselves to what is new and radically other, the subject relinquishes those subjective qualities that have become atrophied in functioning in the unidirectional sense involved in a form of knowledge based purely on concepts. The involvement of touch in the sensory perception of the other prevents experience from moving in a singular direction,

¹³⁵ Rick Elmore, "Ecological Experience: Aesthetics, Life, and the Shudder in Adorno's Critical Theory," *The Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory: New Readings of Benjamin and Adorno*, ed. Nathan Ross (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 152.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹³⁷ Hellings, *Adorno and Art*, 108.

since we cannot touch without being touched. The role of the shudder's tactile properties then, is to enact the dissolution of those aspects of subjectivity associated with instrumental rationality. Its task, Adorno emphasises, is to compel us to "go out of ourselves, enter into relation with others, and in a certain sense relinquish ourselves to them."¹³⁸ Central to this process is our reattunement to the external world, exposing ourselves, in other words, to the unpredictable touch of the unknown without reducing that phenomena to the rigid unity of the I. As Bowie has pointed out, Adorno is unwilling to endorse the idea of a pure interiority of consciousness because subjective formation emerges as the result of "'external' pressures and influences."¹³⁹ This means that development does not take place in sterile isolation, but in a form of experience that appeals to the contact between subjects and objects. Touch takes here the form of a communicative sense that positions the subject in a perpetual dialogue with the other, a relationship requiring social and historical context mediated by memory of the past. Adorno argues here against the constant bourgeois refrain that "the products of the mind are the property of the great thinkers, poets and composers."¹⁴⁰ He valorised that model of contact that breaks the narcissistic circuit by redrawing the origin of mental activity as "the result of a union of the mental effort of its producer and the objective ideas that are involved."¹⁴¹

1.3. Literature and the New

But how does the temporary suspension of the subject actually succeed in setting up this union with the other? As we shall see in a moment, Adorno invokes the binary between the I and the not-I corresponding to a temporal distinction between the ever-same and the new. The

¹³⁸ "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," *CM*, 240.

¹³⁹ Andrew Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 33.

¹⁴⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 92.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

grounding of the self through sublimation into the logical subject has historically involved the positing of an absolute I that reduces all non-identity to the unity of the “I think.” The consequence of the tautological self withdrawn in extreme individuation is illustrated by the recalcitrance to that which does not submit to the compulsion of identity. To rescue the decaying category of the I from the crisis into which Idealism has thrown it, namely from its entrapment in the ever-same, Adorno confronts it with what he terms “the negation of the permanent.”¹⁴² This is a device that by virtue of its anticipatory orientation serves to open up a relation of responsiveness towards otherness and thus to reanimate the subject’s reified faculties divorced from sensibility. Glossed as the shudder of the new, the negation of the permanent is able to cast a negative light on the question of the other, whose function is to work open a fissure in the perpetual repetition of sameness exercised by the subject. Because the other is never fully theorized in Adorno’s writings, the new is able to offer, albeit obliquely, an account of otherness and our sensuous engagement with it. As Haynes argues, the category of the other in Adorno should be understood as “not the Wholly Other nor the sexuate other but rather an irreducible, sensuous particularity irreducible to the subject’s classifications.”¹⁴³ Modern literature, as understood by Adorno, recodes the discourse of ancient shudder and presents the recipient with a model of the new. This occurs by mobilizing what Geulen calls the “anti-subjectivist tendencies” of the shudder that interrupt the sameness of the I.¹⁴⁴ And it is within the climate of modernity, that literature, one of the arts in which the shudder is displaced by Adorno from nature, registers this longing for the new. Adorno writes as follows:

¹⁴² *AT*, 271.

¹⁴³ Patrice Haynes, *Immanent Transcendence: Reconfiguring Materialism in Continental Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 134.

¹⁴⁴ Eva Geulen, “Adorno and the Poetics of Genre,” *Adorno and Literature*, ed. David Cunningham & Nigel Mapp (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 61.

In central passages of Poe and Baudelaire the concept of newness emerges. In the former, in the description of the maelstrom and the shudder it inspires – equated with ‘the novel’ – of which none of the traditional reports is said to give an adequate idea; in the latter, in the last line of the cycle *La Mort*, which chooses the plunge into the abyss, no matter whether hell or heaven, in the depths of the unknown to find the new. In both cases it is an unknown threat that the subject embraces and which, in a dizzy reversal, promises joy. The new, a blank place in consciousness, awaited as if with shut eyes, seems the formula by means of which a stimulus is extracted from dread and despair. It makes evil flower. But its bare contour is a cryptogram for the most unequivocal reaction.¹⁴⁵

The form of life produced by the advent of industrial capitalism characterized, as Adorno points out, by “the repetition of identical rhythms and the repetitive manufacture of an identical object based on a pattern” ultimately points beyond the immanent historical context.¹⁴⁶ This is because the extreme enhancement of the painful conditions of the industrial age such as atomization, planification, integration, organization aligned with the Fordist production processes that impinge upon individuals help envisage the reversed image of these tendencies. The nineteenth century facilitates the emergence of the shudder of the new as the “abstract negation of the category of the permanent,” in other words, in opposition to the ever-same – a notion supported by the increasing popularity of the natural sciences which set out to demonstrate that the mechanisms conditioning our world recur endlessly. (For example, the fatigue in the face of these conditions is registered among others by Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence, or Blanqui’s desperate account of universal finitude). In response to the previous success of these deterministic theories, the nineteenth century develops an obsessive preoccupation with the principle of the new.¹⁴⁷ Adorno’s interpretation of the new invoked by modernist writers is phrased in materialist terms: although it constitutes the result of a process of abstraction, the vehicle for bringing about the

¹⁴⁵ *MM*, 235.

¹⁴⁶ *AT*, 272.

¹⁴⁷ Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 239.

new is the concrete individual subject.¹⁴⁸ Its possibility released by art refers in Adorno's lines of discourse, to the possibility of the not-I, the object as another subject. The impact of modernist artworks is that of a sensory reminder of a prehistoric exposure to otherness that has been lost in the process of individuation. Central to Adorno's understanding of artworks is their tactile relationship to the world, as he states himself: "art cannot be radically separated from the instant of being touched (*Angerührtwerden*)."¹⁴⁹ Leslie's productive remark suggests that in the shudder the subjects "bodily, unconsciously, involuntarily – remember what it was like to be touched by something different, unassimilated."¹⁵⁰

The shudder then, is the name for a reaction to the other subject's visceral immediacy. Artworks point to that proto-cognitive tactile plenitude because they appeal to contact in a particular way. Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* describes the aura to which the subjects are receptive in aesthetic experience precisely in terms of a phenomenon that brings subject and object together in a shared space. Marks understands aura as a "tactile relationship" between the viewing spectator and the perceived object,¹⁵¹ while Sherratt's interpretation productively suggests that the aura represents the "capacity to induce proximity through distance."¹⁵² Adorno's readings of Joseph von Eichendorff and Rudolf Borchard's poems represent, I argue, one of the ways in which his thinking circles around the notion of touch, as they trace the simultaneous desubjectivization and self-relinquishment that become central to understanding the shudder as a form of sensuous knowledge of the other that engages both body and mind. What I want to suggest is

¹⁴⁸ *AT*, 21.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁵⁰ Esther Leslie, "Shudder – Shutter – Shatter," *animateprojects.org*, 2009. (Last accessed 22 March, 2022).

¹⁵¹ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and The Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 140.

¹⁵² Yvonne Sherratt, "Adorno's Aesthetic Concept of Aura," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, no. 2 (2007): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453707074137>.

that the conception of touch that crystalizes in these interpretations is addressed first, as the negation of the private sphere, which Adorno criticized in Kirkegaard's image of the apartment interior and emphatically denied as symptomatic of philosophies of bourgeois interiority, and second, by the image of abandonment to the other that can reflect the possibility of community, but not analogous to the Husserlian intuitionism that requires complete surrender to the things themselves.

What interests Adorno in Eichendorff's fictional world is precisely the anti-subjectivism practiced within his poems that corresponds to the shudder's ego-weakening force, compelling the I to surrender and disappear into the work of art. Across his lyric poetry, Adorno notes, "the ego no longer becomes callous and entrenched within itself. It wants to make amends for some of the primordial injustice of being ego at all."¹⁵³ For Adorno, this kind of vocabulary of renunciation under which extreme subjectivism dissipates – the verses he cites "And I don't care to preserve myself," "I know not where I am" are the ever-present backdrop of his thinking on the shudder¹⁵⁴ serves to open the subject up to a process of externalization defined as "the full experience of external life returning inwardly."¹⁵⁵ The moment the self relinquishes its hold over itself is the moment whereby the I offers oneself up to the touch of the other. The shudder's loss of the self is modelled on the image of the tangible (*leibhaft*),¹⁵⁶ and qualified as "the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness."¹⁵⁷ Moreover, Adorno resorts to citing Borchard's poetic language that "appeals frantically to the not-I" in order to illustrate what is meant here – "My heart yearns outward" – to which he comments: his poetry "calls [...] to the Other who has become

¹⁵³ "In Memory of Eichendorff," *NL 1*, 64.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

¹⁵⁵ *AT*, 116.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 245.

indistinct and is in the process of vanishing.”¹⁵⁸ Seen from this vantage point, it becomes increasingly clear that the non-totalizing signification of the other can be understood as what is new to the I, the (other) individual subject. Although Adorno provides different names and sometimes contradictory descriptions for the sensory process of being touched by the other epitomized by the experience of the shudder, we can say that it posits a form of communality by mobilizing a prototype of social engagement or practice. Warstat is correct in one sense when he interprets the shuddering phenomenon as “an encounter,” “an entanglement with otherness” that is socially oriented, but he is wrong in describing it as “the subject becoming social.”¹⁵⁹ Although it shakes the subject out of its seamless identity into a modality of responsiveness to that which is non-identical, the shudder only forms the condition of possibility for becoming social. The social framework is an important step in conceptualizing the reciprocal character of tactile interaction governed by the shudder. However, the somatic reaction remains fundamentally proto-cognitive and irrationally structured – precisely what Adorno praises in the experience. He needs a moment anathema to a systematically organized society to oppose the form of reason that has grown instrumental. Geulen’s account is more precise when she emphasizes the shared nature of the experience, aptly referring to it as “something that is collective.”¹⁶⁰

1.4. Music and Critical Alienation

However, the path to understanding the shudder’s tactile configuration must still pass through a second movement, inseparably fused with the ego-weakening stage namely, the process of

¹⁵⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Charmed Language: On the Poetry of Rudolf Borchardt,” *Notes to Literature, Vol. 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 200.

¹⁵⁹ Andrew Warstat, “Adorno, Lewis Klahr and the Shuddering Image,” *Drawn from Life: Issues and Themes in Animated Documentary Cinema*, ed. Nea Ehrlich and Jonathan Murray (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 152.

¹⁶⁰ Geulen, “Adorno and the Poetics of Genre,” 60.

estrangement. For Adorno, this is captured by the experience of music, which constitutes the afterimage, or the “echo of the animistic shudder.”¹⁶¹ Its function is to create a feeling of alienation “in which the world displaces itself, estranges itself, reveals its fissures and crevices.”¹⁶² As we have seen, Adorno identifies in extreme subjectivism one of the core forms of psychological desolation to which rational modernity condemns its subjects. Narcissism transforms the instinct of self-preservation into a coercive fetish since the life it claims to preserve has lost its self-evidence. This is then replicated in what Adorno terms “the isolated cell of pure inwardness” that minimizes the possibility of “live contact” between subject and object.¹⁶³ The second component intrinsic to Adorno’s conception of the shudder is bound up with the mechanism of familiarization. The central issue dictating the production of such ruinous forms of consciousness is the process of disenchantment that effectively “strips the world of its uncanny aspect,” and replaces it with a rational “experience that in this world we stand on our two feet, and that we inhabit a known world without dreading the interventions of demons, without magical and mythical anxieties.”¹⁶⁴

However, in the wake of progressive rationalization “the familiarity with our own world is purchased at the price of metaphysical despair.”¹⁶⁵ This “cosmic night,” that Adorno warns against, colonizes the present with the principles of equivalence, exchange, and identity, capable of effacing within individuals the ability to engage with sensuous particularity. Adorno’s concern here will be with the question of whether these schematized modes of behaviour have reduced our capacity to touch and be touched that serve as a bulwark against the increasing withdrawal in private existence. His critique seems to argue

¹⁶¹ *TTMR*, 170.

¹⁶² *MM*, 247.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁶⁴ *KKPR*, 110.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

that in this framework there are no resources for giving an account of the sensory relationship to the world that includes different modes of affectability. What is it exactly that falls away in the course of the development of a civilization that liberates itself from the condition of barbarism? What kind of irreparable erasure occurs in this trajectory of emancipation across which humanity proceeds? Adorno will suggest a way beyond this dilemma by reflecting upon a field central to his account of philosophy, the practice of music. In an unusual affirmation of immediacy, he says: “Music is the process of being touched, the experience of what is immediately other, the shudder as a phenomenon that is just as much within the world, *mana* as something empirical.”¹⁶⁶ The ambiguity of this statement is underpinned by Adorno’s deliberately obscure use of the notion of touch reconfigured here as the tactile quality of sound. What is praised in its appeal to contact is the capacity to bring the subject closer to the object. However, the presence of such sensuous aspects with which Adorno invests the experience of music is quickly dissolved the moment a logic that reduces its object to what is known and familiar installs itself. “In a certain sense,” Adorno shifts the emphasis, rearranging the fundamental structure of touch in such a way as to produce a contradiction:

This also works against the process of being touched [...] This element becomes weaker in the professional musician, once one is involved in music it loses this dimension of shudder, or rather it is secularized and persists in the purity of its immanent articulation. What is now left and what is not of this process of being touched? That is what we need to answer.¹⁶⁷

What Adorno suggests in this statement is that the more control technical rationality gains over the work in the form of overly organized construction, the more difficult it becomes for subjects to act receptively, to behave in such a way that the overarching identity of the “I think” breaks free from the spell of mere tautological repetition. The resolution to this

¹⁶⁶ “Note Z,” *OD*, 268.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

problem lies in Adorno's insistence on the concept of dissonance, a device that presents us with the possibility of a margin outside which we can temporarily step and unmask that which appears as the most natural – the I, as historically constructed. Accordingly, Adorno brings before us an unsettling model of alienation subjected to the following ideology critique:

There is only one point at which the gramophone interferes with both the work and the interpretation. This occurs when the mechanical spring wears out. At this point the sound droops in chromatic weakness and the music bleakly plays itself out. Only when gramophonic reproduction breaks down are its objects transformed.¹⁶⁸

To address the role that estrangement plays in the touch-based experience of the shudder, we must briefly turn to the work of Freud and his interpretation of the principle of the uncanny. As Ball rightly notes, Adorno organizes the core structure of the shudder via the critical appropriation of Freud's concept of the *Unheimlich*.¹⁶⁹ She stresses that Adorno's thinking in relation to the concept of the shudder should be translated in Freudian (and I would add, Lukacsian) terms. In this framework, second nature – the realm of reified human relations, which the subject no longer recognizes due to its total integration – comes to be disturbed by the interruption of the first, prerational nature.¹⁷⁰ This sudden, unexpected presence creates an unprecedented impact within the individual.¹⁷¹ According to Freud, underpinning the feeling of unsettlement produced by the uncanny aspect is a register of familiarity.¹⁷² As Freud states, the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old

¹⁶⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Curves of the Needle,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 55 (1990), 55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778935>.

¹⁶⁹ Ball, “Shudder,” 227.

¹⁷⁰ Adorno takes up the concept of second nature, suggesting the world of convention, from Lukacs's *Theory of the Novel* and develops it further as the dialectical relation between nature and history in “The Idea of Natural History,” *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹⁷¹ Ball, “Shudder,” 227.

¹⁷² Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” *Art and Literature, Volume 14*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1990), 340.

established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.”¹⁷³ As we have already seen, the central thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, claiming the simultaneity of subjective liberation and collective subjugation, employs the vocabulary of repression to account for the progressive domination of inner nature and the subsequent formation of subjectivity. Adorno thinks that “demythologization is separation,”¹⁷⁴ which means that the rationality of disenchanted thought that contributed to the original split of the unity of subject and object included a form of distance that involves a form of detachment and prevents considerations of touch as modes of being affected. Rather, what the aesthetic shudder performs in Adorno’s view is the cancelling of that distance,¹⁷⁵ thereby enacting a form of intimacy with difference. In the shudder, the petrified memory of the first encounter with the other preserved as a repressed instinctual impulse becomes animated and registered physically as a visceral form of touch. That which becomes effaced in the wake of the process of civilization is brought into the domain of experience by the unsettling effect of the shudder namely, the sensory memory of the other. Adorno’s conception of the shudder as a phenomenon able to bring into flux an ossified memory of what it feels to be momentarily touched by the other lines up with what Freud describes as “something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.”¹⁷⁶

This point is illustrated by Adorno with a musical analogy. The shuddering experience produced by the gramophone’s manifestation of something internally broken serves as an index pointing to the I’s failure to register difference on account of its utilitarian rationality. Adorno will treat this predicament by deepening the contradiction, such that the category of incomprehensibility is reconfigured as the truth of understanding. In this sense, he writes:

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 363-364.

¹⁷⁴ *OD*, 229.

¹⁷⁵ *AT*, 269.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 364.

“He alone would understand music who hears with all the alienness of the unmusical.”¹⁷⁷ By resisting conceptual reduction, the enigmatic moment in the aural phenomenon of music, serves to deliver perspectives that are foreign to the I, perspectives that announce a consciousness of the heterogenous, or further still, perspectives that may well be signalling the presence of the touch of the vanishing other. For Adorno, this concealed aspect comes to light in the reception of dysfunctional musical reproductions: this strange modality of touch addressing itself to the spontaneous ear in the form of a gramophone’s broken conveying of sound presents the listener with something that normally escapes its notice. Symptomatic of a philosophy committed to the concepts of the fragment – as the part that opposes totality and the nonidentical – as the element that increases the strangeness of the object, is the claim that the linear development of sound produced by fully functional machines, paradoxically hinders the recipient’s capacity for interpretation, due to the prevailing indifference that the listening experience provokes. Rather, it is the moment the “gramphonic reproduction breaks down,” when the intermittent noise begins to interfere with the conventional emission of sound and thus to dissolve what is habitual that Adorno aims to capture. The concentration here is on the rejection of the notion of reproduction, which, in Adorno’s line of thinking functions as an allusion to repetition. Reproduction, in this context, subtly reinforces an affirmation of the principle of the assembly line, that of identity, thereby casting a negative light on difference. Bowie explains repetition in Adorno’s work as the “mark of a deep crisis in the concept of truth,”¹⁷⁸ while Jameson interprets it as a subtle critique of the sign of neurosis: “the return of sameness over and over again, in all its psychological desolation and tedium.”¹⁷⁹ In contrast to repetition, the aural dynamic of damaged sound is coded as that which is heterogeneous to the I. According to principles reminiscent of Brechtian alienation,

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁷⁸ Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, 229.

¹⁷⁹ Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 16.

harmony is abruptly unsettled by dissonance. In this way, the deceptive reconciliation governing all representations of harmony – “the smooth gramophonic reproduction” – is unmasked as ideological because it serves to flatten real antagonisms and to cultivate within the subject a socially false consciousness of reconciliation. Instead, the shudder pursues the negative way of estrangement up until “the sound droops in chromatic weakness,”¹⁸⁰ thereby illuminating the shudder’s sensory recollection of the other.

1.5. Interpretation and Allegorical Vision

Mussel succinctly outlines the threefold stages of the shudder as a process that first begins with a proto-cognitive stimulus mediated then by a level of reflection that finally unifies feeling.¹⁸¹ This schematic presentation of the experience of the shudder across three different levels brings forth a final interpretive stance in the economy of the phenomenon. To understand it, it is necessary to look elsewhere than in Adorno’s theoretical discourse around the concept of interpretation namely, at Benjamin’s theory of allegorical vision. Adorno took over from Benjamin the notion of allegorical interpretation, a device that exposes that which appears natural as historically constructed. In his study of German tragic drama, Benjamin addresses the fundamental function of allegory, identifying it as the capacity to interrupt the effect of totality, or false reconciliation predominant in the modern bourgeois society, and at the same time to effectively illuminate the fragmented condition of our situation. Here, he writes: “In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished.”¹⁸² An allegorical interpretation aspires to awaken in images or

¹⁸⁰ Adorno, “The Curves of the Needle,” 71.

¹⁸¹ Mussel, *Critical Theory and Feeling*, 35.

¹⁸² Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 2009), 176.

objects those elements that have yielded to the process of petrification.¹⁸³ The content of such criticism is shaped by “the phenomena brought to a standstill.”¹⁸⁴ If we are currently inhabiting an inverted world whereby the conditions of capitalism, such as subsumption, equivalence, and exchange, have been naturalized in the form of second nature and conversely, the natural world has been historically disparaged as merely the portent of the sociohistorical sphere, then the task of thinking remains that of repositioning things back into their dynamic context, shattering in this way the seemingly immutable and ahistorical character of these principles.¹⁸⁵ The experience of the shudder comes forth here as the pivot around which the work of interpretation turns; such a form of reflection offers the short-lived recognition of the other’s repressed identity. This particular allegorical vision no longer associated with objectifying forms of perception is capable of paradoxically bridging the untouchable distance between subject and object. The visuality to which Adorno refers is incompatible with surveillance and instrumental modes of knowledge. On the contrary, Adorno’s description of the shudder produced by artworks abounds with allusions to a mode of seeing aligned with tactility that yields to that which is seen. “Artworks,” he writes,

are images as apparition, as appearance, and not as a copy. If through the demythologization of the world consciousness freed itself from the ancient shudder, that shudder is permanently reproduced in the historical antagonism of subject and object. The object became as incommensurable to experience, as foreign and frightening, as mana once was. This permeates the image character. It manifests foreignness at the same time that it seeks to make experiential what is thing-like and foreign.¹⁸⁶

The experiential nature of the framework in which Adorno envisages the antagonism between subject and object can be identified as a tactile or embodied encounter between the familiar and the foreign. The shudder’s constant index to the figure of allegory, whose “basic

¹⁸³ *OD*, 202.

¹⁸⁴ *HF*, 135.

¹⁸⁵ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 17.

¹⁸⁶ *AT*, 83-84.

characteristic,” according to Benjamin, “is ambiguity, multiplicity of meaning,” reveals the object to be at once distant (foreign) and proximal (experiential).¹⁸⁷ Distant, because the space thereby carved between the two epistemic poles is enhanced as a medium of reflection; proximal since the same space provides a thingly intimacy that prevents regression into reified consciousness. Alternatively stated, the phenomenon the subject comes to inhabit should solicit “sufficient involvement in it to feel it itching in one’s finger-tips,” while simultaneously informed by such “strength, drawn from this involvement, to dismiss it.”¹⁸⁸ Although a separation should be preserved in order to avoid falling into the pitfalls of irrationalism, Adorno concedes that the interaction between the self and its other is invariably shaped by a shared structure without which experience would not be possible in the first place.¹⁸⁹ Cook illustrates this point by speaking of a material space or common ground, in which we, as creaturely beings participate with other things, since “experience involves the encounter of a corporeal subject with equally material, physical things.”¹⁹⁰ While the original response in the face of the unknown took the form of a violent compulsion to repress, the afterimage of that antagonism, preserved by the shudder-producing artworks, is disclosed by the allegorical vision as what is beyond the reach of identification, namely, the nonidentical moment inherent in all conceptual thinking, since, Adorno argues, even “reason itself becomes mimetic in the shudder of the new.”¹⁹¹ Having its origin in a mythical past, the shudder nevertheless addresses itself to the subject from the position of the new. And what is the new, following this complex incursion into the life of the shudder, if its nature cannot be

¹⁸⁷ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 177.

¹⁸⁸ *MM*, 29.

¹⁸⁹ This point is illustrated in Adorno’s criticism of Heidegger charged with bridging this separation and succumbing to irrationality: “Thought cannot conquer any position wherein the separation of subject and object which lies in every thought, in thinking itself, would immediately disappear. That is why Heidegger’s moment of truth levels out into just another world-view of irrationalism.” *ND*, 85.

¹⁹⁰ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 11.

¹⁹¹ *AT*, 20.

fully disclosed by lived experience? To what kind of presence does its unsettling silence point? “The new,” for Adorno, “is a blind spot, as empty as the purely indexical gesture “look here.”¹⁹² The act of looking in this last moment of allegorical interpretation offers the subject an indirect glimpse of the experience of the excluded other.

1.6. A Multisensory Experience

No longer immediate, synchronous or continuous, Adornian shudder reconfigures sensory perception as the touch of the other, a gesture that within the context of art blends the cognitive with the somatic – a gesture, moreover, impacting the subject with the awareness that it may well be that “goose bumps were the first aesthetic image.”¹⁹³ Here is a form of proto-cognitive sensing that can only be accurately grasped by locating it at the point of intersection between the haptic experience – delivered in the phenomenological act of touch, the aural perception of sound – articulated by the musical form, and a new model of seeing embodied by the allegorical vision, all underwritten by the principle of the new – as an endless source of hope. The result of their unsystematic juxtaposition is the experience of the shudder. The productive association of the three mediums, i.e. sensing, hearing, and looking (and their generative opening, irreducible to neither side of the separation) emerges as all the more paradoxical since it no longer refers the experience to a single sense. By unsettling a previous ontological arrangement dictating the distribution of the senses across rigidly constructed, hierarchical orders, Adorno’s gesture is able to emancipate the sensuous form of

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 331. This conception that resists the compartmentalization of the senses and locates the dissolution of sensory modalities into an archaic past, resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on the multisensory nature of Cezanne’s paintings, wherein the visual overlaps with the tactile. In “Cezanne’s Doubt,” he observes that: “Cezanne does not try to use colour to suggest the tactile sensations which would give shape and depth. These distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception. It is only as a result of a science of the human body that we finally learn to distinguish between our senses.” *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 15.

touch from an official stigma charging it with inferiority and to reinscribe it with equal philosophical weight as the sense of hearing, since the aural dynamic triggered by music binds the constitution of a phenomenological moment of touch with an allegorical model of vision. In sharp contrast to Husserl's digital manipulations, which in trying to achieve the positivist ideal of direct immediacy with the object, depended upon a mode of external coerciveness, Adorno's conceptless synthesis of the senses is underpinned by a changed form of tactile sensitivity: "Nonjudging, artworks point—as with their finger—to their content without its thereby becoming discursive."¹⁹⁴ The metaphor of the index finger resonates with tactile overtones, while the uncoercive gaze engages with the other in a spirit that is no longer coded as a distance sense associated with objectifying mastery. We might imagine this form of non-totalizing synthesis as the anticipation of the possibility of a social synthesis, whereby the sensuous and the cognitive aspects are non-violently reconciled, whereby, furthermore, the structure previously accounting for the categories of subjectivity and objectivity suddenly collapses, leaving us with a mutually determined, yet asymmetrical relation, undamaged by the reduction of difference to identity. As Bowie notes, what he terms "judgementless synthesis" will no longer aspire to reduce its object to what is already known and familiar; instead, it will strive to grasp "something unique and individual."¹⁹⁵ The image before which we shudder approaches the model of a utopian image of reconciliation – an image of social refurbishing whereby "what transcends nature is nature that has become conscious of itself."¹⁹⁶ In that image that artworks aspire to paint, but whose fulfilment remains constantly betrayed, thinking acknowledges its invariably natural background shaped by the objective world of impulse. Against this background, the other turns to face the subject no longer in the

¹⁹⁴ *AT*, 245.

¹⁹⁵ Andrew Bowie, "Interpretation and Truth: Adorno on Literature and Music," *Adorno and Literature*, ed. David Cunningham & Nigel Mapp (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 44.

¹⁹⁶ *PMP*, 104.

form of a threat. And what is it more precisely that this recognition presents to us? “The image of what is oldest in nature reverses dialectically into the cypher of the not-yet-existing, the possible,”¹⁹⁷ refunctioning the prospect of the new from an archaic repetition, into a palpable possibility.

¹⁹⁷ *AT*, 90.

Chapter 2

Nonidentity and the Asymptotic Touch

I once compared artistic production and the process of appropriately understanding it to the ill-reputed miner without a light, who does not see where his path is leading, yet whose sense of touch precisely reveals the texture of the tunnels, the hardness of the resistance, the slippery spots and the dangerous edges, and thus guides his steps and does not abandon them to chance.

– Adorno, *Without Model*¹⁹⁸

This thesis attempts to trace the thematic continuity of the concept of touch in Adorno's work. The previous chapter provided the groundwork for the elaboration of the central theme of the thesis: a theory of affective thinking as a distinctively Adornian contribution to philosophy. The principal strategy was to frame an openness onto such emotionally informed cognitive behaviour by employing and at the same time expanding one of Adorno's own decisive yet underdeveloped constructs. The preceding chapter focused on a particular embodiment of touch, namely the touch of the other as it manifests itself in the irrationally produced, yet all the more rational by virtue of its dialectical constitution, phenomenon of the shudder. Epitomized by the dizzying experience of the new, the concept of touch was revealed to act as a mediator between an I representing repetition and sameness and a not-I understood as otherness and difference. Framed through this network of intellectual and sensorial relationships, the current chapter seeks to determine to what extent touch can be positively

¹⁹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Without Model: Parva Aesthetica*, trans. Wieland Hoban (London: Seagull Books, 2023), 9.

grasped. To which of the forms of presence and absence can it be made to respond? Does its character allow for its firm articulation or on the contrary does it expose it to a systematic instability which prevents it from being fully instantiated? Similar to the way in which the experience of the shudder problematized the act of being touched by the other, the concept of nonidentity poses questions that come to undermine the very foundations of the conventional interpretation of touch; questions that ultimately enact a break with what comes before then, that denounce a Western tradition of self-evident tangibility in which touch is understood as continuous, immediate and empirical. This Adornian lineage of touch announces, by contrast, another line of thinking governed by the leitmotif of the *Bilderverbot* principle, the silent yet constant companion to Adorno's philosophical practice that prevents the figure from being enlisted in the service of positivism – from turning it into “something that we can have and hold.”¹⁹⁹ Herein what will be shown to be the potential of touch – its capacity to present itself in the form of a necessarily ever-broken *promesse du bonheur* (a constant reference to a beyond in the form of a better polity) rather than its actuality advocating an instant, unmediated contact (which would henceforth contaminate it with the deformed present condition) – becomes increasingly significant in Adorno's “idea of a changed philosophy.”²⁰⁰

My aim in this chapter is twofold. First, I want to show how Adorno's thinking of a tactile hermeneutics emerges in the theoretical discourses of *Negative Dialectics* as a concern with safeguarding the nonidentical element. Second, I want to suggest that the strategy of employing only the use of “concepts to unseal the nonconceptual” cannot ultimately account for the sensuous presentation of particularity.²⁰¹ In this sense, I want to show that the problem for Adorno will be to shift the framework beyond the conceptual sphere entertained in the

¹⁹⁹ *OD*, 195.

²⁰⁰ *ND*, 150.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

negative dialectical project. The path to conceiving an epistemology grounded in the sense of touch leads Adorno to turn away from a systematic philosophical intention and to engage with experience in a spirit no longer embedded in the need to identify. The sensory landscape of experience is going to be redeveloped by aesthetic concepts in the differently-conceptual space associated with *Aesthetic Theory*, which carries on from where *Negative Dialectics* left off.

2.1. Identifying Logic and Illicit Touch

The historical pivot around which the principle of identity turns is represented by an imbalance carving itself between the world of objects, shaped by their material character and a dominating consciousness producing order in the form of subjective synthesis.²⁰² Beginning with Plato for whom “*ideas* have a constitutive meaning” the separation thus serves to reinforce the realm of thinking within a hyperbolic subject, indifferent to the object’s sensuous particularity.²⁰³ For Kant, the possibility of objective knowledge is modelled on the unity of constitutive subjectivity.²⁰⁴ In other words, the identity of the subject – the “I think” that must accompany all my representations – comes forth as the inaugural gesture that shapes the objective world in its own image, namely of an increasingly independent mind separated from its physical body.²⁰⁵ The self-aggrandizing logic of identity thinking expands with Hegel’s dictum in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*: “truth is subject,” a claim that suggests a subjective appropriation of all objectivity, squaring the circle of identity and difference. The task of this doctrine will later become that of concealing the contradictions

²⁰² Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1983), 216.

²⁰³ *KCPR*, 24.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

inherent in the split between essence and existence.²⁰⁶ Further developed by fundamental ontology whose specific feature is the ontologizing of the ontic, the particular set of circumstances that have engendered the philosophy of identity culminates in “the primacy of the concept over the thing,” mirrored in that of the subject over being.²⁰⁷

In this sense, identity thinking deceptively holds open a distinction only to then pseudo-reconcile it in the “false conclusion that the object is the subject” – a disfiguring action that inadequately distributes reifying and fetishizing patterns across both sides of the opposition.²⁰⁸ On account of its inability to recognize the presence of difference in the objects it addresses, the principle of identity suppresses the qualitative, changing moments, which escape the concept’s invariance.²⁰⁹ Furthermore, “the coercion to which the form of identification really subjects” mankind eliminates those contents that are contradictory, heterogeneous and oppositional in character, such that entities can suddenly be portrayed as commensurable with one another.²¹⁰ If the prototype of identity is represented by the concept, that of the subject, by the model of synthetic unity. By subsuming under its definition only certain characteristics that the object shares with others of its kind, its internal logic ensures that “each thing is what it is only by becoming what it is not.”²¹¹ To pass judgment informed by such logic is to render exchangeable the subject with the predicate under the authoritarian jurisdiction of “the copula that says: It is so, not otherwise.”²¹² The weight with which the

²⁰⁶ *AE*, 180.

²⁰⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 125.

²⁰⁸ *ND*, 150.

²⁰⁹ On Jameson’s reading, however, the primacy of the concept carries with it a favourable implication, as well, because its emergence marks a decisive moment in which the mind abandons the “primal flux of sheer names that would seem to characterize preconceptual thinking” and begins to elaborate an ability to perceive universals, without which modern reason could not have developed. *Late Marxism*, 20.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

²¹¹ *DE*, 11.

²¹² *ND*, 147.

copula bestows meaning on the subject admits of no resistance from the predicate as its declarative tone removes from its path any trace of external opposition. That which would customarily pass as a conventional philosophical operation, namely concept formation – determining the identity between concept and thing – reveals in this line of argument one of the most ruinous forms of thinking, analogous to “the primal form of ideology,” due to the removal, or forgetting of nonidentity.²¹³ By proceeding on this basis, thinking’s science-based model of detached observation will prove to have equally tactile effects.

2.2. Touch, Taste, Vision

As Adorno’s heuristic use of the haptic image of the scar shows – “irrationality is the scar which the irremovable nonidentity of subject and object leaves on cognition”²¹⁴ – the hostile touch exercised by the principle of identity is able to affect and reconfigure the surface of incarnate subjects, with significant physical consequences. In this section, I want to analyse Adorno’s understanding of the simple identifying judgment as the exemplification of an illicit touch. I then want to propose a new reading of the nonidentical element as an alternative name for that which has been rejected and hence, rendered untouchable. Adorno first expounds on the link that the history of philosophy has forged between the concept of nonidentity and that of intangibility. The weakness of the conceptual register in sustaining a sensory discourse will prompt Adorno to reorient the operation of rescuing the nonidentical remainder toward a framework able to exert a different relation to touch, acting as a bulwark against the hostile strokes of identity thinking. In this sense, Adorno introduces terms derived from a somatic register that appeal to taste in order to outline the activity of the closed

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 148.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

philosophical system. Herein terminological allusions to illegitimate forms of touch indicating modes of bodily appropriation and physical overconsumption abound:

Idealism—most explicitly Fichte—gives unconscious sway to the ideology that the not-I, l'autrui, and finally all that reminds us of nature is inferior, so the unity of the self-preserving thought may devour (*verschlingen*) it without misgivings. This justifies the principle of the thought as much as it increases the appetite (*Begierde*, lust). The system is the belly (*Bauch*) turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism.²¹⁵

Apart from the explicit polemic directed against Fichte's idealist system, this is an implicit critique levelled against the standard of taste and its moral use. It is important to note here that beginning with Aristotle, who regarded taste as a "sort of touch,"²¹⁶ the common view in medieval scholastics and late-twenty-century anthropology was that the carnal senses ranked the lowest in the treatment of sensation.²¹⁷ They included smell, taste, and touch and were traditionally grouped together by the prejudice that they shared the characters of primitivity and animality.²¹⁸ However, the competing view of Enlightenment European philosophy regarded taste as a metaphor for aesthetic sensitivity to fine distinctions and the capacity to recognize beauty. Furthermore, the subjective synthesis underpinning the judgement of taste becomes an allegory for social synthesis and agreement. For Adorno, this position is no longer tenable in a modern culture that has failed to develop morally. The anthropomorphic description of the system's pathological dissatisfaction disavows the figure of synthesis internal to both system and aesthetic judgment. Herein Adorno takes the symbolism of taste including the more vulgar facets of the sense to extremes, and refunctions it as a sublimated

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²¹⁶ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 39; 67.

²¹⁷ Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 109.

²¹⁸ Constance Classen, "Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses," *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153 (1997): 405, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2451.1997.tb00032.x>.

form of gluttony that completely absorbs all opposition and dissolves contradictions into a (false) unity.

Adorno repeatedly makes the analogy between the closed philosophical system and the closed social system. The core figure of anthropology – the instinct of self-preservation – is transferred to the sphere of epistemology and read as the principle of identity, the need to preserve the identical self. From a social standpoint, instrumental rationality manifests itself in the process of integration. The result is a total society that first achieves the integration of the proletariat into the bourgeoisie, then of any critical oppositional force into a state of conformity, and finally of the manifold of phenomena into the synthesizing, yet levelling unity of the “I think.”²¹⁹ What falls outside the I’s appetitive faculties is immediately rendered inimical – and subjected to domination in the same spirit that Adorno identifies in the biblical wisdom: “he who is not for me is against me.”²²⁰ The passage informs us that what the system’s standard of taste cannot classify is immediately rejected. Adorno’s subtle and implicit denunciation of the class language of philosophies of taste is concentrated in the figure of the system that “spew[s] (*speit*) undigested (*Unverdaut*) scraps of subjugated nature.”²²¹ Korsmeyer’s suggestion that “the model of deliberate tasting without swallowing is the professional wine taster” is instructive here.²²² What the activity of wine tasting and the project of eighteenth-century philosophers of taste have in common is the objective of a privileged elite group to determine a universal standard of taste that deliberately conceals differences. Adorno’s heuristic use of the sense of taste reveals the process of assimilation immanent to the social and philosophical systems. Departing from a framework of tactile

²¹⁹ Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 196.

²²⁰ *MM*, 131.

²²¹ *ND*, 347.

²²² Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 105.

delicacy, the gustatory role in the standard of taste is figured as a hostile species of tactile appropriation. Adorno's catalogue of rough sensations is evoked by the descriptions of ingestion, digestion, and ultimately indigestion in reaction to otherness. The refinement of gustatory, as well as aesthetic, tastes resonates with allusions coded as class privilege.²²³ By comparing the decayed idealist system to a pair of disembodied mouth and stomach whose lust or appetite, understood as the compulsion to identify, devours all acts of resistance or internalizes all external phenomena, Adorno invites us to think of the violent identifying logic as a variant of illicit touch, which sometimes can take on fatal forms. At least, this seems to be the direction Adorno is pushing us toward in the following visualization of the act of illicit touch: "whatever does not fit a judgement will be choked off (*Abgewürgt*, strangled)."²²⁴ The unsettling image of a pair of hands emerging from this description – the metonym for the presence of the violent body of instrumental reason – provides the language for understanding the physical effects that the principle of identity enacts. Adorno here disrupts the received view that linked vision and knowledge. The injuries caused by instrumental thinking, mirrored in the process of strangling, are associated not with vision, but with touch. By opening up afflicted sites of tactility, these faceless hands function as a reminder of the materiality of sentient bodies and their perishable nature.

At the same time, they serve to heighten Adorno's anti-ocularcentric discourse. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, Adorno appears to connect sometimes explicitly, at other times implicitly, the act of touch to the experience of visual failure: "the blind anxiety of the shudder (*blinden Angst des Schauers*)" provides the basis for the "act of being touched by the other."²²⁵ Even in the notion of the "gaze that artworks direct at the

²²³ *Ibid.*, 63.

²²⁴ *ND*, 233.

²²⁵ *AT*, 331.

viewer” introduced in order to account for art’s enigmatic character,²²⁶ Adorno’s conception of the anthropomorphic phenomenon is characterized not by the unidirectional vision traditionally aligned with mastery, but by the visceral immediacy at work in the sense of touch. The enigmatic non-sopic gaze with which recipients are confronted develops tactile connections since modern artworks’ shocking character shake the subjects out of their distance from the artwork. Adorno’s allusion to the haptic quality of vision is here in line with Derrida’s question stressing the tactile remainder in the optical, rather than the distant and surveillant visualism of the eye: “can eyes manage to touch, first of all, to press together like lips?”²²⁷ By the same token, by attacking the abstracted visualization procedures, Adorno’s conception of the gaze evokes Alois Riegl’s definition of haptic vision, a modality of vision that by caressing the visible surface can distinguish not only the form but also the texture of the object.²²⁸

In conformity with the Old Testament ban on making images of God, the subject of Adornian philosophy is prohibited from picturing any positive image of postrevolutionary society.²²⁹ There is almost a complete absence of (functional) eyes in Adorno’s depictions. “The splinters in your eyes is the best magnifying glass.”²³⁰ The ban on graven images serves to refunction the visible form of perception into a tactile relationship to the world. When an occasional reference is made, it points to a form of sight unable to see, yet able to engage in a tactile mode of perception. This point can be explained with reference to Adorno’s aesthetical writings. The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter illustrates Adorno’s refusal to ground knowledge in vision through the use of the metaphor of the miner, who, having lost all

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

²²⁷ Derrida, *On Touching*, 2.

²²⁸ Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1985).

²²⁹ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 24.

²³⁰ *MM*, 50.

possibility of seeing, engages tactfully with the surrounding environment in order to find his way out. Here and elsewhere,²³¹ the category of blindness, more exactly the blind surrendering to the artwork which appears to suggest the existence of a species of tactile experience, becomes a stand-in for the lost authority of vision. Adorno also privileged the myopic vision of Beckett's characters. His reflections on *Endgame*, as well as the preparatory notes for the essay on Beckett, reveal a strange fascination with the concept of blindness. Ham's gesture of pulling "a cloth over his eyes to keep out the light or the flies" denotes for Adorno the visual analogy for Clov's realization when peering out the window that there is no more nature.²³² For Adorno, blindness becomes the "consequence of the catastrophe."²³³ Deteriorated sight impaired by "concept fetishism" comes forth as a symptom of damaged life; the corrective would consist in "a philosophy that lets us know this, that extinguishes the autarky of the concept," a process of reflection that "strips the blindfold from our eyes."²³⁴ What prevails in the current situation, however, are only vulnerable bodies shaped by violent touches indicative of the false condition in which they exist. In Adorno's reading, this violence is legitimized by the constant invocation of the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Viewed from this standpoint, identity theory gropes, palpates, and pokes the other with the lethal instruments of abstract logic that ultimately consume the "object's qualitative moments" withstanding definition.²³⁵ The abusive character of this unsolicited modality of touching manifests itself in the form of conceptual manipulation as the other is filtered through and coloured by a narrow field of rubrics. The consequences of the idealist project of

²³¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 128; Adorno, *Without Model*, 7.

²³² Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," trans. Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique*, no. 26 (1982): 131, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488027>.

²³³ Dirk Van Hulle and Shane Weller, "Adorno's Notes on *Endgame*," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 163. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26471094>.

²³⁴ *ND*, 12.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

determining the identity of thought and being, subject and object are illustrated by what Adorno terms an “administrative mode of thought” – the historical development of modern rationality modelled on “the research questionnaire.”²³⁶

We can understand the consequences of such schematized modes of human thinking by situating them in relation to social practices that can reveal their potential for symbolic and concrete forms of violence that often condemn, exclude, damage, or repress bodies on the basis of class, ethnic, racial, and gender identities. Adorno’s thinking on administrative and reified mentality gestures towards the fate to which the material existence of shattering, fleshy bodies is exposed. When abstract logic represses the somatic and affective instances it is because its subordinating logic and unifying formulas fail to capture the singularity of the physical instance, “that which in reflecting upon the mind appears specifically as not mental,” but on the contrary, as “material.”²³⁷ The object’s particularity, its sensuous excess, what Adorno calls the “very wealth of the existent which is otherwise cut off by the logic of judgement,”²³⁸ remains altogether incomprehensible to the highly abstract mechanism of rationality. Although identity thinking’s compulsion to identify particulars with universal concepts does not always harm physically, its traumatic touches frequently induce pain and suffering in different disguises, such as the violent reconciliation that the principle of identity enforces “between human beings and their own world” as the basis of “suffering.”²³⁹ But how does the thread of suffering unfold across Adorno’s understanding of identitarian philosophy? Despite the paucity of detail in Adorno’s work, it is nonetheless underpinned by a Feuerbachian substructure, wherein the subject of philosophical experience is conceived as

²³⁶ *OD*, 158.

²³⁷ *ND*, 193.

²³⁸ *A*, 28.

²³⁹ *ID*, 46.

material and transitory, and thus, exposed to the social reality of suffering.²⁴⁰ Within this framework, there are helpful resources that can illustrate the significance of suffering for identifying touches. We therefore turn to two essays concentrating on the intimate link between the act of illicit touching and the activity of writing that can assist us in understanding what Adorno's theory never explicitly elaborated.

This idea of an illicit touch that has the capacity to mark the other in often violent ways lines up with Grosz's description of what she terms "textualized bodies." Her account provides a useful basis for understanding the inscriptive processes enacted by various regimes of power in order to construct subjectivity. From institutionalized disciplinary discourses to medicalized observations, torture and punishment, the forms of cruelty outlined in her work serve to organize our corporeal economy by inscribing the body with "living significations."²⁴¹ These practices function as instruments employed to etch, engrave, or inscribe the living bodies on both figurative (as processes of calculation, classification, exclusion), and physical levels (as the pain inflicted by different institutions such as "prisons, juvenile homes, hospitals").²⁴² The traces these objectifying touches leave on subjects bring Grosz closer to Adorno's understanding of the consequences of identification. For Adorno, a definition identifies "by placing its mark on the object."²⁴³ The activity of marking the object in conceptual definition comes to stand metonymically for that which has been injured by the superiority of reason. From an Adornian perspective, it becomes difficult to disentangle the illegitimate touch exercised by the identity principle from the experience of pain, since the

²⁴⁰ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 83.

²⁴¹ Elisabeth Grosz, "Inscriptions and body-maps: representations and the corporeal," *Feminine/Masculine and Representation*, ed. Terry Threadgold & Anna Cranny-Francis (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 63.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁴³ *ND*, 149.

wound inflicted by the subject on the object physically marks the latter as damaged, excluded, or repressed.

Following Derrida's definition of the trace as an unavoidably violent arche-writing,²⁴⁴ Erin Manning's study maps the idea of illegitimate touch onto the vocabulary of the nation-state. Her treatment of touch in connection to normativity and law attempts to unsettle the state-centric theories that contribute to the portrayal of touch as the "violent writing of the relationship between self and other."²⁴⁵ State violence is figured across her account as a form of illicit writing on the body of the other. Within this economy of violence, the other is marked by acts that become "textualized, made into a writing."²⁴⁶ These practices fix corporeality into the straightjacket of "stable" forms by encoding through bodies the unilateral relationship between the national and the refugee, the citizen and the sovereign. Her suggestion is that the affirmation of the relational capacities of moving bodies has transformative potentials, in that they can challenge the marking mechanisms exercised by the body-politic. What Manning appears to share with Adorno is the claim that the process of touch does not move in a singular direction. The hostile touches that in Adorno's parlance are symptomatic of damaged life can be mobilized as Manning's "choreographies" that shake bodies out of the reified patterns, dictated either by the identifying logic of conceptualization or enforced by its social model in the form of the coercive state apparatus.

Equipped with this understanding, we can see that Adorno frequently shifts freely between the two registers of conceptual logic and physical reality. In Adorno's view, "the universal [...] compresses the particular until it splinters, like a torture instrument."²⁴⁷ The

²⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 101.

²⁴⁵ Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 56.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *ND*, 346.

description of the conceptual relation between the category of the universal and the concrete particular mirrored in the preponderance of the society of capitalist exchange over individuals unveils something essential about the material existence of bodies across his work. When Adorno states: “What is, is more than it is. This “more” [...] remains immanent to it, as that which has been pushed out of it (*Verdrängte*, repression),” there is no longer a break to segregate the conceptual semantic – the irreducibility of nonidentity introduced by the figure of “the more” – from a framework of physicality – dominated by the image of a deforming pressure. The wounds resulting from the operations of identificatory thought – being literally touched by repression – cannot thus be entirely separated from an empiricist account. Sometimes his concern appears to be focused on the impact of instrumental reason on the sentient body. The insistence on the ineliminable material moment underpinning conceptual definition suggests that the effects precipitated by the doctrine of identity are not limited to an epistemological issue. Accordingly, Adorno provides access to the relation between the individual and the universal standing opposed to it via a digression through practical philosophy:

If I say to you that the true basis of morality is to be found in bodily feeling, in identification with unbearable pain, I am showing you from a different side something which I earlier tried to indicate in a far more abstract form. It is that morality, that which can be called moral i.e. the demand for right living, lives on in openly materialist motifs.²⁴⁸

Adorno connects touch and ethics by encoding both wrong and right lives in tactile motifs. However, identification is figured here as an act that verifies the experience of suffering and enables us to reflect on the interrelatedness of the physiological and the political status of pain. For Adorno, “the pure moment of identity” represents “the result of abstraction from all predicates.”²⁴⁹ Identity thinking involves “purity from the factual,” and in this way becomes

²⁴⁸ *M*, 116-117.

²⁴⁹ *ND*, 149.

independent from experience,²⁵⁰ pure thought. The exaltation of thinking into a pure entity occurs by severing all affective content then. In this sense, by employing a mechanism of logical purification, identity thinking cordons off the somatic aspects of experience from cognition. For Adorno, the principle of identity was absolutized by the concentration camps. The purity characteristic of the abstract logic of mathematics resulted in the systematic and rationally planned atrocities conducted by the Nazi regime. Adorno's reflections on the Nazi genocide of the Jews disclose the core structure of identity as ultimately fatal: "the pure identity of all people with their concept is nothing other than their death."²⁵¹ Taken to its extreme, total identity thinking no longer individuates but conversely, shows itself to be in complicity with genocide. The form of touch resulting from pure abstraction can be characterized as irrational, repressive and violent. Following Adorno's suggestion that deep-rooted in the process of identity thinking rests the telos of unmitigated destruction, we can note a correlation at work between pure thinking and illicit touch, namely that the more thinking is rendered purely cognitive and as a result becomes dispossessed of its affective supplement, the more literal and traumatic are its touches. In response to a form of touch that has no relation to a determinate content, Adorno introduces as a corrective his critique of the mind-body dualism. This occurs by suggesting the conflation of the affective and perceptive elements of experience, and by addressing the figurative meaning through a vocabulary of literalness:

Every sensation is a physical feeling also. The feeling does not even "accompany" it, for that would pre-suppose a tangibility of the sensation's chorismos; in fact, it gets this chorismos solely from the noological intent—from abstraction, strictly speaking. The linguistic shading of such words as "sensuous," "sensual," even "sensation" itself shows how little the designated facts are the pure moments of cognition as which they are treated in epistemology.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ *AE*, 168.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁵² *ND*, 193-194.

2.3. Non-identity Thinking and Intangibility

What form would a touching take that no longer remains indifferent to the object's qualitative moments, but on the contrary, would seek to articulate that which the grammar of instrumental reason cannot accommodate? How does this model of touch position itself in regard to the division between animistic and disenchanted thought? In order to understand the ways in which Adorno's thinking gestures toward a tactile sensitivity that engages with the scarred non-identity of the object, it is first necessary to turn to the ur-historical split that accounts for the current fate of sensuous particularity. As the movement that caused the development of anthropomorphic nature (a mode of seeing living qualities even in the non-living) is reversed in the opposite direction by the process of disenchantment (the gradual assimilation of the living to the non-living) something is lost and becomes increasingly problematic to retrieve. Conti helpfully summarizes the ontological consequences of the phenomenon of disenchantment as follows: no longer governed by the animistic outlook that spiritualized the object, and stripped of the transcending metaphysical impulses, "the reified concept reduces the object to a brute 'fact'."²⁵³ This increasingly monopolist form of reasoning, which tolerates only what is known and familiar, indicates a hostility, Adorno claims, to those ineffable, diffuse, and unexplicit instances forming one aspect of our lived experience.²⁵⁴ Against this background of metaphysical loss, a crisis of meaning installs itself in the epistemological sphere.²⁵⁵ Therein the fragmentary character of the nonidentical emerges as an expression of the impossibility of subsuming the particular under the general

²⁵³ Conti, "Sensation at Odds with Itself," 105.

²⁵⁴ In Adorno's letter to Benjamin dated 29 February, 1940, Adorno concedes his preference for a paratactic order of thinking: "I am convinced that our own best thoughts are invariably those that we cannot entirely think through." Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 321.

²⁵⁵ Henri Lonitz, "Editor's Afterword," *The Complete Correspondence*, 344.

without “leaving a remainder,” without casting a persistent and irreducible remnant of meaning on the boundary dividing materiality and signification.²⁵⁶

As we have seen, identity discourse operates in terms of rational mechanisms that fail to cover the nonconceptual aspect of entities. Its force of abstraction, compatible only with a disenchanted thought’s preference for normative metrics and grids, effectively evacuates the incalculable, untranslatable and recalcitrant moments provided by the senses and encountered by thinking so as to suppress any traces of contradiction that these contents might have. Since under the authority of instrumental rationality tactile identities were shown to be conditioned by the mutilating and highly abstract touch of the principle of equivalence that renders the particularity of objects exchangeable with one another, Adorno will have to address the question of the nonidentical through a conceptual framework modelled on materiality.

Adorno’s claim that “the physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different” points to the somatic responsiveness that has the capacity to disrupt, if only partially, the illegitimate conceptual touches exercised by identity thinking.²⁵⁷

Viewed from this standpoint, the experience of nonidentity – that irrepressible moment at once groundless and invariably shaped by concreteness – begins for Adorno not with the sense of wonder, as Platonic philosophy envisaged the birth of philosophy, “but in horror.”²⁵⁸

Rather than animated by a background of bewilderment, the nature of this fundamental Adornian category calls, above all, for the elaboration of a frame of reference produced in accordance with the spirit of a melancholy science capable of making amends to the damage historically inflicted upon the world of objects by the procedures of identity thinking. With respect to a behaviour suited to safeguard the nonidentical element, Adorno glosses this point

²⁵⁶ *ND*, 5.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

²⁵⁸ Conti, “Sensation at Odds with Itself,” 105.

in the following terms: “My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking.”²⁵⁹

How does Adorno account for the nonidentical and why is our cognition rendered inadequate in relation to it? In formulating the structure of the nonidentical Adorno turns away from the Heideggerian notion of Being as a pure essence that cannot be accounted for in philosophical discourse.²⁶⁰ Regardless of the challenges faced in attempting its presentation, the task of the philosopher, Adorno repeatedly insists, is to articulate the nonidentical as “the thing’s own identity against its identifications” more exactly, to mediate the abstraction advanced by the concept with the nominalist rejection of universals fostered by sensuous particulars, and not to reduce it to the abstract and empty haecceity of thisness (the appanage of positivism).²⁶¹ Although the framing of the nonidentical occurs in a profoundly paradoxical expression, it should nevertheless capture the object’s multifaceted and partly contradictory aspects and relations, namely: against the clarity of conceptual definitions (“direct communicability to everyone is not a criterion of truth”)²⁶² and instead, in terms that increase its strangeness and reveal the object’s unsettling nonidentity with itself. In this sense, Adorno is committed to withstand a doctrine of essences that would ignore all facticity (the object’s mediations). Despite a shared ambition with Husserl’s dictum “to the things themselves,” this project refuses to resort to the phenomenological bracketing of the nonidentical, a gesture which would ultimately amount to its dissolution into a condition of

²⁵⁹ *ND*, 5.

²⁶⁰ Although in *The German Aesthetic Tradition*, 195, Hammermeister remarks in passing that “a striking parallel exists between Adorno’s notion of the nonidentical and Heidegger’s notion of Being” the two categories are incompatible on account of their negative and positive underpinnings, respectively. For an analysis that delineates Adorno’s category of nonidentity against Derrida’s differance see: Sabine Wilke, “Adorno and Derrida as Readers of Husserl: Some Reflections on The Historical Context of Modernism and Postmodernism,” *Boundary 2* 16, no. 2/3 (1989): 77–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/303297>.

²⁶¹ *ND*, 161.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 41.

pure immediacy – itself ungraspable by conceptual thinking.²⁶³ Finally, the character of nonidentity remains irreconcilable with the Derridean notion of the trace, insofar as the latter registers the presence of a residue abandoned on the boundary separating language from meaning, since this gesture would merely lend itself to a residual theory of truth. Whereas the trace has “properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace,”²⁶⁴ Adorno locates the structure of nonidentity as internal to the object: “this ‘more’” namely, the object’s true identity long since fallen into oblivion, “is not imposed upon it, but remains immanent to it.”²⁶⁵ What then are the terms in which these neglected, effectively alienated pieces of contradiction can be considered if their internal structure and logical arrangement are always subject to an exclusion by the regulating unity of the whole? How can thinking begin to aim at these contents if, on the one hand, no thinking can escape the identifying logic of conceptualization and on the other, the principle modality of the nonidentical withstands thought’s integration, remaining incompatible with its identifying mechanisms? By what means and along what channels can the subject “make up for what it has done to nonidentity”?²⁶⁶

2.4. A Taboo on Touch

As it is presently constructed by Adorno tactility appears to be split in two components. In the face of the growing violence of identity that, as we have noted, exposed reason to a process that relies on “maiming” and “mutilation,”²⁶⁷ an alternative epistemic orientation opens an account of nonidentity that is irreconcilable with tactility. Adorno presents us with the

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison, Newton Garver (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 156.

²⁶⁵ *ND*, 161.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 388.

ideological error of locating the resolution to the problem of excessive touch in its polar opposite: the prohibition of tactile experience. Throughout this line of reasoning, I argue, the blurring of the distinction between the taboo on thinking what is unverbalizable and the taboo on touching that which is intangible is located in Adorno's account of the doctrine of the block – a thread that runs throughout his body of work and uncovers something important about his understanding of the negation of contact. In this regard, he writes: “Confusion about identity tends to make thinking capitulate to the indissoluble. Such thinking turns the object's indissolubility into a taboo for the subject. The subject is to resign itself, irrationalistically or scientifically, and not to touch whatever is unlike it (*nicht an das rühren soll*).”²⁶⁸ As a result of its systematic ruination, the “more” of nonidentity is driven out of the object and rendered a formless and indeterminate piece of monstrous excess. In light of this total expelling, a barrier against touching – a metonymic substitution for the act of thinking – threatens to impose itself. This ambiguity is further elaborated when Adorno points out that this gesture “combines an appetite for incorporation with an aversion to what cannot be incorporated.”²⁶⁹ Adorno here invites us to consider the nonidentity of the object as the agent of touch that simultaneously provokes attraction and repulsion. The emphasis in Adorno's formulation of the interweaving of tactile reception and cognitive perception – “the materialist longing to grasp (*begreifen*, understand) the thing” –²⁷⁰ is placed on the embodied physicality of the mind. By giving a sense of embodiment to the subject's desire for a tactile encounter with the object that fails to materialize, Adorno enables us to grasp how the bans on touching and thinking operate in similar ways.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

Embarking on this train of thought we can distinguish in the ban on touch emerging in the subject's reaction to incomprehensibility, what Šterk explains in psychoanalytical terms as the horror the subject experiences when faced with what lies beyond symbolization, "the uncanniness of the 'too-close-to-touch.'"²⁷¹ Her account sketches the nature of our encounter with the unspeakable instant and indicates the locus in language that unfolds its material consequences. Šterk's list illustrating the figures of speech we employ denoting the sense of touch – "to tremble," "to feel one's hair standing on end," "to have one's heart in one's mouth," "to have a lump in one's throat," "to grow pale," "to make one's flesh crawl" – serves to express the somatic reaction triggered by the presence of the Lacanian "Thing," prompting a defence mechanism of repression. In this sense, Šterk claims that the physical dimension captured by language in articulating the surplus of signification in fact "provides the means to scare us away, to prevent the impossible encounter, to avoid the happening of the unimaginable outside all language."²⁷² The moment the symbolic medium collapses, the sense of touch becomes responsible for keeping at bay the unrepresentable excess. This is because the living body does not operate within the realm of the symbolic codings. It signifies not by resorting to linguistic sense, but to a mute, bodily perception.²⁷³ As Adorno

²⁷¹ Karmen Šterk, "Surplus of Touch: From the Forest of Symbols to the Jungle of Touch," *The Language of Touch: Philosophical Examinations in Linguistics and Haptic Studies*, ed. Mirt Komel (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 48.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁷³ Although different from the type of silence championed by Kant, Wittgenstein, or even Heidegger – whom Adorno critiques in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 54, for perpetuating the cliché image of old farmers smoking their pipes in silence as a means to uncover an allegedly profound virtue, shared only by rural life and the pure condition of Being – Adorno nevertheless advocates a certain kind of muteness. In *AT*, 205, Adorno claims that "only the intensive aiming of words toward the nucleus of the innermost muteness can be effective." His commitment to this form of quietude is not equivalent to a mythically charged silence that Heidegger praised as having an existential foundation: "Keeping silent authentically is possible only in genuine discoursing. To be able to keep silent, Dasein must have something to say that is, it must have at its disposal an authentic and rich disclosedness of itself." *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 2001), 208. Such behaviour would ultimately amount to what Hegel ironically defined as the "dull, empty consciousness" of the isolated priest who "for years on end,

notes: “A language remote from all meaning is not a speaking language and this is its affinity to muteness.”²⁷⁴ From the perspective of enlightened rationality functioning in a language-mediated structure, the sensuous signifies the breakdown of signification. For this reason, it becomes a device able to step outside the margin of representational meaning and to breach linguistic boundaries. As Adorno makes immediately clear, “the somatic” converges with the “unmeaningful stratum of life.”²⁷⁵ Sensuous experience and unverbalizable content exceeding language are of a piece then. The tactile motifs employed by our vocabulary to describe the visceral magnitude of the experience of anxiety become the barrier denying access to what lies beyond signification. Applying this argument to the domain of negative epistemology, the enigmatic space described by Adorno as the “gap between words and the thing they conjure” precipitates the image of untouchability precisely because the structure of the gap is shadowed by the presence of a sensuous remainder.²⁷⁶

What brings Adorno’s thinking on nonidentity in line with a discourse that in the moment of the breakdown of signification assigns the body the task of expressing somatically what we can no longer articulate rationally, is the mobilization of the material body that forms the essence of the concept of nonidentity. From this perspective, the unutterable instance held open by nonidentity demonstrates a form of physicality ungraspable solely by cognition. In the words of Feola, the nonidentical constitutes the “experiential ‘noise’” that

physically motionless and equally unmoved in sensation, conception, fantasy, desire and so on, looking only at the tip of his nose, he says inwardly only *Om, Om, Om*, or else nothing at all.” *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 73. In contrast, Adorno envisions the prototype for communication through muteness in a passage that articulates a form of eloquence divorced from communicative language: “That aspect of the Etruscan vases that most resembles speech depends most likely on their Here I am or This is what I am, a selfhood not first excised by identificatory thought from the interdependence of entities. Thus the rhinoceros, that mute animal, seems to say: I am a rhinoceros.” *AT*, 112.

²⁷⁴ *AT*, 79.

²⁷⁵ *ND*, 365.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

fails to be registered by the tools of our present conceptual thinking.²⁷⁷ The concept of dissonance implied by Feola reflects in the musical form of discontinuity the presence of antagonisms in the social sphere.²⁷⁸ As Allen points out, across Adorno's body of work, "dissonance bears the form of a negative dialectics as it presents sensual happiness in absence."²⁷⁹ The concentration is on the sensibly mediated ground of thinking. In this context, dissonance serves to convert the musical experience of estrangement into a tactile one, as the vibrating body resonates with the material, rather than the conceptual existence of the object.

There appears to be something frightening, unsettling or strange in these spectral remnants of sensuous meaning attending the conceptual side of the object then. Adorno's reflections on the uncrossable limit imposed on the category of transcendence can provide interpretations as to why modern philosophy has constantly revealed a phobic fear toward the enigmatic dissonance of nonidentity, and has accordingly developed a prohibition against engaging with it.²⁸⁰ In highlighting the common ground between philosophy and language on one side, and the sense of touch on the other, we can identify in Adorno's writings two models that portray the denial of the impulse to touch rendered as the emergence of intangibility in philosophical discourse: Kant and Wittgenstein. In Adorno's view, philosophy

²⁷⁷ Michael Feola, *The Powers of Sensibility: Aesthetic Politics through Adorno, Foucault, and Ranciere* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 26.

²⁷⁸ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 39.

²⁷⁹ William S. Allen, *Adorno, Aesthetics, Dissonance: On Dialectics in Modernity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 13.

²⁸⁰ The elimination of the category of transcendence is the fantasy of an enclosure in which idealist philosophies had repeatedly cast, each in its own way, the interiority of an isolated consciousness on which the phenomena of the outside world no longer have any bearing. This is precisely why Adorno's preoccupations with Kierkegaard's work point to the failure of such bourgeois interiority to produce an accurate perspective on account of its withdrawal from material existence. Its role is to reject any alternatives to the existing bourgeois order and implicitly, to cordon off from the mind the living body, condemning in this way the fate of tactile experience to a state of almost complete absence.

is constantly pulled in opposing directions. In a certain sense, as metaphysics, it indicates the defiant act of “thinking beyond itself, into openness” intangibilities foreign to experience.²⁸¹ Yet in another sense, the concepts articulating the transcendent nature of things always “refer to nonconceptualities;” in short, to the tangible determinations of experience.²⁸² Furthermore, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer introduce the anthropological concept of mana to describe the archaic anxiety produced by such intangibility, conceived as something “primal and undifferentiated [...] unknown and alien; it is that which transcends the bounds of experience, the part of things which is more than their immediately perceived existence.”²⁸³ As Šterk’s argument has emphasized, tactility (immanence) is theoretically capable of communicating what lies beyond the boundaries of existence (transcendence). If the terrifying mana cannot be touched by speaking language, our tactile receptivity warns against the mana of touch. By inverting the argument that touch functions as a device preventing the emergence of inexpressible horror, it will become apparent that Kant and Wittgenstein’s refusal to engage with the metaphysical question brought out in Adorno’s criticism, becomes equivalent to a taboo on touching since touch serves as the common denominator for both transcendence and immanence.

The transposition of this schema is figured for Adorno in Kant’s doctrine of the block. Kant contended that only a form of intellectual intuition unavailable to finite beings could be able to gain knowledge of things, since all human knowledge is knowledge only of concepts. His system thus installs an epistemological block on the “things-in-themselves” in order to deny access to absolute knowledge. Adorno elaborates on this point by addressing the question of knowledge in Kant with a haptic vocabulary of proximity and distance, whereby

²⁸¹ *M*, 68.

²⁸² *ND*, 11.

²⁸³ *DE*, 11.

what is proximal – the reference to the phenomenal realm of the tangible – dissolves the moment we approach it, becoming distant – a reference to the noumenal order of the intangible: “the closer [knowledge] comes to its object, the more it shapes it in its own image and thus drives it further and further away.”²⁸⁴ What Adorno seems to be suggesting is that Kant’s epistemologically problematic concepts – God, freedom, immortality – that do not have an object stand in stark contrast to reason’s need to reach them and its alignment with the transitivity of touch that invariably requires an object. Against the received view of touch as the sense offering proximity, any attempts to touch the object of knowledge work to reaffirm its distance. There appears to be a similar rationale at stake behind the structure of the Kantian prohibition to think the obstacle in knowledge encountered by the subject and Adorno’s narrative accounting for the nonidentical as the impenetrable source of knowledge that provides the foundation of experience and the cornerstone of knowledge.²⁸⁵ He goes on to note that we:

are not even told that there is no God, that there is no freedom, that there is no immortality – even this negative sustenance is withheld from us in our philosophical need. Instead we find a threatening armed guard posted at the gate who tells us: You are not even permitted to ask about this. Now it is very difficult for consciousness to bear this prohibition.²⁸⁶

The thematic continuity of the block, restricting speculative reason to touch beyond the limits of experience, resurfaces in Adorno’s writings in his critique against Wittgenstein’s adage from the opening of the *Tractatus*: “whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.”²⁸⁷ Wittgenstein’s injunction to abolish the metaphysical question announces precisely the emergence of the prohibition to approach that which is inarticulable in language. Adorno’s argument implies that what Wittgenstein recognizes as unspeakable is precisely the

²⁸⁴ *KCPR*, 176.

²⁸⁵ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 83.

²⁸⁶ *OD*, 114.

²⁸⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (Project Gutenberg, 2010), 23, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-pdf.pdf>.

strangeness of the object, the nonidentical moment that invariably appears “as matter, or as inseparably fused with material things.”²⁸⁸

The acknowledgement that the point of correspondence between the unsayable and the untouchable is the materiality of concepts that can touch from a distance (as their constitution fosters a sensory dimension) compels Wittgenstein to formulate such ban on thinking mirroring the ban on touch, as the voice’s inability to speak acts as a replacement for touch’s proscription to set up contact. The nonidentical content’s inexpressibility obscures the opposition between the two sense organs, as touch’s capacity to serve as a substitute for the unhearing ear is demonstrated by Adorno’s counterclaim that “only the intensive aiming of words toward the nucleus of the innermost muteness can be effective.”²⁸⁹ This intensive aiming is characterized not only by cognitive but also by a form of tactile acuity, a capacity of being affected by particularity in a way that escapes the grid of conceptuality. In opposition to the taboo erected by Wittgenstein’s logical positivism, whose recalcitrance against metaphysics erases the question of contact altogether, Adorno’s critique argues for an inverted project: “to counter Wittgenstein by uttering the unutterable.”²⁹⁰ Adorno’s insistence that the role of philosophy is to mediate the unsayable through the domain of the sayable can be translated as the demand to reverse the polarity of the relation between prohibition and consent by touching the intangible. The answer to this impasse – whereby the failure of metaphysics to define the being of a thing is substituted by a limited epistemology that permits us to define merely the concept of a thing – comes forth in the form of an inversion, namely to think (and as we shall see in a moment, to touch) things – to give a conceptual account of what exceeds the concept. Trepca helpfully summarizes this rescue operation as

²⁸⁸ *ND*, 193.

²⁸⁹ *AT*, 205.

²⁹⁰ *ND*, 9.

the attempt to render conceptually intelligible phenomena that nonetheless remain unaccountable for in thinking.²⁹¹

However, to counter a narrative that fails to comprehend the material dimension of objects Adorno's problem will be to position his philosophy relative to contexts of touch and art, which can incorporate aspects of sensory information. In this sense, he fundamentally refunctions the nature of philosophical practice as the synthesis of "theoretical consciousness at its most advanced" with "the corporeal element, the very thing that cannot be fully identified with reason."²⁹² This project takes on a haptic force as Adorno's injunction "to focus on what is denied to the word," such that "the sphere of the wordless discloses itself," stresses the tactile and material dimension of perception otherwise left unnoticed by conceptual language.²⁹³ By defining the space inhabited by the nonidentical exclusively in negative terms, Adorno struggles to develop this specific modality of language able to communicate materiality. The difficulty encountered stems from the fact that he refuses to give any positive content to the nonidentical movement. What I suggest is that in order to reassert those elements that have been repressed or excluded from the dominant discourses of instrumental rationality, historically distrustful of the emotional and somatic aspects of experience, Adorno will fold the rational into the framework of aesthetic experience, where he must ensure that the sensorial moment plays an important function. As Conti has perceptively depicted this shift in a Kantian analogy, for Adorno, "reason without aesthetic experience is empty; aesthetic experience without reason is blind."²⁹⁴ Accordingly, the next section turns to the sphere of art and inquires into its potential to articulate that which the

²⁹¹ Amalia Trepca, "The Utopia of Eidetic Intuition: A Phenomenological Motif in Adorno," *META: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy*, XII, (2020): 103, <https://hal.science/hal-02888625v1>.

²⁹² *HF*, 238.

²⁹³ *AT*, 205.

²⁹⁴ Conti, "Sensation at Odds with Itself," 106.

philosophical concept's work of abstraction has condemned to repression: nonidentical sensuous particularity.

2.5. Art's Untouchability

For Adorno, art has a redemptive role. Art has the capacity to show that which philosophy cannot say.²⁹⁵ Art works by salvaging the materiality repressed by philosophy. For this reason, Adorno thinks that art "is an attempt to do justice to all that falls victim to this ongoing concept of control over nature."²⁹⁶ Art distinguishes itself from philosophy by making claims about the sensuous particulars that slip through the net of concepts. By shifting the frame of reference, and stressing the materiality and tactility of experience, art can offer "a glimpse of the nonidentical."²⁹⁷ However, the transition from the domain of negative epistemology to that of art organizes the concept of the nonidentical around the distinction beautiful/ugly, because what the nonidentical is now called upon to express is simply this: excess, that which falls outside the normative. When Adorno says – "something is excised from the living, from the body of language, from tones, from visual experience" – what is effectively echoed is the exorbitant structure of the nonidentical unaccommodated by discursive language, yet presented and negated by art.²⁹⁸ The ugly bears the form of that excision. Modern, autonomous artworks oppose the tendencies of identificatory thought replicated in canonical art as beautiful reconciliation, by pressing into service the ugly.²⁹⁹ Ugliness stands for antagonism; for "violence and destruction;"³⁰⁰ an expression that

²⁹⁵ Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy: 1760–1860; The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 191.

²⁹⁶ *A*, 47.

²⁹⁷ Oshrat C. Silberbusch, *Adorno's Philosophy of the Nonidentical: Thinking as Resistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 145.

²⁹⁸ *AT*, 50.

²⁹⁹ Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Aesthetic Violence: The Concept of the Ugly in Adorno's 'Aesthetic Theory,'" *Cultural Critique*, no. 60 (2005): 171, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4489213>.

³⁰⁰ *AT*, 46.

“mean[s] the way a body in pain means;”³⁰¹ a meaningless materiality from an epistemological standpoint, emerging in fragments. Adorno summarizes this ambiguity when he explains that the work of art “expresses the absence of meaning and thus through determinate negation” reaffirms it.³⁰² Nonidentity thus thrives on meaninglessness. The anxiety it deploys has been suggestively described by Marder as the “horror of meaninglessness.”³⁰³ The principle of stylization, on the other hand, aligned with the category of the beautiful, and traditionally conferring meaning to the artwork serves to remove this horror.³⁰⁴ As he puts it in connection to the sphere of music:

The concept of the expressionless has its authentic application in the most powerful moments of the musical – where music attains imageless presence. All expressionless music that fails to attain imageless presence is nothing but the empty shell of something expressed that has remained absent.³⁰⁵

Modern art’s nominalism affirms expressionlessness while rejecting the historical category of style, whose harmonizing tendency removes the presence of the nonidentical. Drawing upon the binary style/expressionlessness corresponding to the distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, Adorno describes authentic artworks as “the expression of the expressionless.”³⁰⁶ What he has in mind comes forth in the works of twentieth-century European modernism and the avant-garde: Beckett’s “decomposition of meaning,”³⁰⁷ Stravinsky’s “rejection of expression,”³⁰⁸ or Kafka’s prose which “expresses itself not through expression but by its

³⁰¹ J. M. Bernstein, “The Horror of Nonidentity: Cindy Sherman’s Tragic Modernism,” *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2006), 263.

³⁰² *AT*, 157.

³⁰³ Michael Marder, “Minima Patientia: Reflections on the Subject of Suffering,” *New German Critique*, no. 97 (2006): 64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27669155>.

³⁰⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 313.

³⁰⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Opera Woyzeck,” *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 620.

³⁰⁶ *AT*, 117.

³⁰⁷ Conti, “Sensation at Odds with Itself,” 108.

³⁰⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell & Wesley V. Blomster (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 121.

repudiation,”³⁰⁹ works that lift up to our attention the mutilated and reified nature of the nonidentical. Against this background, the nonidentical becomes the memory trace of accumulated suffering that art can effectively articulate.

For Bernstein, it is Cindy Sherman’s photographic self-portraits that fulfil this function, as they become a stage allowing for nonidentity to unfold itself. By rejecting the stylization that turns the work into an appropriable commodity, Sherman exploits meaninglessness as a productive resource. In the chapter that frames Sherman’s use of thematic abjection in terms of nonidentical remainders saturating the narratives of each photographic work, his description fits in with the Lacanian image of the Thing signifying pure excess or uncontainable surplus. Bernstein rehearses here the disenchantment thesis that perceives Modernity as the processual elimination of animism from the experience of life, and replacement by abstract linguistic idealism, but complicates it by focusing on the material nature of the residual element discarded by that excising operation. Bernstein claims that by portraying “an overlooked syntactic quality of its objects, say their aliveness or deadness, their injurability or vulnerability, their brokenness or *jouissance* – in all, their being forms of representation beyond representational meaning,”³¹⁰ Sherman’s body of work in fact works to reveal the materiality of the nonidentical. Since the category of beauty has historically served as an instrument of exclusion (by dismembering the unity of the body), her series of portraits act as a subversive device that announces the return of the repressed namely, “the monstrous sensuous particularity that is the violated and brutalized remnant of the corporeal subject.”³¹¹ By operating within the genre of the horror, the structure of each photograph of Sherman’s *Film Stills* series, argues Bernstein, serves to register the obscene detail that identity’s

³⁰⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 246.

³¹⁰ Bernstein, “The Horror of Nonidentity,” 253.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 296-97.

purifying and abstracting machinations have hidden from view and delegitimized. They therefore portray the nonidentical as that which ought not to be seen. No longer coming forth as the melancholic exponent of lost sensible uniqueness, the form of the nonidentical moment comes to be shadowed by a dark and unsettling animism. Affected by constant displacement, the proliferation of the nonidentical now occurs outside the framework of representational meaning, in fragmentary form. Sherman renders that dislocating movement as “misplaced life” and refunctions it in repulsive, grotesque imagery revealing “boil, livid pimples, leaking flesh, and fleshy tongue.”³¹²

Vulnerable to a fate that subjected it to the escalation of violence, the nonidentical returns in art as sublimated aesthetic violence grounded in the concept of the ugly that effectively repels, and at the same time fascinates, the viewer. Like a death mask, nonidentity turns toward us an expressionless face, uncannily “weeping without tears.”³¹³ As Adorno’s passage has detailed, this “imageless presence” does not address itself to the rationally ordered perspective of vision. In order to acknowledge the invisible within the visible, the subject requires an intuitively felt mode of perceiving that can evince the weight and gravity of the thing encountered and can furnish a more immediate sense of being there, being affected, albeit negatively. Instead, Adorno launches the idea that (closely aligned with his iconophobia) this form of perception is only ever possible by circumventing the visuality of the eye advocating for theoretical distance. The sensory awareness of immediacy undermined by the authority of the abstract concept is apprehended in the viscosity of sensuous perception, which on account of art’s mimesis of the universal’s constant expanding ad infinitum, and decline into intangibility, currently commands emphatic untouchability. Along what channels and according to what logic is untouchability interpreted by Adorno then? In

³¹² *Ibid.*, 302.

³¹³ *AT*, 117.

his *Philosophy of New Music*, Schönberg's dissonance provides for Adorno a model for articulating the ugly as a formal element, stemming from the internal logic of the material. In negating the harmony of beauty, modern music emphasizes the ugly as a form of dissonance that in being objectified, assumes "fixed contours," and becomes "material."³¹⁴ Artistic materialism (flatness of the canvas, twelve-tone technique) conjures the imageless presence of the nonidentical, which on account of its damaged condition, provokes repulsion:

Many early works of new music, beginning with those of Schoenberg's middle period and with Webern's works, have a character of untouchability, a refractoriness that rebuffs the listener by the strength of their objectivation, which becomes a life of its own.³¹⁵

Authentic artworks foreground nonidentity in all its desolate, decomposing, and distorted specificity. To adequately portray it means to cast on it the allegorical light that reveals its sedimented historical content informed by reification. In aesthetic experience, the subject is both fascinated and repulsed by the ghostlike appearance of what is no longer living. By enacting the mimesis of death, artworks at the same time withdraw from it. The negative – dissonance, distortion, disjunction – becomes the placeholder for dominating rationality, and hence for the undermined legitimacy of that rationality. Adorno makes this point succinctly:

One can say that precisely in the taboo placed on desire by the work of art, precisely in the refusal of every work to be touched, consumed or in any way appropriated, lies that element of nature which was present in desire – but now sublated in its negative form. In other words, the energies that originally wanted to take it, absorb it and directly possess it now actually serve to posit, to constitute, beauty as a form of special sphere in relation to the sphere of mere immediacy.³¹⁶

Untouchability is here coded as art's force of opposition to society's current situation.

Adorno's notion of aesthetic experience involves a moment of psychological and physical awareness whereby the subject acknowledges the increasingly mortifying conditions that have shaped and informed the fate of nonidentity, turning it into something intangible,

³¹⁴ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 58.

³¹⁵ *AT*, 302.

³¹⁶ *A*, 34.

withdrawn from experience. Artworks' untouchability crystalized in the injunction they forever utter – do not touch! – represents art's force of negativity that serves as a critique of domination. The prohibition against tactile engagement serves as a bulwark against the constantly repeated illicit touches exercised by the principle of identity. Adorno's model of advanced artworks addresses, again and again, a protest against the reified conditions of their possibility. Acting in this way, artworks shift the frame of reference from the illicit touches of identity thinking to the suspension of touch, or simply non-touch. Otherwise put, in replicating the principles that promoted the emergence of illicit touches akin to the principle of identity – violent appropriations, attack on materiality, the abuse of individuation, they break through identitarian thinking and produce a counter image of it. Sensuous particularity, is "emancipated from the measure of identity," whilst "the nonidentical moments show up as matter,"³¹⁷ which Adorno nevertheless places outside of the subject's reach. However, to avoid falling into the kind of first philosophy of which he was strongly critical (that gives constitutive primacy to a single principle), Adorno needs to constitute touch through more than a pure negation or as a merely conceptual entity. As nonidentity is the experience of contradiction, Adorno will require the opposing position – the immediacy contained in conceptual mediation – to establish the static dialectical tension between the conflicting moments, or what Benjamin terms dialectics at a standstill.

To sum up the argument: the nonidentical represents a stand-in or plenipotentiary for the vanished pre-subjective sensorial aspect of experience. Modern life's increasing rationalization of experience in the form of the dominance of technological rationality, growing abstraction of exchange relations seizing social relations, and processual disenchantment as the evacuation of animism, displaces the subject's capacity for mimetic

³¹⁷ *ND*, 193.

affinity to mimesis of abstract forms. This capacity involved a form of receptivity in which the object of knowledge was not apprehended exclusively through the use of universal concepts. Perception of sensuously distinct things presupposed an intuitive responding to matter and materiality in an immediate way that necessarily passed through the subject's sensuous conformation. On account of their expanding authority and privileged purchase upon things, concepts weaken our ability to encounter the nonidentical. Concepts' purely epistemic relation to things neglects the thing's unique specificity that would allow for an experience of a comprehensive whole. Art's autonomy, characterized by its inherent lack of social function and the loss of any "governing social purpose," no longer submits to "political, religious, moral, epistemic" authority.³¹⁸ Paradoxically, this very autonomy enables art to express the rejected nonidentical and its mode of address, as both share a common status of exclusion. Artworks' radical freedom affirms society's total unfreedom. Their untouchability, the prohibition they formulate against tactile encounters makes manifest the status quo: our distorted ability to stay "in touch" with the nonidentical moment, its status as out of touch, etc... If, according to Adorno, art negates the socio-historical situation by incorporating it into its structure, then we can say that art protests against nonidentity's intangible condition by appropriating it, and refunctioning it as something that produces pleasure for us, as spectators. Art, for Adorno, is ultimately that which pleases but does not gratify. For this reason, he will profoundly complicate touch and claim that "beauty establishes a sphere of untouchability; works become beautiful by the force of their opposition to what simply exists."³¹⁹ Adorno's "horror of the diffuse" – of the nonidentical that cannot be formed or confined within the limits of identity thinking – is beautified by art's

³¹⁸ J. M. Bernstein, "'The dead speaking of stones and stars': Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 146.

³¹⁹ *AT*, 51.

inner logic, the fact that whatever object it represents it does so as an object of pleasure. Heller is correct in one sense when she identifies enchantment as a core element of artworks' internal structure, yet she is wrong in interpreting the untouchability that beauty radiates as the result of their sacredness.³²⁰ On the contrary, the unsettling darkness, and inherent untouchability, surrounding modern works of art, is the consequence of their power to portray the disenchanting nonidentical in all its negated abjectness. What all this means is that there is a form of ugliness – the unwanted 'more' of nonidentity surgically removed by the logic of identifying thought as a result of its structural inadequacy – that develops in complicity with the category of the beautiful. Adorno goes on: "there is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better."³²¹ The beautiful as an in-itself is no longer available in modernity for Adorno. As a result, it emerges as dialectically intertwined with its polar opposite: the ugly as the damaged life it constantly negates.

2.6. Toward an Asymptotic Model of Touch

Adorno mobilizes this line of argument in connection to the works of Kafka. For Adorno, it is in his prose that the intangibility of the nonidentical becomes thematic (portraying it as either the "refuse of society" in the figure of the unassimilable immigrant within the despairing universe depicted in *America*,³²² or as the perpetually intangible totality of the bureaucratic apparatus in the image of *The Castle*'s "inaccessible functionaries."³²³) By illustrating "the waste-products," or "residues" of modern capitalist societies, the fictional worlds opened up by Kafka precipitate a sense of fear because they uncover that which should have remained

³²⁰ Agnes Heller, *The Concept of the Beautiful*, ed. Marcia Morgan (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012), 144.

³²¹ *MM*, 25.

³²² "Notes on Kafka," *P*, 251.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 259.

hidden namely, nonidentical excess. On Adorno's interpretation, Kafka's critical strategy aims to produce an image of the nonidentical in its negation, as men's impossibility of individuation. The process of individuation, which presupposes the inclusion of the nonidentical element that particularizes each sensuous object, has become so remote in the liberal era for Adorno, that men "are mortally frightened whenever its veil is raised a little."³²⁴ This is the horror of the nonidentical from which Kafka's characters do not look away. In conveying its intangible character, Kafka's works tangibly move the readers out of their reified selves and present them with an acknowledgement of our own condition. As Adorno observes:

His texts are designed not to sustain a constant distance between themselves and their victim but rather to agitate his feelings to a point where he fears that the narrative will shoot towards him like a locomotive in a three dimensional film. Such aggressive physical proximity undermines the reader's habit of identifying himself with the figures in the novel.³²⁵

This passage marks a turning point in Adorno's account. By twisting the argument in the opposite direction, Adorno here attempts to frame his insights of nonidentity in the form of an ambivalence. On the one hand, as we have seen, the nonidentical is modelled on the category of untouchability. Yet, at the same time, Adorno wants to bridge that gap. By collapsing the distance between the beholder and work, he suggests that there can be a compatibility between "physical proximity," the stand-in for tactile encounter, and nonidentity. Kafka's novels affirm deformed sensuous particularity as the imageless presence of an absence that presses upon the reader with violent tactile force, turning nonidentity's untouchable distance against itself. This contradictory line of thinking that proposes the minimization of the distance between subject and object is similarly rehearsed in Adorno's interpretations of Benjamin's work, where he appears to be introducing a more positive level of engagement

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

with touch. In Adorno's view, the sensuous cast of Benjamin's writing is grounded in an affinity with the transformative power of touch, "in its close contact with material which was close at hand."³²⁶ According to this view, Benjamin's entire practice becomes, by virtue of its senses-engaging methodology, a stage upon which the injured, and ultimately irrepressible, "more" of nonidentity is manifested:

The thoughts press close to its object, seek to touch it, smell it, taste it and so thereby transform itself. Through this secondary sensuousness, they hope to penetrate down to the veins of gold which no classificatory procedure can reach, and at the same time avoid succumbing to the contingency of blind intuition.³²⁷

What Adorno appears to want to achieve is mutually exclusive goals. We must resist the temptation of dismissing Adorno's philosophy as an advocate for positivity and thus missing its actual target. Although considerably diffuse and gestural, Adorno's aim, I suggest, is to find a way to dialectically balance touch between the separate poles that must remain in tension across his writing. In order to sustain an account of touch that adheres to the procedures of thinking of negative dialectics that demonstrate the failure of synthesis, Adorno will have to fight positivism on two separate fronts and prevent the dialectical tension from lapsing. First, he must oppose radicalizing nonidentity's untouchability, so as not to reaffirm its current existence as out of reach of experience. This was the philosophical error with which Adorno charged Kant and Wittgenstein. The model of nonidentity constituted through a series of gestures that rendered it unknowable and hence untouchable is too closely aligned, as we have seen, with philosophies committed exclusively to given facts and empirical phenomena. Second, Adorno's problem at the same time, is to avoid yielding to the benjaminian materialism which he himself criticized for being situated at the seam line between positivism and magic.³²⁸ Adorno and Benjamin did not mean the same thing by

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

³²⁷ "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," *P*, 239.

³²⁸ Adorno's letter to Benjamin, dated 10 November, 1938 develops this critique in the following terms: "To express this another way: the theological motif of calling things by

touch. Whereas Benjamin's account suggests a more philosophically mystical/theological position that grants immediate access to empirical phenomena, Adorno is unwilling to renounce conceptual mediation. Furthermore, although Adorno admits that "sensation [is] the crux of all epistemology," his criticism is aimed at phenomenological reductions that merely aim to "constitute it mentally."³²⁹ Instead, in order to open the possibility of what he calls "the dignity of physicality" namely, the recognition of the irreducibly material "core of cognition,"³³⁰ Adorno's standpoint is paradoxically going to be mediated by theory. In this sense, Adorno attempts to shift his perspective from negative dialectical epistemology to the philosophically comprehended experience of art. This is a touching that philosophy foregrounds in its transdisciplinary partnership with art, but that stays within the remit of conceptual mediation. What all this means finally, is that Adorno's conception of tactility can only be redeemed by overcoming the partiality of both previous positions that have rendered the subject's relation to nonidentity, each in its own way, either excessively intangible or excessively tangible. My argument is that Adorno will defend a form of touch carved out of these two views. Tactile engagement is formulated according to the model of "distanced nearness,"³³¹ a space sufficiently close to its object to perceive its differences, "to feel it itching in one's fingertips," yet simultaneously distanced in order to preserve the space of reflection required by critique, or as he puts it, to retain "the strength drawn from this involvement, to dismiss it."³³² Rooted neither simply in somatic (it dismisses the category of sensory knowledge), nor rational perspectives (it registers a connection to materialism)

their names tends to switch into the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts. If one wanted to put it rather drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism." *The Complete Correspondence*, 283.

³²⁹ *ND*, 193-194.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

³³¹ *MM*, 90.

³³² *Ibid.*, 29.

Adorno's problematic notion of touch is reworked as an experience at once distanced and embodied, launching a form of tactility opposed and yet internal to identity thinking.

In this chapter, I attempted to reconstruct the contours of the different ways in which Adorno's work circles around the concept of touch in relation to identity and nonidentity, respectively. In a certain sense, we can say that the nonidentical can only ever be approached by means of an asymptotic form of touch. In a single stroke, it affirms closeness, because in its proximate encounter with the object it reveals the "more" of nonidentity, what an object really is, and by doing so, "it identifies to a greater extent,"³³³ while at the same time rendering the object infinitely distant from the illicit touches of identity. Adorno describes this aporetic movement as a form of transcendence reflecting immanence and vice versa: "what will not have its law prescribed for it by given facts transcends them even in the closest contact with the objects, and in repudiating a sacrosanct transcendence."³³⁴ However, since it cannot escape conceptual logic, Adorno's constitutively asymptotic model of touch is caught up in a crisis. Neither touch (as tactility cannot ultimately be addressed beyond the closure of conceptuality), nor non-touch (as it retains a relation to contact), this suspended dialectic gives us the contradiction of nonidentity. Departing from Hammer's assertion that it "touches and cannot but touch,"³³⁵ my interpretation suggests instead that this suspended dialectic touches, yet cannot touch.

³³³ *ND*, 149.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

³³⁵ Espen Hammer, "The Touch of Art: Adorno and the Sublime," *SATS: Northern European Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2000): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1515/SATS.2000.91>.

Chapter 3

Coldness and the Absence of Touch

In them wither the irreplaceable faculties which cannot flourish in the isolated cell of pure inwardness, but only in *live contact (Fühlung) with the warmth of things*. A chill descends on all they do, the kind word that remains unspoken, the consideration unexercised. This chill finally recoils on those from whom it emanates. Every undistorted relationship, perhaps indeed the conciliation that is part of organic life itself, is a gift. He who through consequential logic becomes incapable of it, makes himself a thing and freezes.

– Adorno, *Minima Moralia*³³⁶

The reception of Adorno’s philosophy has undergone many and contradictory inflexions. As Cook notes, it has been characterized in a variety of ways such as “Nietzschean, Weberian, Hegelian, idealist, Marxist and materialist.”³³⁷ However, my broad claim throughout this thesis is that the focus of these accounts tends to neglect an undeniable aspect: the various uses and invocations of touch that undergird the fundamental concerns of Adorno’s philosophy. What I want to argue is that Adorno’s work contains another story in a minor key. As we have seen, Adorno takes up the question of touch either surreptitiously (in a note whereby perhaps one of Adorno’s most intriguing questions occurs, he asks: “What is now left and what is not of this process of being touched? That is what we need to answer.”³³⁸), or in plain sight (“Art cannot be radically separated from the instant of being touched,”³³⁹ since “the process of appropriately understanding it” is modelled on the image of a “miner without

³³⁶ *MM*, 43. (Emphasis added).

³³⁷ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 7.

³³⁸ “Note Z,” *OD*, 268.

³³⁹ *AT*, 303.

a light, who does not see where his path is leading, yet whose sense of touch precisely reveals the texture of the tunnels.”³⁴⁰) In the first chapter, I demonstrated that Adorno conceived of touch in the phenomenon of the shudder as a multisensory experience that imbricated a non-hierarchical alignment of the senses, while in the second chapter, I showed that Adorno’s approach to the concept of nonidentity was expressed not in terms of absolute proximity, but riddled with the contradictions of an asymptotic form of touch. We can now observe the multiple strands of the concept of touch saturating Adorno’s reflections on political philosophy, art, sociology, and metaphysics. Although each instance plays a distinct role in the broader Adornian critique of the alienated separation of mind and body, they all share a core structure: a departure from an immediate and continuous understanding of touch. On the contrary, the common denominator of the manifold valences of touch is that they are continuously interwoven with their opposite.

The current chapter seeks to deepen this problematic of touch that Adorno’s work opens up, but never clearly delineates, and to further illuminate the ways in which the concept of touch influenced and productively interacted with Adorno’s larger critical project. Building on the findings brought forth in the previous chapters, namely that (1) in the context of the shudder touch ensured not the narrow horizon of the present, but a *fundamental futurity* synonymous with an opening toward the other without which the I would regress to a form of extreme subjectivism, while (2) in order to maintain that possibility without collapsing it into pure immanence, the nonidentical required touch to go against its very nature of self-evident tangibility and sustain a *distanced nearness*, this chapter will continue to trace the way in which Adorno’s thinking is compelled to carve holes into the overall traditional structure of touch if it is to be retained as a meaningful concept throughout his work. What I want to

³⁴⁰ Adorno, *Without Model*, 9.

argue, is that the coming into presence of touch is linked for Adorno to the preservation of its absence. By illustrating the central importance of the concept of coldness in his philosophy, this chapter wants to demonstrate that for Adorno, it seems that *the emergence of touch is paradoxically conditioned by the radical negation of its presence*.

In order to prove this claim, this chapter suggests that the reason why coldness is prevalent across many of Adorno's philosophical discussions about sociology and psychology inheres, above all, in the way in which he formulates the specificity of its content. Adorno is strongly critical of the phenomenon of coldness, whose reifying effects permeate social relations because in almost all its manifestations, it stands opposed to touch. Although Adorno does imbricate the notions of contact and touch when he is staging the problem of coldness, the gesture of fully fleshing out the relation between these terms remains (perhaps deliberately) diffuse and gestural. In reconstructing the missing links, we may interpret the touches with which Adorno is concerned to belong to an invariably mediated broad spectrum ranging from metaphorical understandings (the capacity to affect and be affected) to literal understandings (tactilities registered physically that can provoke bodily reactions). To this end, in the first part of this chapter, I aim to draw out from Adorno's social theory a deployment of coldness epitomized by the absence or more exactly, the "forgetting" of touch. In this sense, this chapter mobilizes touch in the experiences of coldness and warmth, analysing the terms of this binary opposition as they continuously shape and inform one another. By reconstructing the implicit lines of thinking emerging from Adorno's writings on the concept of coldness, above all in his account of Alexander Kluge's debut film *Abschied von gestern* (Yesterday Girl), I want to show that one of Adorno's main concerns was the way in which the freezing conditions of late capitalist societies that reify the human subject into a

“thing among things” render the experience of touch untenable.³⁴¹ In this context, Adorno’s sociological writings make room for, but do not explicitly develop the shape that touch takes in the experience of coldness. For this reason, my argument seeks to delineate a certain form of touch that could fill in the gap in his insufficiently articulated account of tactile encounters. More precisely, my broad claim is that Adorno’s defence of tactility is developed negatively, in his unremitting emphasis on the problem of coldness, on a par with the failure of the modern world to engage tactfully.

The framework through which Adorno addresses the problem of coldness, however, is fraught with tensions and contradictions, since on the one hand, coldness announces social catastrophe, while on the other hand, it has the capacity to denounce the ideology that holds the current structure in place, and thus to function as an instrument of self-liquidation. Adorno’s conception of this absence of touch is bound up with our threatened survival, at times even going so far as to suggest that survival hinges on eliminating this coldness (such as the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter suggests in the opposition between warm organic life and the notion of frozen thingness), thereby implying the importance of preserving (a strongly refunctioned version of) touch. However, as we are going to see shortly, Adorno will not posit a simple alternative to this impasse. This point serves as the foundation for the ensuing discussion in the second part, where I want to make Adorno’s oblique suggestions about the ways in which we might recover this ability productive for a new understanding of touch in his work, as paradoxically engendered by its non-presence, namely a form of touch whose condition of possibility is precisely the cold non-touch of reification – the frozen thingness he set against organic life. Although Adorno famously rejects *Lebensphilosophie* both in its Bergsonian form, where life is conceived as an intuitive

³⁴¹ *MM*, 239.

elan vital that escapes rational articulation and in that expounded by Dilthey that understands life as a pre-reflexive, pre-conceptual experience, he nevertheless attempts to articulate a concept of life separate from what a vitalist understanding might suggest.³⁴² My interpretation is that this concept will not attempt to suture the rupture between the living/non-living, dead. On the contrary, Adorno will develop an aporetic concept of life whose “survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity.”³⁴³

Drawing attention to the sensuously informed ground of Adorno’s philosophy, Bernstein describes coldness as “the affective correlate of a conceptuality that wants to secure knowledge, meaning, order, and self-possession, independently of the vicissitudes of the contingent experience.”³⁴⁴ What I want to suggest, is that contrary to Bernstein’s argument that mistakenly recognizes in coldness an index of affect, coldness becomes for Adorno the name for a situation in which *the lack* of affectivity, and by extension, of touch-based relations, becomes dominant, and in consequence undermines touch. What is the function of this productive non-sensation that, as Adorno tells us clearly, should not be opposed, but on the contrary, retained and amplified, and how do these consequences that are being brought to light here reorganize the bent of his whole philosophy in general and his understanding of touch in particular? Ultimately, the ambition of this chapter is to derive from Adorno’s reflections that pop up in the margins of his work on the phenomenon of coldness a theoretical discourse that can effectively challenge traditional philosophies of touch.

³⁴² Morgan, *Adorno’s Concept of Life*, 8.

³⁴³ *ND*, 363.

³⁴⁴ J. M. Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 413.

3.1. Coldness and Warmth: A Problematic Context

The incursions of the sensation of temperature in accounts that describe the consequences of the capitalist colonization of the lifeworld are many and varied. Nevertheless, most of these narratives are inclined to highlight coldness, rather than warmth, as the predominant experiential model. In the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, Marx and Engels point to the indifference and lack of empathy that came to define the structure of bourgeois subjectivity in modernity. The metaphor they employ: “the icy water of egotistical calculation,”³⁴⁵ is particularly evocative in conveying its impersonal essence. Furthermore, in his analysis of the pathologies of modern living, Simmel thinks that the chilling effects of urban life produce a “blasé attitude” that can be read as encompassing both apathy and coldness.³⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Deleuze’s study of the nature of Sacher-Masoch’s writings expounds on the relation between the masochistic contract – shadowed by the image of the bourgeois economic contract – and the cold cruelty of the libertine.³⁴⁷ His interpretation appears to suggest the intricate relations that closely link capitalism to emotional detachment. Equipped with this information, we can observe how coldness makes the intersection between the logic of alienation at the core of capitalist reproduction and its pattern of affective disengagement palpable. In addition, the bodily sensation of temperature makes an explicit appearance in narratives that only allude to the way in which capitalism reconfigures our affective structures.

While travelling across his native island of Martinique in the tropical Antilles, Fanon details the symptoms of racial objectification by invoking the feeling of coldness in a body

³⁴⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 2002), 222.

³⁴⁶ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1950), 413.

³⁴⁷ Gille Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

“shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones,”³⁴⁸ a paradoxical sensation given the warm climate of the Caribbean. By the same token, in one of Bartky’s examples of the experience of being sexually objectified, the experience of coldness suddenly erupts even on “a fine spring day.”³⁴⁹ Her account explicates this phenomenon by noting that “petrified by the gaze of the Other [...] I freeze.”³⁵⁰ Both accounts about the different modes of subjection (Fanon’s critique stresses the slavery and economic exploitation of Western colonialism while Bartky’s feminist critique emphasizes the role of power structures in sexual objectification) share the insight that capitalism’s exploitative and instrumental function has a tendency to bridge the separation between the symbolic and the sensory, suggesting the immobilization of the subject into a frozen body, devoid of instinctual reactions.

Moreover, coldness becomes the source for the production of myths, such as the ideological view that as opposed to the atmospheric conditions of the warm south generating effeminate personalities, cold climates are productive of strong, masculine character traits that help individuals resist the vicissitudes of harsh weather.³⁵¹ Adorno himself talks about how traditional education cultivated the “ideal of being hard” (with the sense of producing cold, emotionless characters), which culminated catastrophically with the rise of the Nazis.³⁵² The bifurcation of coldness and warmth along gender lines into masculine and feminine distinctions is most clearly exemplified by Plato in *Phaedo*. We can read this dialogue as perpetuating the stereotype that women are more sentimental, whereas men are expected to maintain a stoic coldness even in the face of the most tragic scenes. Observing his disciples in

³⁴⁸ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charls Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 114.

³⁴⁹ Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (Oxon: Routledge, 1990), 27.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁵¹ Stephanie Clare, “Feeling Cold: Phenomenology, Spatiality, and the Politics of Sensation,” *differences* 24, no 1 (2013): 178-179, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2140618>.

³⁵² “Education After Auschwitz,” *CM*, 197.

tears before his execution, Socrates provocatively remarks: “You astonish me – what a way for you all to behave! You realize it was not least for this reason that I sent away the women, so that they wouldn’t strike the wrong note in this sort of way. For in fact I’ve heard that one should meet one’s end in a reverent silence. Now, keep quiet and show some resolve.”³⁵³ This position will be replicated by Kant’s refusal to acknowledge the significance of feelings for perception, which he regards as immature. Promoting a similar approach that prioritizes the perceptual component of reason at the expense of the emotional one, Kant argues that “the ineffectual sharing of one’s feelings in order to appear sympathetically in tune with the feelings of others, thus allowing oneself to be affected in a merely passive way, is silly and childish.”³⁵⁴ As the exponent of enlightenment philosophy, Kant reworks the autonomous subject as an epistemological (thinking) subject giving the law to itself, a move that contains an implicit dichotomy between the subject’s self-determination and self-governance on the one hand, and its vulnerability and instinctual drives on the other. This theory finds resonance in his disparaging understanding of affects that endorses the principles of the stoic school since Kant believes that “affects make us (more or less) blind.”³⁵⁵ Two conceptual pivots can be traced in the background of these accounts: that affects and emotions, corresponding to the conception of warmth, are being philosophically delegitimized by portraying them as attributes of feminine subjectivity;³⁵⁶ and that coldness emerges as a form of disciplining and even elimination of what appear to be merely anarchical feelings, which threaten to interfere with the bourgeois (male) individual’s rational rhetoric. Adorno and Horkheimer themselves draw attention to this problematic discourse replete with further-reaching gender concerns

³⁵³ Plato, *Meno and Phaedo*, ed. David Sadley and Alex Long (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 115.

³⁵⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 132.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

³⁵⁶ Simon Mussel, *Critical Theory and Feeling*, 2.

when they remark that reason labels affects as “purely natural,”³⁵⁷ and by extension immature, prior to philosophical reflection. In this sense, the logic that links coldness to the masculine (Western) rational subject in order to then immediately associate emotions and affects with the feminine (racialized) body implicitly participates in the naturalization of women,³⁵⁸ as it locates sensuousness and materiality in nature, while deriving freedom (from the senses) and autonomy from rationality.

What these accounts dealing with the phenomenon of social coldness appear to illustrate is the problematic obstruction of contact between the mind and the living body, whereby the latter merely fulfils the role of vessel for the former. Coldness comes forth as both the prerequisite and consequence of the bifurcation of feeling and thinking. These narratives point to the deterioration of the important moment of opposition animating dialectical thinking. They deviate from what Adorno describes with reference to Hegelian dialectic as the “explosion ignited by the contact of extremes.”³⁵⁹ Rather than a mere source of inspiration, this particular aspect of Hegelian philosophy becomes the model for Adorno’s understanding of dialectics. The broad framework unfolds as follows: “instead of producing some middle term or connection between both, we see how the universal and the particular, the two extremes, touch.”³⁶⁰ Using as an anchoring point the image of coldness as that which thwarts touch between the somatic and cognitive dialectical poles that must remain in tension, this chapter traces possible alternatives to this predicament in Adorno’s philosophy.

Building on and expanding these conceptions, Adorno offers several accounts of coldness, the threads connecting them being numerous and conflicting. The concept of

³⁵⁷ *DE*, 89.

³⁵⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 170.

³⁵⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 82.

³⁶⁰ *ID*, 85.

coldness figures prominently across Adorno's writings. Coldness was so influential that Adorno made plans to supplement his books on aesthetics (*Aesthetic Theory*) and epistemology (*Negative Dialectics*) by writing a third volume addressing moral-philosophical questions entitled *Kälte* (Coldness).³⁶¹ Although it never came to fruition, Kluge explains that the book would have been modelled on his concept of natural history. The function of this concept would have served to juxtapose nature as "the intelligence that came from the cold" and history as "the art of retaining heat and fire into the world," demonstrating how "the comfort of those families that settled the Reich also belonged to the phenomenon of Auschwitz."³⁶² In other words, Adorno's intention was to show the historical forces at work in shaping what is perceived as the natural category of coldness. This speculation forms the broad framework of this chapter, as it attempts to draw out from Adorno's theoretical discourses a historically situated form of what is generally considered a natural category: touch. In any case, coldness was envisaged by Adorno as both the logical outcome and precondition of late capitalism. This is pointed out in the claim that "the coldness of the societal monad, the isolated competitor, was the precondition, as indifference to the fate of others, [for Auschwitz],"³⁶³ whereby coldness serves to highlight the shared logic of identity between capitalism and totalitarianism. Furthermore, he argues that "whoever imagines that as a product of this society he is free of the coldness harbours illusions about himself as much as about the world; without such coldness one could not live,"³⁶⁴ indicating that coldness is an inherent necessity for existence within the framework of late capitalist societies. The

³⁶¹ Wilhelm Miklenitsch, "Die Arbeit der Macht an das Leben. Opferökonomie und Opferpolitiken - Am Leitfaden von Bataille, Adorno, und Foucault," *Peter Sloterdijks "Kritik der zynischen Vernunft"* ed. Otto Kallscheuer & Peter Sloterdijks (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 229-251.

³⁶² Alexander Kluge, "Straw in The Ice: Stories," trans. Richard Langston, *Grey Room*, no. 53 (2013): 100, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43832249>.

³⁶³ "Education After Auschwitz," *CM*, 201.

³⁶⁴ "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," *CM*, 274.

political ideal of freedom underlying bourgeois civil society is reproduced in the principle of coldness as freedom from the senses, the latter being conceived as an obstacle to the objective of capital accumulation. In this sense, the category of coldness becomes in Adorno's philosophy the concept of "bourgeois coldness."³⁶⁵ This conception appears in many varieties and forms, however, as we are going to see, it becomes most acute in Adorno's abrupt formulation interpreting bourgeois coldness as that "without which there could have been no Auschwitz."³⁶⁶ What does it mean for Adorno to place coldness in close vicinity to the disintegration of self-preservation epitomized by definition by this nightmarish cultural phenomenon and at the same time to affirm it as the *conditio sine qua non* of life? What I want to argue is that the gradual dissolution of the "process of being touched" discussed in the previous chapters is replaced by the coldness of inverted self-preservation,³⁶⁷ which ultimately enacts catastrophic consequences for the individual.

3.2. Affective Content in Experience: A Narrative of Decline

Before we can discuss Adorno's understanding of coldness as the forgetting to touch, we must examine the plurality of perspectives contributing to the prehistory of this situation, in which tactile connections falter, that Adorno and Horkheimer recount in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Their work provides a double account that underscores Enlightenment's disavowal of emotions, the suppression of the tangible flesh as well as that "felt contact" invoked by Adorno in one of his aphorisms from *Minima Moralia* to advocate the tactile sensitivity required, and currently missing, in the accurate development of philosophical knowledge.³⁶⁸ Throughout their critique of formalized reason, Enlightenment philosophy and science are accused of "treat[ing] emotions 'ac si quaestio de lineis, planis aut de corporibus

³⁶⁵ *MM*, 74.

³⁶⁶ *ND*, 363.

³⁶⁷ "Note Z," *OD*, 268.

³⁶⁸ *MM*, 247.

esset,”³⁶⁹ that is as if they were lines, planes and bodies, all elements observed and measured according to the abstract visualism of geometry, which works by fixing figures in their spatial relations.³⁷⁰ Otherwise stated, the fundamental logic with which Enlightenment rationality operates is inseparably linked with a logic of reification that involves addressing the totality of intersubjective relations and practices (in this case, emotions) through objective and universally translatable terms (the vocabulary of natural sciences). This formal activity, that today survives in therapeutic narratives, of fixing or locking emotions in order to render them manageable, stable, and quantifiable contradicts their ephemeral and context-dependent character.³⁷¹ The operation of supplying emotions with an ontological and unchanging depth solidifies them into objects of scrutiny and manipulation. Rendering subjective emotions as objective entities further presupposes the idea that emotions are clearly delineated objects, dissociable from the subject experiencing them.³⁷² As we shall see, the rigidity of this approach prevents the tactile connection with which Adorno is in the final analysis concerned, since the complex array of touches require for their realization a fundamental mobility, and not the static invariability that formally fixes them in place. It is useful here to briefly mention that Adorno was also critical of philosophy’s adoption of Taylorism, which as the heir of Enlightenment, endorses the “productivity of thought” by separating the sensual aspect of experience from the animating body. In contrast, Lee rightly shows that Adorno promoted a form of philosophical practice “not just cerebral, but also corporeal and grounded in sensual experience.”³⁷³

³⁶⁹ *DE*, 86.

³⁷⁰ Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, 60.

³⁷¹ Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 33.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

³⁷³ Lisa Yun Lee, *Dialectics of the Body: Corporeality in the Philosophy of T.W. Adorno* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 60.

Freud's renunciation thesis which states that the Enlightenment's teleological goal of forging a civilized subjectivity is obtained through the relinquishment of affects, plays a key role in Adorno's genealogy of coldness. Freud's theory provides the framework for Adorno's critique of repression, whereby he argues that European civilization contains a subterranean discourse that "displace[s] and distort[s]" the shape of "human instincts and passions."³⁷⁴ For Adorno, this model of experience deceptively presents itself as a product of humanity's own rational development toward greater civilization. However, its continued persistence loses its ultimate purpose and threatens to negate all possibility of survival, descending into a mode of barbarism, such that what appeared to be the vehicle of self-preservation is deformed into an instrument of self-destruction. As Adorno states, Enlightenment's irrationality "demarcates emotion, like religion and art, from everything deserving of the title of knowledge or cognition."³⁷⁵ However, Adorno interprets such denial of affects within the ideology of freedom and locates its origin in an earlier phase, before the outset of what is considered to be the bourgeois age: "even in Aristotle it was not simply defined as freedom from external compulsion, but also as freedom from emotions, that is, from instinctual drives, and ethical behaviour was equated, as by the Stoics, with mastery of the feelings."³⁷⁶ In this sense, "emotion and finally all human expression, even culture as a whole, are withdrawn from thought; thereby, however, they are transformed into a neutralised element of the comprehensive ratio of the economic system."³⁷⁷ What Adorno is highlighting in these passages is the way in which the Stoic and Kantian focus on universal disinterestedness effectively ignores the substance of ethical life with its local practices, particular contexts, and encounters with materiality. The absence of compassion and solidarity, modelled on the

³⁷⁴ *DE*, 231.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 91-21.

³⁷⁶ *PMP*, 147.

³⁷⁷ *DE*, 91.

principles of rationalism intensifies further in the behaviour of Sade's characters who, despite their hedonistic affirmation of the flesh, Adorno reminds us, reproduce the general violence of the pure moral law on a personal level. Herein, the syntax of Madam de Clairwill's morality binds elements of Kantian disinterestedness with the doctrine of the Stoic school that conceived of ethical behaviour as the abolition of emotions, "call[ing] compassion womanly and childish, as she boasts of her "stoicism," the "serene command over the emotions" which allows her "to do, and continue to do, everything without any feeling."³⁷⁸

3.3. The Fragmentation of Touch

This thematization of the anti-emotional substance of Western culture from an Adornian perspective enables us to grasp the status of the body that marks the material point of affirmation and negation of emotions, which Adorno describes as being "maimed from the outset."³⁷⁹ Adorno details the reifying dualism operating at the centre of European civilization that effectively separated experience into distinct spheres. "The separation of feeling and understanding," in other words, the isolation of affect as a separate domain and the neglect of its spontaneous role in the cognitive process "hypostasized the dismemberment of man into functions."³⁸⁰ Adorno is articulating his underdeveloped ideas about touch as a response to the two different narratives about the body that were in circulation at that moment. In both cases, we can trace its subjection to the powerful mechanism of ideology, positioning it on one side of the reified dichotomy of sense and logic. The Nazi fetishization of the body into a sacred entity, attributing it quasi-divine attributes, and its systematic devaluation in philosophy's pursuit of epistemic objectivity, which seeks to abandon every link to the philosopher's bodily sensations and emotions, form two sides of the same

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁷⁹ *DE*, 231.

³⁸⁰ *MM*, 197.

approach. Nevertheless, in the case of fascist propaganda that promoted a cult of the body, the latter “remains the corpse however vigorously it is trained and kept fit.”³⁸¹ With respect to philosophy’s enforcement of mind over matter, the body suffers a “metamorphosis into death.”³⁸² Adorno details the effects of these seemingly contradictory processes operating side by side in the following passage:

Culture defines the body as a thing which can be possessed; in culture a distinction is made between the body and the spirit, the concept of power and command, as the object, the dead thing, the “corpus.” In man’s denigration of his own body, nature takes its revenge for the fact that man has reduced nature to an object for domination, a raw material. The compulsive urge to cruelty and destruction springs from the organic displacement of the relationship between the mind and body.³⁸³

This displacement sets the scene for the subsequent insulation of touch. The advent of modernity precipitates the disintegration of the holistic concept of touch, leading to its fragmentation into distinct, specialized disciplines: from Western fantasies of therapeutic narratives that celebrate the supposed healing capacity of touch found in non-Western traditions,³⁸⁴ to the contemporary convertibility of touch into capital via haptic technologies. Each of these shifts illustrates what Adorno condemned as the process of dismemberment. As a result, touch loses its synthesizing function and its sense of wholeness. For this reason, I will show that Adorno’s stance on touch has to pass through the logic of decay already at work in fragmenting the concept. As a result of this segregation in ascending and descending movements, the structure of touch is reframed from a somatic sense that provided not only the raw sensation to be correlated in perception but also a felt proximity not limited to mere physical contact, to become the object of haptic ideology. Touch is captured by the quantifying processes of rationalization expanding since the nineteenth century and as a

³⁸¹ *DE*, 234.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

³⁸³ *DE*, 232.

³⁸⁴ Constance Classen, “Tactile Therapies,” *The Book of Touch*, ed. Constance Classen (London: Routledge, 2005), 348.

result, is untied from the complex array of the senses with which it was previously coordinated. The “liberation” of vision from the embodied subject and the subsequent loss of tactility lead to the emergence of a disembodied subject: the detached observer in the sphere of epistemology and the detached spectator in the sphere of consumption. In his work dealing with the historical bias toward the optic, Crary points out that “the loss of touch as a conceptual component of vision meant the unloosening of the eye from the network of referentiality incarnated in tactility and its subjective relation to perceived space.”³⁸⁵ Touch becomes haptics when it is deprived of its integrating function and is pressed into the service of society’s growing demand for the digital exchange of information.³⁸⁶ Haptics, explains Parisi, describes the incorporation of touch into the commodity structure, its reconfiguration “as an exploitable resource in an economy that treated the human sensorium as a calculable network of discrete information-processing channels.”³⁸⁷ Today, haptic technologies converting touch into economic profit range from touchscreens to vibrating mobile phones that serve to artificially replicate physical touch, even engaging users with “force feedback” systems in simulated environments such as VR.³⁸⁸

However, devices employing force and feedback systems are not commonly found in our everyday physical environments. On the contrary, there has been an increasing presence of technologies that require effortless interaction and deprive the user of tactile feeling. Flat touchscreens untie emotion from tactility as they allow us to control several interfaces of digital media with a mere tap, swipe, or flap of the finger. These technologies have raised

³⁸⁵ Johnatan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992), 19.

³⁸⁶ Parisi, *Archaeologies of Touch*, 19-20.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁸ Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, 12.

concerns among critics about a new form of living in a touchless world.³⁸⁹ Indeed, Plotnick points out that the attitude of detachment prompted by these touchless interfaces is intimately linked with the structure of such digital devices consisting mostly of glass, a material evoking “sterility and cleanliness, (and I would add coldness) in environments such as science labs that are often characterized by logic rather than emotion.”³⁹⁰ Furthermore, she suggests that we can uncover within our flattened world that has moved in terms of design from physical buttons sticking out to slick digital buttons, an uncomfortable alliance between the uniformity of our one-touch experiences and that which psychologists describe as flat affect namely,³⁹¹ “total or near absence of appropriate emotional responses to situations and events.”³⁹² The symbolism of the historical transition from depth to surface in interface designs is pushed even further in Jameson’s definition of postmodernism, highlighting the loss of affective engagement: “the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms,” he argues, “is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense.”³⁹³

Disembodied and disconnected, haptic touch, as these narratives suggest, effectively decouples tactile response from emotional response. What Adorno detailed in the above-cited excerpt represents precisely the subject’s passage toward the decline of a unified field of cognition, whereby the senses become experientially separate from each other. Adorno identifies a similar phenomenon, interweaving coldness with hands and touch practices, at work in the exaltation of technology when he claims that “people who are inclined to take

³⁸⁹ Rachel Plotnick, “Force, flatness and touch without feeling: Thinking historically about haptics and buttons,” *New Media & Society* 19, no.10 (2017): 1645. doi.org/10.1177/1461444817717510.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1646.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1634.

³⁹² *American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology Online*, s.v. “flat affect,” accessed 22 July, 2024, <https://dictionary.apa.org/flat-affect>.

³⁹³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 9.

technology to be the thing in itself [...] forget it is an extension of human dexterity [...] Those people are thoroughly cold.”³⁹⁴ Some of Adorno’s anxieties about how the blending of the fleshy hand and the mechanical device that paralyzes rather than enhances genuine interaction are present throughout his account. Although Adorno does not fully develop the lifeless, cold connotations of what later came to be called haptics, we might imagine that translating all human touch in the impersonal, mechanical terms of technologically-mediated tactility – where, as we have seen, all touch feels the same – raises concerns about the authenticity of touch and human agency. The privileging of a particular kind of uniformed touch specific to the machine, Adorno seems to imply, remaps sensory experience away from affective human engagement and closer to the coldness of reified relationships, ultimately, setting the stage for the forgetting of the manifold valences of touch.

3.4. Coldness: The Forgetting of Touch

For the Frankfurt School in general and for Adorno in particular, the project of demystifying history included among other tasks the recognition of the imbrication of feeling and reason.³⁹⁵ This undertaking involved for Adorno a subtle and implicit recognition of touch as a pivotal moment in conceptual thought, countering in this way the process of fragmentation to which it had been previously subjected, albeit refusing its positive foregrounding. In this context, Adorno will critically posit the modern ideology of coldness as the product of instrumental rationality that sets out to construct a form of subjectivity free from external compulsion, whereby increasing instinctual repression gives rise to “the glorification of self-control.”³⁹⁶ Coldness here designates the rational and disinterested attitude that has come to typify the mode of human conduct under the capitalistic mode of production anchored in the

³⁹⁴ “Education After Auschwitz,” *CM*, 200.

³⁹⁵ Mussel, *Critical Theory and Feeling*, 19.

³⁹⁶ *KCPR*, 129.

abstract principle of exchange. For Adorno, the icy conditions of exchange relations seen as the fetishization of means and indifference to material ends, replicate themselves across human relations such that this glacial atmosphere antithetical to the life of the living precipitates across individuals not only an administrative mode of thinking in relation to sensuous particulars, but also a state of psychological desolation that blocks human compassion.

My argument in this section is that coldness becomes synonymous with a specific form of forgetting namely, tactile sensitivity, and marks out the conditions of possibility of reified relationships. Etymologically derived from the Latin prefix *res*, meaning thing, reification is a multifaceted phenomenon whereby dynamic relations are perceived as dead things. The concept of reification is invoked by Adorno throughout many of his writings and is employed with various meanings, making it difficult to pin down a single definition. However, I want to focus on his initial conceptualization of it, particularly where Adorno forges the relationship between reification and forgetting in an early correspondence to Benjamin, dated 29 February 1940. In his letter, he writes: “For all reification is a forgetting: objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has been forgotten.”³⁹⁷ In making both reification and forgetting modalities of the same claim, Adorno draws on Marx’s theory of value who showed that once removed from the sphere of production from which they emerged, commodities acquire the reified status akin to fetishes.³⁹⁸ Objects become reified when they are forced into either side of the abstract dichotomy between their exchange value and their use value. It is important to stress that Adorno sees in the very notion of dualism (of

³⁹⁷ Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence*, 321.

³⁹⁸ Gilian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 43.

mind and matter) the “schema for reification.”³⁹⁹ As the paradigm for emotional detachment, coldness participates in the phenomenon of reification by reinforcing the very dualism it embodies, bluntly put, by pursuing an active “forgetting” or disregarding of the senses through which we can perceive. By the same token, since coldness affirms only one of the poles of the tension between thinking and feeling, namely the independent, disembodied mind, disunited with its sentient body, we can extrapolate from Adorno’s Marxian influenced passage a conception of coldness understood as the suppression or forgetting of human emotion, feeling, and above all, tactile experience.

This conception forms the background of the essay entitled “Opinion Delusion Society,” which provides a useful basis for illustrating the linkages between the phenomenon of coldness and reification, with the state of the decay of tangibility at stake. In this text, Adorno sets out to identify the difference between the nature of pathological opinion in its opposition to truth. To this end, he formulates the category of contact (*Fühlung*, which might also be translated as feeling) in order to negatively define the status of the relation between the subject and object in the philosophical apprehension of truth. More precisely, Adorno means to demarcate the increasing decline of this relation of contact especially at work in the circulations of opinion, which Adorno sees as “consciousness that does not yet have its object.”⁴⁰⁰ Furthermore, Adorno describes the cold individual as having “no genuine relation to the matter at hand.”⁴⁰¹ The concentration here is on the function of the notion of felt contact that serves as the agent of touch that engages subject and object into their requisite polarity. “Without contact with what it intends and what it actually must begin by grasping,” the subject is separated from its object and thinking degenerates into mere opinion. What I

³⁹⁹ *AE*, 75.

⁴⁰⁰ “Opinion Delusion Society,” *CM*, 110.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

want to suggest is that, although Adorno does not fully develop the possibilities of touch in this context, his account of the split of psychic life between a type of consciousness sensuously engaged with the object of cognition and another withdrawing from engagement into isolated thought, contains insights that can enable us to make another step in exposing the tactile resources of his philosophy and how they were continuously oriented beyond the framework of modern philosophy. Throughout Adorno's account in this text, we can trace the interweaving of two alternative images used to highlight the aesthetic orders (understood in the ancient sense of *aisthēsis*, meaning the sensuous perception of the embodied subject) in which they are couched.

The first model I want to discuss is marked by the encounter of the body with atmospheric temperature, resulting in, to extend the argument even further, the stiffening rigor mortis of reification. In developing the concept of pathological opinion, Adorno introduces terms derived from a register indicating both the ambiguity and continuity between tangibility and intangibility. The signifiers – “hardened,” “congealed,” “atrophy” and “cold” – employed by Adorno provide the language for understanding the collapse of thinking into false consciousness.⁴⁰² They suggest on the one hand that which has been rendered solid and can be firmly grasped, yet on the other hand they dissolve into the activity of reification, as they resonate with overtones that hint to our ossification. If warmth indicates immediacy and sociability because as Clare has pointed out, in contact with one another bodies can warm themselves, coldness obstructs bodily relationships as it appears to be linked to death in its evocation of the cold corpse.⁴⁰³ Coldness can literally reduce the wide range of

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 109-120.

⁴⁰³ Clare, “Feeling Cold: Phenomenology, Spatiality, and the Politics of Sensation,” 176.

sensations detectable in average temperatures and has been shown to cause numbness.⁴⁰⁴

Adorno's account seems to lie on an understanding of coldness as a reifying social phenomenon that intervenes to interrupt the subject-object symmetry in the dynamics of thinking and feeling: "the hardening of opinion" literalizes meaning, causing truth to "freeze solid in reified consciousness."⁴⁰⁵

What does Adorno mean by his use of the notion of separation that interrupts the genuine relation of contact? As we have seen with the question of Enlightenment, it is not only the formation of mere opinion that appeals exclusively to the detachment of feeling from thinking but also the core of instrumental rationality. The moment thinking is cordoned off from its object, the fluidity of this relationality is reduced to a fixed, rigid entity. In this light, the psychological desolation produced by coldness (flat affect) converges with the anaesthesia of sensory experience (flat aesthetic). Adorno's account in this text exposes the fundamental shift in the frame of reference in which we think – from a mode of apprehension that pays close attention to the object's multiplicity of facets and enacts the reciprocal involvement emblematic of the tactile medium of empathy, to a form of thinking that empties the relationship of its particularity and effectively erodes the possibility of touch. Adorno illustrates what is meant here by stressing the schematized modes of thinking characteristic of hardened opinion predominantly exercised by a public no longer able "to hear the unheard-of with their own ears, to touch the unapprehended with their own hands."⁴⁰⁶ The consequential coldness stemming from rationalization hinders a key aspect of philosophical knowing, namely "thought's affective investment in the object."⁴⁰⁷ His critique argues that under the

⁴⁰⁴ Stephen S. Cheung, "Responses of the Hands and Feet to Cold Exposure," *Temperature* 2, no 1 (2014): 115, doi:10.1080/23328940.2015.1008890.

⁴⁰⁵ "Opinion Delusion Society," *CM*, 120.

⁴⁰⁶ *DE*, 36.

⁴⁰⁷ "Opinion Delusion Society," *CM*, 109.

aegis of instrumental rationality the subject's sensory configuration (felt contact) is being progressively delegitimized in the relationship to what is not itself. At this point, it should be emphasized that for Adorno, philosophical knowing always requires the subject's mediation with the object, and vice versa, while simultaneously avoiding hierarchical relationships of subordination. From this, we can surmise the direction toward which Adorno's interpretation is pushing us. Since the materialist cast of Adorno's philosophy requires him to pass the relation through the individual incarnate subject, the notion of contact begins to take on a tactile understanding. This is precisely Adorno's attention to materiality that locates morality "in bodily feeling, in identification with unbearable pain."⁴⁰⁸ Bowie rightly shows that by employing this formulation, Adorno wants to capture a form of understanding of pain that involves "a sense of affinity to the other that is prior to discursive interchange."⁴⁰⁹ This subject-object relation of felt contact that is ungraspable solely through conceptuality is increasingly undermined by capitalist formal morality. In addition, following Adorno's account that "thought's affective investment in the object" involves a relation of contact, we may say that to affect is to touch and to provoke emotion. Since the numbing implications of coldness as reification come forth as the subject's inability to experience authentic engagement, they render touch interactions untenable.

The second paradigm emerging from Adorno's critique of administered mentality that realizes not only the cold distancing of the body from the mind but also blocks the subject's contact with the other is formulated as dialectically opposed and bearing two opposed levels of meaning. In the same way as coldness harbours a double entendre, the nature of warmth is also twofold. On the one hand, this pole of the dialectic is grounded in the sensation of

⁴⁰⁸ *M*, 116.

⁴⁰⁹ Bowie, *Adorno and The Ends of Philosophy*, 76.

warmth,⁴¹⁰ and in “the immediacy of human relations.”⁴¹¹ However, at no point does Adorno positively articulate warmth. We might say that for Adorno, warmth serves as a regulative category since its resources are no longer immediately available. What prevails, are models of warmth distorted and displaced by the dominant forms of consumer capitalism. Informed by his intense sense of negativity, Adorno goes so far as to write that such affection might in fact have always been a mere positivist fantasy: “Probably that warmth among people, which everyone longs for, has never been present at all, except during short periods and in very small groups, perhaps even among peaceful savages.”⁴¹² Adorno recognizes in the existing forms of warmth a deceptive mechanism that attempts to reconcile society’s self-antagonistic whole. The culture industry, Adorno’s name for the imbrication of mass culture and commodification, imparts the illusion of intimacy while disguising the coldness of alienated labour. It advances an inverted form of warmth as it trades in established modes of politeness and predictable norms of sociability. What Mussel has rightly identified as “warm culture” represents the culture industry’s mode of trading in false illusions of connectedness,⁴¹³ emblematic of this being the tendency of the film industry to produce an ideological image of warmth. Mass culture advocates a repressive perpetual enjoyment, in Adorno’s formulation – it fabricates “admonitions to be happy.”⁴¹⁴ As part of this machinery, even philanthropy becomes, for Adorno, a vehicle of “administered beneficence, the planned plastering-over of society’s visible sores.”⁴¹⁵ Capitalism theodicy seeks to redress the problem of forgetting through further forgetting. The culture industry reproduces itself on the basis of what

⁴¹⁰ “Education After Auschwitz,” *CM*, 202; *MM*, 43.

⁴¹¹ “Opinion Delusion Society,” *CM*, 120.

⁴¹² “Education After Auschwitz,” *CM*, 202.

⁴¹³ Simon Mussel, “‘Pervaded by a chill’: The dialectic of coldness in Adorno’s social theory,” *Thesis Eleven* 117, no. 1 (2013): 61,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513613494712>.

⁴¹⁴ *MM*, 62.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

O’Conner defines as a “society that maintains itself through forgetting,”⁴¹⁶ by exalting (immediate) pleasure and by satisfying (heteronomous) desire. The ideology of warmth produces modes of individual and social reification that actively block the recollection of past (and contribute to the perpetuation of present) forms of suffering. In this way, the culture industry abandons thought experience as *Erfarung*, and contributes to the reproduction of the ominous *Erlebnis*, a distorted form of experience whereby laughter is secretly associated with “the forgetting of suffering even when it is shown.”⁴¹⁷ Between the extremes of alienated coldness and false warmth, we find their common denominator then. In consequence, both models serve to illustrate that what is experienced as coldness (or rather, what marks the impossibility of experience) is the imbrication of the literal and figurative meanings of a reifying logic at work within modern capitalism.

However, as Mussel has perceptively pointed out, Adorno will allude to genuine warmth by mobilizing not the coldness of social alienation, but the coldness of critique.⁴¹⁸ Interestingly, Adorno introduces the category of liquidation to describe one possible source of resistance against false consciousness: the trope of liquidation appears in relation to truth, which “proves itself in the liquidation of opinion,” and to thinking’s “effort to liquidate opinion.”⁴¹⁹ I would argue here that it is difficult to avoid the etymology linking the act of abolishing opinion to its transformation into a state of flux, associated with truth. We might envision liquidation as a melting process setting into motion a kinetic experience, whereby what occurs is a process of reanimation of the subject’s frozen faculties, as well as one of

⁴¹⁶ Brian O’Connor, “Adorno on the Destruction of Memory,” *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone & Bill Schartz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 143.

⁴¹⁷ *DE*, 144.

⁴¹⁸ Mussel, “‘Pervaded by a Chill’,” 60.

⁴¹⁹ “Opinion Delusion Society,” *CM*, 121-122.

reassembling “things congeal[ed] as fragments.”⁴²⁰ The image of liquidity to which Adorno’s formulation is hinting dramatizes the passage warming up the *idée fixe* of congealed thought into the fluid state of truth. Elsewhere, Adorno employs a similar image to capture the way in which the process of reification is manifested as a form of fossilization, alluding to the sensation of freezing temperature, hostile to the porous nature required by touch to connect surface and depth: “all cognition which resists reification in earnest brings the petrified things into flux and thereby becomes aware of the history inside them.”⁴²¹

Instead, Adorno will outline a picture of incandescence by introducing the image of fireworks to refer to the volatile nature of truth: “fireworks” are visualized as “the only art that aspires not to duration but only to glow for an instant and fade away,” and posited as “the counterpart of a reification.”⁴²² Although not strictly a haptic image, fireworks serve throughout *Aesthetic Theory* to radiate heat and illuminate the conception of truth as an ossified entity, inverting the freezing “chill” saturating subject-object relations. In this context, they abound with allusions to touch because, by presenting a model of transitoriness, they promote the subject’s “intimate contact with its object,”⁴²³ a relation whereby touch manifests exclusively as impermanence. While the sense of fluidity anticipates a sensation of warmth sustaining the necessary condition of dialectics – touch between extremes – coldness seizes their contact in a freeze frame. The freezing point represents the solidification of the point at which contact is realized; it conveys untouchability. It is precisely this warmth that can dissolve what has “frozen in the cold light of reason” that Adorno’s efforts are seeking to rescue.⁴²⁴ Indeed, Adorno thinks that to think dialectically is to “render [concepts] fluid

⁴²⁰ *ND*, 191.

⁴²¹ *OD*, 234.

⁴²² *AT*, 28.

⁴²³ *ID*, 48.

⁴²⁴ *MM*, 239.

through the application of logical categories.”⁴²⁵ In other words, to occupy the position of truth, thought must step out of its insular self and become mobile, such that the subject of thinking and the object of knowledge contaminate each other, or else permanently fail to make contact. This process places the fluidity unique to truth in closer vicinity to a speculative kind of warmth conflicting with petrified thought. Adorno highlights the key importance of change in this approach: “whatever may be eternal or of enduring significance about such forms can only be preserved insofar as it changes in the course of history, insofar as it is penetrated by history.”⁴²⁶ Otherwise put, Adorno’s preferred approach seeks to unfix what has been locked in its relation (from the ontologizing of emotions in the therapeutic discourses that ultimately renders them flat and timeless to today’s flat ontology that assigns all objects the same ontological degree), and therefore aims to foreground the different magnitudes of impact and affect produced by different encounters with different objects. What does this shift in approach mean for the question of touch? As it will be made clear, Adorno will refuse to ground touch in an absolute sense dissolving it into a simple definition, but rather problematizing its very nature, presenting us with historically and culturally specific tactilities. The next section deals with Adorno’s preferred method of fluidizing that which has been rendered “rigid, reified, ossified” namely, (congealed) “life,”⁴²⁷ existing solely in the act of touching. As Macdonald has aptly pointed out, Adorno will not try to restore touch as intimacy by resorting to “the warmth of love,” but rather by employing “the first-hand experience of the mechanisms that destroy such warmth.”⁴²⁸

3.5. Radicalizing Non-Touch

⁴²⁵ *ID*, 83.

⁴²⁶ *OD*, 165.

⁴²⁷ *ID*, 102.

⁴²⁸ Iain Macdonald, “Cold, Cold, Warm: Autonomy, Intimacy and Maturity in Adorno,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37, (2011): 678, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453711402940>.

The organization of the world through the category of coldness then places the concept of self-preservation in an alarming synchronicity with its absolute opposite, such that it becomes increasingly difficult to extricate the concept of survival from that of the abolition of life, such that further still, the dynamic of the two contradictory forces enacted by the concept of coldness will no longer be addressed by Adorno as separate, distinct entities, but instead as fundamentally wedded concepts. Having departed from an understanding of reason that no longer exclusively serves the interest of self-preservation, Adorno will provocatively open an account of survival that will suddenly become compatible with the notion of extinction, an account in which, conceptually, the two terms come to occupy the same terrain. On the one hand, Adorno assigns coldness a fundamental role, recognizing the phenomenon as intrinsic to our continued survival. He claims that “our mere survival depends on coldness,”⁴²⁹ and that “without such coldness one could not live.”⁴³⁰ Across this facet of coldness, Adorno socializes his understanding of touch, suggesting that the imperatives of capitalism have shaped our senses, producing a desensualized, disembodied, mechanized form of experience. In this reified conception of human emotions, we can imagine coldness representing a stand-in for the lost capacity to touch, evoking our contemporary tactile identities, which have come to replicate the cold and smooth glass of digital interfaces on which we are now dependent. At the same time, the experience is accused of being a crucial factor in the active ruination of society, “without which the calamity could not recur.”⁴³¹ However, Adorno identifies in coldness a progressive motif able to counteract the regressive tendencies currently legitimating its existence. This is described as “theoretical ruthlessness,”⁴³² and marks the moment whereby coldness is turned against itself. On account of its double nature

⁴²⁹ *ND*, 363.

⁴³⁰ “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” *CM*, 274.

⁴³¹ *ND*, 347.

⁴³² *PMP*, 4.

irreducible to neither simply constructive nor destructive impulses, but on the contrary, structured by a set of laws that blend together the two sides of the split, it becomes increasingly difficult for Adorno to dispense with the principle of coldness without also untying it from its demystifying function, which is to say, without at the same time suspending that very framework capable of overcoming such coldness. In this sense, by virtue of its dialectical structure, coldness will render the line of demarcation between ideology and critique hardly determinable.

As we know, Adorno's dialectical approach involves casting a negative light on the problem in question. This means that Adorno does not want to fight against social coldness and the subsequent absence of felt contact by taking recourse to what he terms the clichéd "warmth of togetherness,"⁴³³ which can be interpreted as the false sense of reconciliation or ideological intimacy that would merely gloss over the existing antagonisms and dissolve the contradictions reflective of concrete historical tensions fundamental for all dialectical analyses. Following this pathway would reproduce what Sennett identifies in the conclusion of his discussions about the intensifying asymmetry between the public sphere and its increasingly dominant opposite – the private one – as "tyrannies of intimacy," a sense of domestic routine that degenerates into claustrophobic oppression.⁴³⁴ In accordance with his negative dialectical project, Adorno will not simply reject the notion of coldness and adopt a "right" behaviour positing a lost solidarity, or relegitimizing an extinct touch, for this would be undialectical. Since Adorno is not espousing a hermeneutical reading, he will equally dismiss a theory of a lost sense of touch in need of restoration. On the contrary, he will develop his entire philosophy in complicity with the refusal to grant happiness, love, warmth,

⁴³³ "The Meaning of Working Through the Past," *CM*, 95.

⁴³⁴ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of the Public Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 337-340.

or for that matter, the positive form of touch that would hold the key to our lost collectivity, a significant role. In short, Adorno will reflect negatively on the impossibility of establishing an ontological ground for touch, reorienting his philosophy in relation to this move.

Rather than merely dispensing with the ideology of coldness that currently renders interpretation opaque, thereby positively endorsing aspects of warmth, Adorno will attempt to dispel this “chill” invoked in the aphorism at the beginning of this chapter, by reflecting on the disintegrating powers of coldness itself. For Adorno, it appears as if the law embodies the very gesture that allows for its own transgression, such that a gap in the symmetry of universal coldness can disrupt its formal logic. In other words, Adorno’s proposed method of liquidating coldness is that of pushing its immanent implications to a configuration in which it annihilates itself. Adorno not only theorizes coldness as the countermeasure to false warmth but also formulates a contradiction in the concept, embedding within it the hints of exits from this moment of crisis. He exemplifies this concept through the style of his writing – a severe pessimism conceived by Adorno also as a form of content – as the formal aspect of this objective category reflects social coercion. Although the critique of coldness and of a detached philosophical practice become leitmotifs throughout his oeuvre, Adorno will nevertheless cultivate a syntax of seriousness and sobriety, in short, of a coldness tantamount to the exclusion of touch. This has to do with his refusing the temptation to positively endorse compassion or illusory intimacy, as the overall aim is dialectical and is associated with the principle of negation. Adorno’s favoured procedure – immanent criticism – was most forceful when it attempted to show from within the concepts’ inherent logic of disintegration. Since coldness becomes an indispensable element in defining capitalist forms of life, Adorno must precisely retain the principle before subjecting it to a determinate mode of argumentation that exposes its internally decayed structure. This procedure entailed “enhancing” the principle of

coldness or driving it to an extreme such that we become aware of it and, implicitly, of its missing opposite – “live contact with the warmth of things.”⁴³⁵

This process of pushing a category toward its limit in order to measure it against its own claims refers, in this context, to emphasizing the impersonal, disconnecting and fragmenting tendencies at work in the social phenomenon of coldness. It includes relinquishing tactile interaction, communication, and sensitivity as the affective subjective resources for the sake of their own realization. Otherwise put, Adorno will defend coldness in order to rescue touch as the instance of affective exchange between subjects. In this sense, Adorno pushes touch to a determination whereby it becomes irreconcilable with embodied contact. The subject, whose instrumental rationality historically led to its reification defined by Adorno as “petrification in his own subjectivity,”⁴³⁶ requires, as with the shudder, a momentary release from that congealment. With coldness, this situation is rehearsed. Similar to the way in which the experience of the shudder necessarily invoked an anxiety that indirectly served to push toward betterment and transformation, in the experience of coldness Adorno wants to find a way of shocking or shaking the subject out of its solidified self, with the ultimate purpose of orienting it toward contact and toward the possibility of inhabiting a tactile world. Such that, furthermore, the relation between subject and object epitomized by the experience of the shudder in the previous chapter, can juxtapose “eros and knowledge,”⁴³⁷ that is, sensuous and logical capacities, and not rely exclusively on the cold distancing of reason.

The model of action endorsed by Adorno will be predicated on a specific discourse of aesthetic modernism whereby art becomes conscious of its own autonomy. In *Aesthetic*

⁴³⁵ *MM*, 43.

⁴³⁶ *AT*, 269.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 331.

Theory, Adorno sketches the following image of dialectical inversion: “construction gains expression through coldness. Picasso’s cubist works and their later transformations are, by virtue of asceticism against expression, far more expressive than those works that were inspired by cubism but feared to lose expression and became supplicant.”⁴³⁸ While expression designates for Adorno an umbrella term encompassing individual elements linked to affective and cognitive forms of experience, construction emerges at the opposite pole of the dialectic, being associated with material techniques and technologies. These opposites shift according to context, such that in the high-modernist artworks of Picasso, Kafka, Beckett or Schoenberg, construction replaces the contingency of the subject’s self-expression which becomes a “matter of indifference.”⁴³⁹ It is worth noting here that, as Plotnick argues, at the beginning of the twentieth-century individual touch was thought as being able to reflect one’s unique personhood, an inimitable form of the subject’s expression; “tactility and individuality were tightly bound together as concepts,” while “the finger’s marks signified a distinct form of self-identity and self-expression.”⁴⁴⁰ Just as the category of construction achieves expression through the deployment of a certain type of coldness, so the problem of touch – as the exponent of individual expression – has to pass for Adorno, precisely through the medium of objective and rational construction, in this case, articulated as coldness. Having performed a mimesis of reification, these works achieve a consciousness of contradiction that points beyond themselves. Art for Adorno has the capacity to heighten our perception of the dialectical nature of coldness, coming into being as the disruptive vector that calls into question the validity of a reality to which we are constantly adapting, thereby outlining a

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁴⁰ Plotnick, “Force, flatness and touch without feeling,” 1638; 1639.

reconciled rationality. The coldness artworks bring to our attention then can stage mutually opposed orders of rationality: aesthetic and instrumental forms.

At the same time, the protest toward the reifying conditions that define this non-sensibility involves for Adorno an insight into the conditions that made the ideology of coldness possible in the first place: “The first thing therefore is to bring coldness to the consciousness of itself, of the reasons why it arose.”⁴⁴¹ Although Adorno is strongly critical of the Idealist practice of resolving the subject-object relations by dissolving them into the subject, he will nevertheless invoke a certain aspect of individuality namely, that which is associated with its sensible uniqueness in his ambivalent discussions on how to counteract the universal – the “spell as coldness between men.”⁴⁴² Adorno emphasizes in the process of reflexive awareness the category of the individual and a reorientation toward the subject. “If anything can help against coldness as the condition for disaster, then it is the insight into the conditions that determine it and the attempt to combat those conditions, initially in the domain of the individual.”⁴⁴³ Furthermore, he asserts: “What is necessary is what I once in this respect called the turn to the subject. One must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, must reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again.”⁴⁴⁴

To understand Adorno’s engagement with these questions, we must look within as well as beyond the closure of his texts. Therefore, we turn to a piece of cinema that appears to occupy an important place in Adorno’s aesthetics, as it manages to translate the key aspects of his theoretical discourses on coldness into visual form. Alexander Kluge’s first feature film,

⁴⁴¹ “Education After Auschwitz,” *CM*, 202.

⁴⁴² *ND*, 347.

⁴⁴³ “Education After Auschwitz,” *CM*, 202.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

Yesterday Girl can be read as an “ongoing conversation” with Adorno’s modernist cannon.⁴⁴⁵ What I want to argue in this final part, is that Kluge’s film predicates itself precisely on the opposition between a form of coldness shadowed by destruction and its complementing model tainted by a desire for its self-overcoming. Kluge approaches the reification of social relations by employing a technique reminiscent of Brechtian alienation. As Bowie puts it, “one basic impulse of Kluge’s work is essentially Brechtian: to make people astonished at that which has come to be regarded as normal.”⁴⁴⁶ Kluge was opposed to the “fetishistic use of technology” that compels the spectators to identify with the moving image.⁴⁴⁷ Through various montage techniques used in manipulating the sequence of images, such as the “use of empty spaces between shots,” he sought to provoke a process of self-reflection in the audience.⁴⁴⁸ Jameson explains how this process aimed to counteract the passively receptive attitude, by emphasizing the prominent role played by active perception, which “should be closer to the activity of reading rather than to automatic consumption.”⁴⁴⁹ This procedure places Kluge in closer vicinity to Adorno, who thought that the meaning of cinema as an art form stems from the way in which it negotiates its relation to other different media, an interaction occurring precisely by means of montage.⁴⁵⁰

Based on one of Kluge’s short fictional stories, the film presents the life of Anita G, a young East-German migrant who, having moved to West-Germany to start a new life, is confronted by frequent job changes and difficult relationships. In one of the opening scenes,

⁴⁴⁵ Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 249.

⁴⁴⁶ Andrew Bowie, “Alexander Kluge: An Introduction,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 4 (1986): 114-115, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354336>.

⁴⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Mimesis, Expression, Construction: Seminars on Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Octavian Esanu (London: Repeater Books, 2024), 312, Kindle.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Anita is found guilty of stealing a co-worker's woollen cardigan in summer and is subsequently brought in front of an examining magistrate. Here, instead of focusing on the reasons behind the theft, the magistrate inquires into her Jewish background and absurdly sentences her to prison. During the trial she engages in a dialogue with the "expressionless judge" – "a representation of the just as faceless apparatus of bureaucracy," itself seemingly "neutral, guided by an abstract notion of justice."⁴⁵¹ When he asks "Why did you have to steal a sweater at this time of year?" Anita offers a seemingly paradoxical explanation, replying: "I'm cold even in the summer."⁴⁵² This provocative line that is going to permeate the structure of the entire film, evokes Fanon and Bartky's accounts mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, where the experience of coldness, no longer caused by an encounter between bodies and atmospheric temperature, appeared to acquire a life of its own. This aporetic schema outlined by the scene will resonate intensely with Adorno's aesthetic sensibility, itself predicated on the efforts to interpret and eliminate the problem of coldness. In a letter dated March 13, 1967, Adorno writes to his friend and student Kluge, to confess how profoundly the film affected him and to discuss the way in which this particular scene addresses his own concerns about coldness:

Dear Axel, [. . .] You cannot know how much this question has occupied me recently in the most earnest of contexts, namely the incessant reproduction of barbarism. [. . .] An inkling of this can already be found in *The Communist Manifesto*. . . I would have much liked to talk to you about whether and how this intention can be inserted into your plans, that is unless exactly this is already your objective, as I almost presume. Such a film could inch its way closer to the very thing occupying me more and more, namely the question of coldness. In my lecture on Auschwitz, I spoke about it and plan to write an essay about coldness when my larger projects are further along. That incomparable scene from *Yesterday Girl* where Lexi says, in response to the reproaches of the examining magistrate, "I'm cold even in the summer" has stayed

⁴⁵¹ Ricardo Samaniego de la Fuente, "On Negativity and Aesthetics: Kluge's Farewell to Adorno," *Artefilosofía* 17, no. 31 (2022): 163.

⁴⁵² *Yesterday Girl*, directed by Alexander Kluge (Frankfurt am Main: Kairos Film, 1966), DVD.

with me. I'm deadly serious. This is what all of this is really about. [. . .] Cordial greetings from your old friend, Teddie⁴⁵³

The trope of coldness is present everywhere across the film, both in the form of impersonal editing style and as a visual environment picturing Anita “freezing her way through the West.”⁴⁵⁴ However, I want to claim that the reason why Adorno stresses its significance, is linked to the capacity of the concept of coldness, in the context outlined by Kluge, to contain and enact at the same time that which it wants to exclude. Coldness is fraught with ambivalence: it serves to affirm a powerful mechanism of ideology that paralyzes feeling, preventing tactile reception and simultaneously challenging the polarization between feeling and understanding, questioning the instrumental cold practices of capitalism. On the one hand, for Adorno, Anita’s line becomes the mark of a profound crisis, as it marks out the context of an absolute collapse in the order of somatic sensations, whereby the social plane of experience threatens to suspend the self-preservative processes themselves. On the other hand, the coldness of montage, “the principle of construction,”⁴⁵⁵ becomes a device of disruption, as it comes to epitomize the principle of cinematic negativity.

Kluge’s cinematic practice draws on the rhetoric of Adorno’s *Bilderverbot* aesthetic. By picturing precisely the ban of touch, its emptiness, and repressed sensuousness, this opening scene, in particular, details nothing other than the sensation of not-feeling. It resonates with overtones coded as the forgetting of touch in an increasingly disenchanted and rationalized modern world that compels subjects to remain in a state of passivity. Anita becomes emblematic of a life lived in accordance with “the principle of apathy,” as understood by Kant: “the wise man must never be in a state of affect.”⁴⁵⁶ The absolute referent through which the experience of coldness passes for Kluge’s fictional character is the

⁴⁵³ Cited in Kluge, “Straw in The Ice: Stories,” 89.

⁴⁵⁴ “Yesterday Girl,” *e-flux Film*, <https://www.e-flux.com/film/610455/yesterday-girl/>.

⁴⁵⁵ *AT*, 57.

⁴⁵⁶ Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 152.

material point of the body. Nevertheless, the entire *mise-en-scène* (the sterility of the setting, the blank and expressionless faces, the cold artificiality of the gestures) dramatizes a gradual decline of its tactile receptivity: the permanent referent of human suffering – the living body – loses its capacity to feel, such that we can only be presented with the “denied suffering of the alienated subject.”⁴⁵⁷ However, by deliberately extending and universalizing the trope of cold non-touch across all possible configurations of experience, Kluge’s tactical approach fully develops the critical possibilities of coldness. The unsympathetic, distanced, and alienating style of editing takes the cold to new expressive heights. It reflects on the fundamental impossibility of positively expressing suffering as such. This shift effectively moves the production of meaning from the cinematic narrative itself to the individual spectator.⁴⁵⁸ We become aware of the pervasiveness of coldness, in the logic outlined by Adorno with reference to the aesthetic polarity of the constructive and expressive, not by identifying with the character’s expression of pain (her anesthetised sensorium, her transcendental coldness as the impossibility of “feeling warm” even in the summer), but on the contrary, by navigating and negotiating the frustration of not being offered an occasion to identify. In this way, by holding open a previously obscured distinction between that which serves the function of mere survival and that which threatens to dissolve the faculty responsible for immediate external perception, this gesture opens an insight into the conditions of coldness that ultimately brings coldness to a consciousness of itself. On the basis of Anita’s declaration, the cold non-touch that haunts our sensory-bound aspects of experience no longer comes to pass undisturbedly but is suddenly exposed as second nature, as the product of reified human relations, captive in a self-made world, providing in this way the foundation for authentic engagement.

⁴⁵⁷ *AT*, 233.

⁴⁵⁸ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 225.

If, as Adorno maintains, the only way to combat the touch deprivation produced by social coldness in order to achieve “live contact with the warmth of things” is by exacerbating the historical conditions that made coldness possible,⁴⁵⁹ then Adorno’s thesis comes down to the aporetic claim that *the radicalization of touch’s absence gives rise to its presence*. Kluge’s response to the crisis of sensuousness represents one instance in which Adorno’s theoretical line of discourse on coldness is exemplified. *Yesterday Girl* brings Kluge’s conception of feeling in line with Adorno’s model of tactility that stages the problem in terms of an aporia. The production of this form of touch that undermines (since it locates touch infinitely absent) and at the same time enhances its very foundation (since it renders its experience more complex than often presumed), provides the horizon of Adorno’s interpretation of this concept. The passage to which Adorno returns in his letter enacts the process he originally outlined for recognizing the entanglement of the symbolic and the sensory structures of coldness that can bring about genuinely felt contact. Kluge’s solution to the problem of recognition involves unsettling the fixation of coldness as merely a response to atmospheric temperature, shifting its reproduction across all aspects of the human sensorium. However, within this framework, being fundamentally obstructed by the reifying mechanisms of coldness, touch cannot occur except as mediated by the impossibility of its instantiation as it is presently constructed. The early twentieth-century notion that individual touch was considered a key aspect of one’s unique personhood is here thoroughly reversed. By radicalizing the gap between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, Kluge and Adorno drive non-touch to a structure no longer identical to itself, ultimately arriving at an (albeit significantly changed) account of touch that will no longer be founded on the traditional authority of contact as presence.

⁴⁵⁹ *MM*, 43.

Chapter 4

Mimesis and the Loss of Self-Touch

Even in spirit something of the mimetic impulse survives, that secularized mana, *what moves and touches us (was anrührt)*.

– Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*⁴⁶⁰

The concept of mimesis has been taken up throughout the history of philosophy in many and varied forms but philosophers have often stressed its relation to sensuousness. Mimesis has been written about in valorising terms for its sense of embodiment and celebrated as a source of sensory plenitude. Conversely, it has also been criticised precisely for its association with materiality and criticised for its contamination with the physically informed aspect of experience. What is it precisely that mimesis signifies for Adorno and how do its historically

⁴⁶⁰ *AT*, 276. (Emphasis added).

mediated narratives account for it? Given that mimesis is a notoriously difficult concept in Adorno's philosophy, I want to address in what follows the key turning points that have significantly shaped and informed our present understanding of it before we begin discussing this chapter's main theme: namely, the intimate link, formulated yet never fully fleshed out by Adorno, between mimesis and touch. This approach will leave us with an extremely complex concept without dissolving it into a deceptive analytical clarity. In doing so, we can read Adorno's own conception of mimesis as part of an ongoing conversation, rather than an isolated development.

4.1. Mimesis: An Internally Conflicting Background

One of the earliest conceptions of the concept is in fact a negative one. It is found in "Book X" of Plato's *Republic* and is developed as his response to concerns over mimesis' ties with the bodily senses. The reason why Plato notoriously sets out to limit the role of art and to expel mimetic artists from his ideal city-state is tied to his theory of Forms that views artistic imitation as a less than perfect copy of the ultimate reality of eternal and perfect ideas. Plato is highly critical of mimesis in its association with artistic creation because of its claim to represent a specific object, figure, or action in the false medium of the senses. Insofar as our sensuous corporeality hinders the apprehension of truth, Plato's Idealism repudiates the bodily senses in its effort to lift the veil of sensuous representations. Mimesis becomes a threat to the Platonic framework – and later to rationalized cognition – because it enacts a physical presentation of the metaphysical, re-presenting the supra-sensory by translating it into sense data. This process conveys information to our bodily being rather than our cognition, which, according to his theory of Forms, represents a deception: "something *like* the real thing, but not itself the real thing."⁴⁶¹ Throughout the dialogue, Socrates denounces

⁴⁶¹ Plato, "Book X," *The Republic*, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 315.

mimetic representations for their participation in what Zistakis calls a “lower ontological level.”⁴⁶² The argument is illustrated with the famous image of the three beds, each produced by a different type of maker (God, carpenter, artist), each with a distinct relation to truth, such that ultimately, the problem of mimesis becomes the problem of truth. According to this schema, the original or that which is considered “first” receives an ontological primacy over the copy.⁴⁶³ The artist as “imitator” working in the realm of art – described by Plato as “imitation in general” – is defined as merely an “image-maker,” whose distance from truth is twice greater than that of the craftsman producing physical objects. Consequently, the artist’s creation, a copy of a copy, is considered “inferior by comparison with the truth,” namely the (original) metaphysical world of ideas.⁴⁶⁴ This gesture inaugurates a model of “anti-mimesis” rooted in what Lacoue-Labarthe criticizes as “the paradigm of the mirror.”⁴⁶⁵ Stretching from Plato to Lacan’s Mirror Stage, this paradigm reduces the dynamics of mimesis to a “virile stiffening and anxious clenching,”⁴⁶⁶ to a paralysis that confines it solely to imitation and the image.⁴⁶⁷

In stark contrast to the Platonic tradition, Benjamin celebrates precisely the rich sensuous level of mimesis, previously dismissed as ontologically invalid. In Benjamin’s

⁴⁶² Alexander H. Zistakis, “Mimēsis — Imitation as Representation in Plato and His Modern Successors,” *The Many Faces of Mimesis: Selected Essays from the 2017 Symposium on the Hellenic Heritage of Western Greece. Vol.3*, ed. L. Reid Heather et al. (Fonte Aretusa: Parnassos Press, 2018), 160.

⁴⁶³ It is important to note here that Adorno himself will attempt to demystify the contingent nature of *prima philosophia*, particularly in his critique of Heidegger’s ontico-ontological distinction and Husserl’s epistemology, by portraying it as a philosophy of origins that conceives of what is essentially first as more valuable, a brand of philosophy later on actualized by Fascism.

⁴⁶⁴ Plato, “Book X,” 315 – 327.

⁴⁶⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Typography,” *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 127.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁷ Artemy Magun, “Negativity (Dis)Embodied: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Theodor W. Adorno on Mimesis,” *New German Critique*, no. 118 (2013): 129, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23357082>.

work, mimesis is constellated in an intimate relationship with orality and literacy, as his concept of non-sensuous similarity represents the basis of language. In his early 1916 text “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” Benjamin develops this mimetic model of language, by suggestively employing the metaphor of mirroring in order to explain not the deceptive play of illusions instantiated by mimesis, but how “all human language” represents the “reflection of the word in name.”⁴⁶⁸ This gesture marks his refusal to accept a contingent relation between word and signified and shows the preeminence of the mimetic experience over the semiotic in language.⁴⁶⁹ Language, according to his view, is the memory of primitive mimesis akin to onomatopoeic sounds, or the natural signs of similarity between stars and human fate in astrology recognized by magical cultures. In his later essay “On the Mimetic Faculty,” Benjamin claims that the magical mimetic worldview was defined by the ability to perceive correspondences and similarities. He characterizes it as the “gift of seeing resemblances” between nature and language,⁴⁷⁰ a conception congruent with his theory of allegory whose task is precisely the hermeneutical reconstruction of the play of such similarities of the old mimetic order. This order, however, has been disrupted by instrumental rationality in the passage that shifted the production of knowledge from mytho-logic (sensuous similarities) to formal logic (non-sensuous similarities). As a result, the faculty of mimetic knowledge passes over into language and is preserved by its expressive qualities. In this sense, literature develops a non-utilitarian, mimetic relationship to language. It comes forth as an exceptional space capable to mobilize these connections through interpreting,

⁴⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 323.

⁴⁶⁹ Anson Rabinbach, “Introduction to Walter Benjamin’s ‘Doctrine of the Similar,’” *New German Critique*, no. 17 (1979): 61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488009>.

⁴⁷⁰ Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” *Reflections*, 333.

reading and deciphering the allegorical horizon of experience,⁴⁷¹ while language becomes “the highest level of mimetic behaviour and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.”⁴⁷²

As Gebauer and Wulf argue, Derrida subsequently “radicalizes Benjamin’s view of the mimetic character of texts.”⁴⁷³ Anchored precisely in a critique of the classical dichotomy between the negative and affirmative view of mimesis, Derrida’s text “Double Session” presses into service the concept of mimesis in order to confront the endless oscillation between presentation and representation that forms the core of the history of literature. His reading of two juxtaposed texts – Plato’s *Philebus*, and Mallarmé’s *Mimique* – works to connect each discourse with a distinct understanding of imitation. Literary criticism, Derrida argues, has been reductively framed in two competing understandings: the first is rooted in the Platonic framework, which defines the imitated as “more real, more essential, more true, etc., than what imitates. It is anterior and superior to it,”⁴⁷⁴ while its “inverted” form claims that “art can create or produce works that are more valuable than what they imitate.”⁴⁷⁵ If the effort of criticism was traditionally that of unveiling the essence in appearance, Derrida introduces the figure of the mime to unsettle the unidirectional relation between presentation and representation exercised by the two traditions. The Mallarmean mime “plays a game of the between, a game that is like writing with the body.”⁴⁷⁶ By challenging precisely the unidirectional relation between essence and appearance, the mime becomes a “simulacrum,”

⁴⁷¹ Gunter Gebauer & Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture – Art – Society*, trans. Don Renau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 271.

⁴⁷² Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” 336.

⁴⁷³ Gebauer & Wulf, *Mimesis*, 294.

⁴⁷⁴ Derrida, “Double Session,” *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 205.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶ Gebauer & Wulf, *Mimesis*, 302.

a copy with no original that breaks the chain of identification. With *Mimique*, Derrida fleshes out the way in which mimesis disrupts and reshuffles the boundaries that have historically separated the authentic from the inauthentic in the pursuit of truth. In this way, mimesis is radically problematized by Derrida in the figure of the mime that comes to perform the function of the pharmakon as it “reveals as much as it hides.”⁴⁷⁷ Although the mime retains a reference to mimicry – “*there is* mimicry,”⁴⁷⁸ his actions ultimately precipitate a paradox – “there is no imitation. The Mime imitates nothing;” on the contrary, he “inaugurates.”⁴⁷⁹ The mime does not imitate a phenomenon prior to him, “he mimes imitation.”⁴⁸⁰ In other words, he disrupts the received Platonic notion of imitation, which relies on the metaphor of the mirror as mimetic mediator, by enacting what Judith Butler terms the “phantasy of the original in and through the mime.”⁴⁸¹

In parallel, in the wake of natural field studies around 1900, Henry W. Bates coined the term mimicry to describe how animals adapt to their environment, specifically referring to the comportment of edible insects that mimic the shape and behaviour of non-edible ones.⁴⁸² By collapsing human and insect behaviour, Roger Caillois’s work will serve to liberate mimesis from the limitations of such an evolutionary-biological perspective and ultimately, from the subordinate role of producing inessential copies to which Plato had relegated it. His theory of mimetic imagination explores a more unsettling facet of the concept in question, pushing mimesis away from the sphere of artistic production and its understanding as an

⁴⁷⁷ Derrida, “Double Session,” 206.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁴⁸¹ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove et al. (London: Routledge, 1993), 319.

⁴⁸² Philipp Wolf, “Posthuman Mimétisme: Caillois, Adorno and an Aesthetics of Mimesis,” *Journal of Posthumanism* 2, no. 2 (2022): 128, <https://doi.org/10.33182/joph.v2i2.1940>.

evolutionary protective device, and bringing it in line with Freud's theory of the death instinct.⁴⁸³ His two seminal essays "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" and "The Praying Mantis" map the enigmatic way in which the mimetic impulse present in the behaviour of certain insects no longer serves the interests of the preservation of the species. On the contrary, their mimetic comportment, termed by Caillois "a dangerous luxury" since it fails to have a use value,⁴⁸⁴ comes to function in complicity with a counterproductive "instinct d'abandon," a self-loss that in many fruitful ways moves biological life away from a Darwinian theory of evolution.⁴⁸⁵ He exemplifies his argument by showing how, by closely simulating the patterns of foliage, some creatures end up mistaking each other for actual leaves, which eventually leads to cannibalism, while other inedible species, having nothing to fear, still engage in the practice of mimicry. In Caillois's conception, mimicry becomes fundamentally a bodily relation to space and the environment – more exactly, an impulse toward spatial indistinction described as "the appeal of space" – that compels the self to a deadly blending with the environment.⁴⁸⁶ This movement marks out the context in which self-abandonment by means of imitation takes precedence over "the inertia of *elan vital*."⁴⁸⁷ The provocative purposelessness spilling over into a form of "collective masochism" of mimicry transcends the limits of the imitative reflex in Caillois's mythology of the praying mantis' capacity for dissimulation, which even in a decapitated state "is capable of simulating

⁴⁸³ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1993), 46.

⁴⁸⁴ Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 96.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

death;”⁴⁸⁸ in other words, displaying the “objective,” “the non-subjective.”⁴⁸⁹ Although it does hark back to the Platonic notion of mimesis that portrays the experience in negative terms, Caillois’s *le mimétisme*, in which the individual’s fusion with the surrounding environment verges on total identification, has transformative potentials, as it points to a form of the instinctual that opposes what is privately one’s own – “the individual’s property.”⁴⁹⁰

4.2. Adorno, Mimesis, Touch

The motifs that come to the fore across these scenarios will assume concrete form in Adorno’s conception of mimesis, which combines these elements in a paratactical, non-cumulative manner. His thinking takes over from Plato an inverted form of aesthetic illusion – *Scheincharakter* – and refunctions it across his aesthetic writings as the medium through which the utopian impulse, the hope for a better existence, can manifest itself. From Benjamin’s understanding of affinities Adorno borrows the (albeit deeply secularized) magical, intuitive side of mimesis, as well as the idea that mimesis survives in the interpretation and critique of art as a form of co-enactment. Furthermore, Derrida’s trope of miming imitation resonates with Adorno’s concern with artworks’ impulse toward self-likeness, which finds expression in the claim that “artworks do not make themselves like something else but only like themselves.”⁴⁹¹ And finally, Caillois’s notion of an embodied depersonalization is positively received by Adorno and subsequently integrated into his work as the loss of the individualistic self and its collective repositioning, whereby the “I” transforms into a “we” in the mimetic process. Equipped with this information, we can now turn to Adorno’s work, where the concept of mimesis, whether explicit or suggested, remains

⁴⁸⁸ Roger Caillois, “The Praying Mantis: From Biology to Psychoanalysis,” 79.

⁴⁸⁹ John Hamilton, “The Luxury of Self-Destruction: Flirting with Mimesis with Roger Caillois,” *Flirtations: Rhetoric and Aesthetics. This Side of Seduction*, ed. Daniel Hoffman-Schwartz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 115.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁹¹ *AT*, 125.

of pivotal importance. Despite the eloquent detail with which Adorno describes the modes and codes of mimesis, the concept never settles into an easy coherence. On the contrary, mimesis remains a protean concept, laden with ambiguity and conflict, framed in its continually shifting relationship with various elements: the principle of construction, the subject of aesthetic experience, and most importantly, its own desire for self-overcoming by fusing with the imitated.

As I have shown throughout the preceding chapters, the concept of touch hibernates within Adorno's philosophy, emerging in the fissures of some of his underarticulated lines of thinking. These fissures, according to Adorno's own project, point to contradictions that become productive in themselves. As he argues, "the aim should be not to nag away at these contradictions, but to discover the fissures, the chinks, that – if I may use an image from mountain-climbing – enable us to get a foothold and eventually to reach the peak from where we can obtain a freer view of whatever intellectual panorama we are examining."⁴⁹² Here, again, the framework through which Adorno sets his thinking in its wandering course is underpinned by a tactile metaphor that reveals contact to be central to the organization of his thoughts. Although touch comes forth as a multifaceted notion with manifold valences and meanings, its structure is underlined, as in the above-cited passage, by a project to recover the Cartesian divide between sensuousness and intellection. While the last chapter thematized the shape that touch takes across the phenomenon of coldness, showing it to be conditioned by a necessary intimacy without presence, this chapter continues to trace what I call the underlying organizational quality of touch in Adorno's texts by exploring the ambiguities posed by the concept of mimesis. As Bowie has pointed out in his analysis of Adorno's language – and it would be productive to extend this frame of reference for an understanding

⁴⁹² *KCPR*, 82.

of mimesis as well – “something must take place at the level of the contact between the subject and the world which is beyond the causal and the instinctual.”⁴⁹³ My concern in the present chapter then is with the spaces in which these contacts or touches unfold, connecting and perpetually negotiating the intrasubjective (internal somatic affects), the intersubjective (external perceptions of reciprocity), and the transsubjective (the expression of collectivity) folds of mimetic experience. Although Adorno summarizes the mimetic impulse in tactile terms that work to lift to our attention a fundamental setting in motion, it will become clear that his thinking operates with a subversive notion of touch that ultimately serves to challenge its received empirical understanding as an act that secures the affirmation of the subject and its other.

In order to demonstrate this position, I will begin by analysing the touch-based relations enabled by mimesis in what Adorno calls aesthetic experience: the subject’s receptive and reflective engagement with artworks, in particular. My interpretation emphasizes the tactile interactions between subject and object, focusing less on touching than on being touched. However, what I want to show is that our capacity for being touched in mimetic experience always involves, for Adorno, an essential diversion or interruption of a less literal, more metaphorical sense of a deeper touch, namely: self-touch. Thus, in the second part of this chapter, I want to concentrate on the fragile and contingent notion of self-touch and on the way in which mimetic activity performs a fracture of identity, thereby violating the claim to normativity and completeness of such auto-affective tactility. This position becomes evident when we examine Adorno’s key distinction in his discussion of the production of the artwork in *Aesthetic Theory*: he ties mimetic impulses to the expression of the subject while simultaneously connecting rational/constructive elements with the objective

⁴⁹³ Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy*, 145.

material. What enables Adorno to conclude that “what works in opposition to mimesis ultimately seeks to serve it” – that what mimetic affinity thrives on is the disintegration of the subject’s claim to a priori unity – is the structure of the productive force that animates the two poles of the dialectic namely, mediation in and through the extremes themselves.⁴⁹⁴ Furthermore, Adorno describes mimetic comportment as “the anticipation of a condition beyond the diremption of the individual and the collective.”⁴⁹⁵ If we accept that mimesis, as the subject’s expression emerges only in its dialectical opposed pole, in what is other to the subject – the process of construction through which “the subject intends to extinguish itself as it carries out this synthesis” – then Adorno’s thesis boils down to the assertion that relational touch performed in mimesis emerges only at the cost of loosening internal self-touch (conceived as the self-identical self).⁴⁹⁶

What I ultimately want to suggest is that according to Adorno’s schema, touch is an internally disjunctive concept that cannot simultaneously occupy the realm of selfhood and identity, and govern the relationship between the subject and its other. Otherwise put, for mimetic (tactile) interaction to occur, the subject must sacrifice a certain level of inward self-contained identity. Thus, in the next sections, I want to pursue the task of reconstructing across Adorno’s philosophy a narrative of touch whereby mimesis is conceived as an experience that requires for its realization a temporary loss of the inner sense of self-touch. By exploring the mimetic capacity to make, unmake, and remake touch, the current chapter seeks to articulate a certain paradox on which Adorno’s writings invite us to reflect: *that the necessary prerequisite of the touch of the other explored in the first chapter is a disruption of the complete circle of self-touch*. In this sense, touch is exposed by Adorno in the context of

⁴⁹⁴ *AT*, 187.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

mimesis to a process that further complicates it significantly, working to amplify its internal tensions that are always already threatening to disband it.

4.3. First Case: Expressive Mimesis – Tactility

To account for his project of exposing the historical trajectory of rationality as that of the introversion of domination, Adorno distributed mimesis across different contexts and mobilized it from different vantage points. Throughout his philosophical, aesthetical, and negatively anthropological writings, Adorno's exploration of the concept of mimesis brings to the forefront an enmeshed relation between its transient, performative, sensuous, and co-enacting characters, all governed by an underlying understanding of touch. In this current section, I propose a retracing of the path along which the mimetic behaviour is sent, whereby these alternative impulses are always on the verge of touching, or else about to take their leave. How are we to understand these aspects of mimetic behaviour? Why is Adorno taking up the question of touch in the middle of his account of mimesis?

The negatively anthropological account of mimesis opens in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as Horkheimer and Adorno attempt to reconstruct a synoptic history of mimesis, charting its development through various progressive and regressive stages: from an unconscious, playful act of experiencing the other characteristic of an era of magical prehistory, to its increasingly instrumental employment for achieving certain ends, to its entrapment in a rigid self-identical subjectivity caught up in the spell of compulsive imitation, to its final phase culminating in repression. Beginning with its emergence in a mythical era prior to the formation of individual subjectivity, mimesis initially manifested as the experience of blending with the other in sensuous imitation. Although mimesis involves the archaic ground of rationality, as the authors' view identifies its mythical origin as the first form of dominating nature via imaginary identification, archaic expressive mimesis appears

to involve a qualitatively different relation to the objects it imitates: “Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis.”⁴⁹⁷ This conception of mimesis as an imitative disposition toward an other echoes Benjamin’s doctrine of the similar that views the engagement between the self and the other in mimesis as a free, somatic rather than abstract, play. This adaptive, as opposed to dominating, dimension is illustrated in one of the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia*, whereby Adorno thematizes a more sympathetic, non-subordinating aspect of the concept in the context of children’s play. In their playful imitation, Adorno explains, they invest their being with that of an other, so that their uttering “I am a rhinoceros, signifies the shape of rhinoceros,”⁴⁹⁸ a gesture that reflects an experience of noncoercive mimetic assimilation, rather than one of subordination by compulsive identification.

In what ways does mimesis of the magic stage that denotes a relation of affinity, and not of suppression between the knower and the known, materialize in Adorno’s lines of discourse? Within the secularized world emerging in the wake of disenchantment with which the metanarrative of *Aesthetic Theory* is preoccupied, art is primarily defined as “mimesis driven to the point of self-consciousness,”⁴⁹⁹ since it ties mimesis to the subject’s expression of pain and suffering. Art, for Adorno, “is a refuge for mimetic comportment” that develops a non-instrumental relation to objects.⁵⁰⁰ Most importantly for Adorno, expressive mimesis becomes thematic in artworks’ comportment that does not imitate something, but make themselves like themselves. This means that by denouncing existing reality, they announce a better one, a “being in itself,”⁵⁰¹ an autonomous entity; they anticipate “the nonexisting,”⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁷ *DE*, 7.

⁴⁹⁸ *MM*, 228.

⁴⁹⁹ *AT*, 259.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 83.

or an image of transformed humanity. I will return to this point toward the final sections of the chapter, where I explore the notion of mimesis of domination and I suggest that the model of tactile reconciliation practised in the early phase of mimetic behaviour ultimately hangs on a certain disruption of tactile abundance. At this stage, I want to concentrate on what Adorno means by emphasizing mimesis' tactful capacity to move, shift and displace subjects.

Artworks exhibit mimesis as manifestations expressed in an embodied way by the subject in sudden, transient and ephemeral flashes. Adorno understands these miming gestures as pertaining to art's lingering trace of magic, an indication of a metaphysical atavism that survives during art's crisis of historical meaning and that comes into contradiction with its achieved autonomy. They sometimes seem to be conflated by Adorno with an equally enigmatic term – apparition, a particular mode of being of the work of art – and are best revealed in circus acts and firework displays because their structure belongs to an evanescent register, involving a “crucial temporal quality of a sudden and ghostlike appearance and disappearance.”⁵⁰³ In a claim that conjoins kinetic and optical sensation, Adorno presents us with a key motif underpinning his understanding of expressive mimesis as the convergence of appearance and disappearance. “Apparition,” he notes, “illuminates and touches us (*das Angerührtwerden*).”⁵⁰⁴ By appealing to contact, Adorno's account enables us to grasp the tactile level of perception inherent in the performative notion of mimesis. In this sense, similar to how the volatility of touch dissolves the moment we attempt to capture its structure of immediacy, the mimetic gestures disclosed as apparitions are closely linked to a consciousness that perceives transience, instead of permanence, becoming, rather than mere being. We can characterize the mimetic instant of the artwork as the agent of

⁵⁰³ Ulrich Plass, *Language and History in Theodor W. Adorno's Notes to Literature*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (London: Routledge, 2007), 65.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

touch capable of mobilizing transient, fleeting and ephemeral choreographies of the moving body and mind. These volatile moments of mimetic expression align with a notion of subjectivity constituted by bodily and unconscious impulses, progressively denied by the reality principle in modern civilization, since they denote “pure spectacle in the sense that their “meaning” lies in nothing other than their performance.”⁵⁰⁵ Otherwise put, despite their objectivation – being materialized into a permanent entity – all artworks rehearse an immediate, temporal expression of the pulsating rhythms of the living subject, a reminder of what is sacrificed by Western rationality.

We can better understand this dimension of embodied performance by focusing on Adorno’s concept of co-enactment. Adorno’s “Notes on Philosophical Thinking” permits us to get a better grasp on how the performativity of the concept articulates the notion of touch. Therein he describes the mimetic relation that the subject must establish with its object within a framework that suggests a sense of embodiment: the bodies of the imitator and the imitated engage in a tactile relation. This is aptly expressed in a particularly haptic image that appears to collapse the differences between the symbolic and the sensory, without, however, reducing one to the other. In its adoption of imitative behaviour, “thinking must snuggle up to an object.”⁵⁰⁶ The haptic quality of his language fights ratio on two fronts: it rejects the poverty involved in a form of conceptual thinking devoid of affective response, while simultaneously refusing to endorse the irrationality of mere sensory knowledge without conceptualization. This connection then, resists the reductive distinction of mind and body, since to snuggle up, or to cling to an object implies an affective cognition that goes beyond the hierarchical subsumption of the particular under a general, an act characteristic of the illicit touches of

⁵⁰⁵ Karla L. Schultz, *Mimesis on the Move: Theodor W. Adorno’s Concept of Imitation* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1990), 176.

⁵⁰⁶ “Notes on Philosophical Thinking,” *CM*, 129.

identity thinking discussed in Chapter 2. In the words of Jay, the emphasis is on the “relational character” of the mimetic experience conceived as more of a “benign assimilation than domination,”⁵⁰⁷ or as a reciprocal sense of intimacy between the knower and the known. A relationality, that in the final instance, affirms the primacy of the object, and its capacity to affect the subject as itself a kind of object.

The elusive nature of mimesis is inseparably linked to sentience, as it demonstrates the physicality of touch. As Lee observes, “the body is a salient part of Adorno’s understanding of mimesis because as the wellspring of spontaneity, instinct, emotions, and everything else that animates mimesis, the body is the form that mimesis takes.”⁵⁰⁸ This point is illustrated by Adorno in a different passage from *Aesthetic Theory* where he further inscribes the mimetic experience with another tactile motif. In his analysis of artistic performance, the artist’s task is described as the “imitation of the dynamic curves of what is performed.”⁵⁰⁹ Moreover, in his discussion of musical interpretation, Adorno explains that mimetic reproduction involves an activity “free of any concreteness,” hence purely intellectual, “yet at once sensual.”⁵¹⁰ This sense of active mobility similarly emerges in Adorno’s defence of Hegelian speculative philosophy, whose “curves of intellectual movement” are able to redress “in the medium of the concept, the mimesis that concept represses.”⁵¹¹ Stressing the materiality of thinking, these curves on which thinking is able to move remind us of Riegl’s notion of haptic vision whereby the eye, rather than the hand with its greater potential for violence, is enabled to gently caress the surface of an artwork. It is difficult to overlook the tactile aspect of these curves representing the sensuous point of

⁵⁰⁷ Martin Jay, *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 122; 123.

⁵⁰⁸ Lee, *Dialectics of the Body*, 111.

⁵⁰⁹ *AT*, 125.

⁵¹⁰ *TTMR*, 170.

⁵¹¹ *H*, 123.

translation of affect. These alternative accounts are summed up in his lectures on *Aesthetics*, where Adorno proceeds to outline the shape that mimesis takes in aesthetic experience. He ultimately settles on calling the process a “co-enactment,” which implies “an act of following the work of art,”⁵¹² subsequently tracking, in an embrace of sensuality, the “paths it traces within itself.”⁵¹³

These patterns of thinking, able to move, touch, snuggle up, sketch a kinetic portrait of the mimetic subject, and of an emphatic concept of life, as the following passage suggests. The coercion exercised by identity thinking, rooted in the imitation of an object in order to dominate it, undergoes a qualitative transformation in mimesis: “Elements of affinity—of the object itself to the thought of it—come to *live* in identity.”⁵¹⁴ Whereas the epigraph on the front page of *Minima Moralia* that reads “Life does not live” referred to the predicament of our reified modes of experience that render all lives exchangeable,⁵¹⁵ reflecting a deadened, inert form of existence that prevents mobility, Adorno’s structure of mimetic comportment prefigures and resuscitates, the possibility of living. This is achieved by confirming the presence of the other through various dynamics of touch. This sensuous experience then reaches its peak the moment the subject “becomes entirely one with the life of the work in the pulse, the rhythm of one’s own life, where one is taken up in it.”⁵¹⁶ Building on Schultz’s and Quent’s arguments, I propose that the fundamental performativity and participation – where an embodied, vibrating subject resonates with the object (such as the trembling body responding to the overwhelming experience of the shudder in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony which Adorno uses as an example)⁵¹⁷ – can be described in terms of an “erotic”

⁵¹² *A*, 118.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵¹⁴ *ND*, 149.

⁵¹⁵ *MM*, 19.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵¹⁷ *AT*, 245.

experience.⁵¹⁸ These points of “intimate contact” that Adorno refers in his discussions of dialectic,⁵¹⁹ tie together subject and object in a moving mimetic practice. A depiction of this act of touching is expressed by Adorno in his celebration of essayistic practice. The essay, in its attempt to develop a tender and protective relation to the matter, “comes so close to the here and now of the object, up to the point where that object, instead of being simply an object, dissociates itself into those elements in which it has its life.”⁵²⁰ In other words, rather than objectifying imitation, the aim of the essay is to discover and rescue the nonidentical contents in a mimetic activity that perceives the texture and mass of the object. Adorno’s nonidentity thinking pertains to mimetic behaviour insofar as the subject’s bodily adaptation to the other reflects the object’s real identity, ignored by identity thinking’s predilection toward generalization. Adorno sketches the form of such mimetic behaviour in the following terms: “the nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other.”⁵²¹ The effect of this instant is seized in Adorno’s deeply enigmatic formulation cited at the beginning of this chapter: as something that “moves and touches us.”⁵²² As Quent notes, this particular facet of mimesis “suggest[s] a permeability of the subject as a moving subject.”⁵²³ To extend the argument even further, Adorno’s model of mimetic behaviour whereby the subject surrenders to the mimetic impulse and allows itself to be affected in aesthetic experience produces a haptic image by operating with a notion of the subject as porous skin that, perpetually receptive to touch, positions it between the internal physiological self and

⁵¹⁸ Schultz, *Mimesis on the Move*, 147; Marcus Quent, “Thinking – Mimesis – Pre-Imitation: Notes on Art, Philosophy, and Theatre in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory,” *Adorno and Performance*, ed. Will Daddario and Karoline Gritzner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 134.

⁵¹⁹ *ID*, 48.

⁵²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, no. 32 (1984): 162, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488160>.

⁵²¹ *AT*, 54.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 276.

⁵²³ Quent, “Thinking – Mimesis – Pre-Imitation,” 135.

the external world. Taussig's comments aptly capture this register when he describes the twofold implications of the mimetic act, wherein the subject blurs with the object, as encompassing "a copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived."⁵²⁴ Mimesis thus enacts our ability to be affected in our worldly encounters with objects, which invariably presupposes the sense of touch, permitting us to perceive the weight and gravity of objects. But it also points toward, in principle, a bottomless, non-totalizable affective account of what it means to come into contact with the other.

For this connection to materialize, however, Jucan too, points out that "the subject needs to be reconfigured."⁵²⁵ Although as individual expression, mimesis appears to signify uniqueness, Adorno seems to suggest that mimesis works to undermine the subject's reified egocentrism as it ultimately reflects the structure of the community, claiming that "this movement always remains a collective one, even where it appears as a movement of subjective expression."⁵²⁶ The element of tactility that underpins mimetic experience shifts the frame of reference in which we look: unlike the distal senses such as vision or hearing, touch is neither private nor unidirectional, as there is no touch that is not touched in return. This is why Adorno will need to fracture the narcissistic self-touch for mimetic tactile engagement to occur. His argument suggests that the subject can experience the object in mimesis because the subject's materiality is not entirely separate from that of the object. In the absence of these relations of kinship, "the break between subject and object would be absolute and cognition impossible."⁵²⁷ Thus, by following this train of thought, we can

⁵²⁴ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 21.

⁵²⁵ Ioana Jucan, "Thinking Performance in Neoliberal Times: Adorno Encounters Neutral Hero," *Adorno and Performance*, 106.

⁵²⁶ *TTMR*, 189.

⁵²⁷ *AE*, 143.

anticipate the idea that a subject who identifies with an other and participates in the tactile interaction epitomized by the experience of mimesis presupposes that its self-identity is less rigid than its received view in epistemology. Since within the dialectical cast of Adorno's philosophy negation represents the prerequisite for the possibility of difference, it becomes clear that his concern lies in how the dissolution of the subject's self-contact paves the way for the experience of being touched by the other in the mimetic act, which involves both imitation and a crucial level of tactile connection.

4.4. Second Case: Distorted Mimesis – Demise of Touch

Adorno was concerned that as soon as the concept of mimesis is fixed without mediation, it risks becoming reified into a lifeless formula that ceases to have any function for dialectical philosophy. To avoid the phantasm of *prima philosophia* that derives the world from a single principle, Adorno will always address the concept as part of a dialectical play with its opposing pole. By proceeding in this way, neither the logos of the mind isolated by Idealism, nor the eros of the flesh foregrounded by a naturalistic materialism, takes precedence. Imitative behaviour of the self toward the other comes forth as a corrective of the governing mode of cognition in the Western tradition – rationality,⁵²⁸ and vice versa. Thus, along with rationality, these historically anthropological categories form the core dialectical pair that underpins the key themes of Adornian philosophy, from negative anthropology to discourses on the production of the artwork. His commitment to articulate and maintain the dialectical tension between these two registers, as well as the tension inherent in the concepts themselves, rather than explaining them away by way of a third middle term, informs Adorno's entire work.

⁵²⁸ Schultz, *Mimesis on the Move*, 15.

As shown in the previous chapters, these spiritual elements that Adorno's philosophy is concerned with, such as the shudder and real warmth, cannot be retrieved, except in forms that align with the structure of a world that has extirpated animism. From Adorno's standpoint, expressive mimesis has been lost in demythologization and is no longer immediately available in our modern capitalist world because its structure has been distorted by the processes of alienation, rationalization, and disenchantment. As the self evolves into self-consciousness, the subject learns to manipulate original mimesis as an instrument for controlling nature. This phase corresponds to the utilization of magical practices by the sorcerers of tribal communities in order to influence nature. The chapter on the *Odyssey* from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, whereby the authors read the actions of the protagonist as the first model of dissimulation, serves to mark out the context of the organized control of mimesis, the birth of the rational self. Whereas mimesis initially denoted bodily expression and movement, its structure now comes to be characterized by increasing abstraction. As humans begin to adapt to a reified objecthood, mimesis shifts toward the inanimate, becoming a mimesis of the unity of reason. Following this displacement, the emotional component of mimetic interaction dissolves. Modern civilization sets expressive mimesis against embodiment and the emotions. In this sense, Adorno and Horkheimer further show how humanity's relation to mimesis becomes problematic due to the Enlightenment's creation of the myth of a self-identical self that represses the elements that made expressive mimesis of the other possible in the first place, namely: the body and the unconscious.⁵²⁹

We can now observe that there are two models of mimesis Adorno constantly weaves together across his texts – a repressive one that arose as a means of controlling both external and internal nature and a potentially liberating one that bridges the gap between the

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

individual and the collective. They are interlaced, above all, by the shared mode of experience they encompass.⁵³⁰ Whereas traditional epistemology attempts to secure knowledge by splitting the thinking subject from its object, Adorno's ethical brand of epistemology contends that a fundamental mimetic affinity between the knower and the known undergirds all cognition. The first model of identity of which Adorno is strongly critical is embedded in a paradigm of domination. It represents a process in which the subject reduces the object to itself, stripping it of any "unnecessary" elements in order to achieve rational control over it. Identification with another produces representations in order to make them calculable, predictable, ultimately enabling power over those representations. Within this framework extending from science to traditional philosophy, the subject's knowledge of the unlike is performed by liking it to itself. The external act of collapsing the object into the subject mirrors the internal one, which subordinates all representations of the "I" to a unity-founding Archimedean point. Although this model of rationality originates in mimesis, it eventually represses its magical, sensuous aspects and becomes complicit with instrumental rationality.

4.5. Interlude: Self-Identity as Haptic Experience

In order to grasp the meaning of the intouchness of the subject, as well as the fundamental caesura that must underpin it in mimetic identification, to which Adorno only tangentially alludes, I want to suggest ways to move beyond the enclosure of his interpretations.

Therefore, in this section we begin by looking elsewhere, transcending the literal understanding of tactility as a physical sense, as I propose a reframing of touch via two brief

⁵³⁰ The progressive and regressive tendencies at work in the concept of mimesis evoke Freud's analysis of the child's libidinal bonds with the parent in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1949). There, the ambivalent nature of identification blurs the boundary between the compassionate desire to be like the parent and the destructive urge for their removal.

scenarios that confront the problem of self-touch from opposing perspectives, namely: Kant's concept of the transcendental subject and Derrida's critique of it. Across a specific trajectory extending from ancient philosophy's exploration of early forms of awareness or proto-consciousness of being, through Aristotle's commentators of the Middle Ages, to modern medical treatises that attempt to elucidate the origins of a generalized bodily feeling we can observe a common denominator: that in order to grasp the experience of self-perception each instance within this tradition takes recourse, by various means, to the notion of touch. This apparent literal form of touch provided the conceptual schema for an understanding of the medium that held the human faculties together in contact. Within this framework, the inner senses are visualized "as a kind of metaphorical or imaginative touching [that] involves a somatic reflexivity, a knowing 'grip' on the body and its movement," explains Paterson.⁵³¹ Moreover, Howes connects this idea to the notion of "the common sense": "This faculty, which was responsible for sorting and coordinating the deliverances of the other senses, as well as the 'sense of sensing', was understood as an inward form of touch, according to a certain reading of Aristotle."⁵³² This tradition undergoes several transformations throughout scientific modernity, such that, as Heller-Roazen's narrative points out, "the koine aisthesis of the ancient philosophers thus appears as the coenaesthesia of the modern physicians; the 'common sensation' emerges as a 'common feeling'; and the 'inner touch, by which we perceive ourselves,' finds itself redefined as a faculty of 'touch' (Getast) that apprehends the vital force of the sensing body."⁵³³ We can think of the latter model illustrated by this account

⁵³¹ Mark Paterson, "On 'Inner Touch' and the Moving Body: Aisth sis, Kinaesthesia, and Aesthetics," *Touching and Being Touched: Kinesthesia and Empathy in Dance and Movement*, ed. Gabriele Brandstetter et al., (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 118, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110292046.3>

⁵³² David Howes, "The Skinscape: Reflections on the Dermalogical Turn," *Body & Society* 24, (2018): 227, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X18766285>.

⁵³³ Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 241.

in terms of Fichte's necessity of immediate self-relation in intellectual intuition that requires an "immediate nonrepresentational contact with his or her own self."⁵³⁴ This model would be better served, however, by Kant's theory of apperception whereby the abstract I works by putting in touch the various parts of the transcendental self. Although Kant's discussion of the way in which the transcendental subject secures universal knowledge does not explicitly articulate the concept of touch, it implicitly engages with it, as the terms in which he describes the pure form of the subject suggest a notion of contact between the pure I and the inner sense.

In a sardonic commentary that charges the idealist philosophers with the "ideological error of thinking touch is immediate,"⁵³⁵ Derrida sketches an ironic portrayal of Idealism whereby Psyche – the radical personification of the pure form of subject – is systematically abstracted and refined into an increasingly isolated entity by the "doctors" of philosophy. Derrida's critique addresses the way in which time becomes the condition of possibility of the transcendental form of auto-affection or self-touching in imagination. Philosophers from Kant to Heidegger, he argues, have conceived of the mind (psyche) as an a priori pure transcendental contact between the analytical and the synthetic I:

Following in the footsteps of Heidegger, among others, we would find again the great question of pure auto-affection, pure "self-touching," in the movement of temporalization. There, around Psyche (peri psuches), which is to say around the great question of "pure" self touching and preempirical auto-affection, the doctors Kant, Husserl, Freud, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and so many others closer by too (whose opinions will be asked for later) hold what is called a consultation, doubtless calling on their precursor Aristotle.⁵³⁶

This continuous, unbroken contact, unmarked by any syncope or caesura, becomes problematic for Derrida, who, as a result, invites us to reflect on the following paradox: a

⁵³⁴ Redding, *The Logic of Affect*, 126.

⁵³⁵ J. Hillis Miller, "Touching Derrida Touching Nancy: The Main Traits of Derrida's Hand," *Derrida Today* 1, no. 2 (2008): 164, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48616306>.

⁵³⁶ Derrida, *On Touching*, 46.

form of “touch without empirical contact, a self-touching or being touched without touching anything.”⁵³⁷

In order to offer insight into Adorno’s underdeveloped account of the distinction between these internal and external touches continuously shifting positions in mimetic behaviour, I want to draw upon two of the conceptual pivots around which Adorno’s philosophy turns: identity and non-identity. Although Adorno’s thinking does not fully develop how exactly mimesis requires a loosening of self-touch that gives us coincidence and immediacy, I suggest ways to extract specific threads from his thinking that can better articulate his critique of the non-empirical touch, which forms the foundation of the unified self. Adorno criticizes Kant for his profoundly ahistorical conception of the transcendental subject. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant’s notion of the identical self is associated with fixity, rather than with flow and becoming. In this sense, Adorno’s suspicion was that the more we reduce the subject to the absolute unity of the “I think,” the more difficult it becomes to mediate objectivity, as this gesture limits openness to that which is unassimilated by the subject – to the touch of the other, discussed in the opening chapter. He notes: “There is a reifying quality in the attempt to relate all phenomena we encounter to a unified reference point and to assume it under a self-identical, rigid unity, removing it from its dynamic context.”⁵³⁸ Adorno’s commitment to articulate the further-reaching consequences of Kant’s central emphasis on the continuous and uninterrupted interiority of the subject enables him to formulate what would become one of his defining insights: “reification is a function of subjectivization.”⁵³⁹ In a critical discussion of Kant’s interchangeable treatment of self-identity and freedom, Adorno reads this equivalence against the grain, showing that the

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵³⁸ *KCPR*, 114.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*

coherent model of unity between the disunited parts on which the subject is constituted is in fact a source of coercion, since:

The subjects are free, after the Kantian model, in so far as they are aware of and identical with themselves; and then again, they are unfree in such identity in so far as they are subjected to, and will perpetuate, its compulsion. They are unfree as diffuse, nonidentical nature; and yet, as that nature they are free because their overpowering impulse—*the subject's nonidentity with itself* is nothing else—will also rid them of identity's coercive character.⁵⁴⁰

Adorno agrees with Kant that the unified consciousness represents the emancipation of the subject from the diffuse and magical oneness of nature. However, he sees in the subsumption of diversity under unity an oppressive quality that has reactionary potentials. At the same time, he concedes that the impulse to become nonidentical contains hints of exit from the impasse of unfreedom. In *History and Freedom*, Adorno further extends his critique of the self-identical unified consciousness postulated by Idealism and continues to mobilize his argument against identity. The concept of freedom, Adorno contends, “cannot be formulated in the absence of recourse to something prior to the ego, to an impulse that is in a sense a bodily impulse that has not yet been subjected to the centralizing authority of consciousness.”⁵⁴¹ What Adorno seems to be implying is that in order to achieve freedom and autonomy, the subject must not appeal to sovereign rule and relapse to the private interiority akin to the oneness of nature. On the contrary, the process must pass through the register of the heteronomous. Adorno's conclusion points to a form of experience that can actively foster, by interrupting the narcissistic circuit of self-touch, elements that are nonidentical with the subject. The concentration is on a form of behaviour that is capable of facilitating the passage that pushes self-enclosed touch away from its present state. Adorno's concern then is that in order to conceive of self-reflexivity, reflexivity requires an external object.⁵⁴² My

⁵⁴⁰ *ND*, 299. (Emphasis added.)

⁵⁴¹ *HF*, 213.

⁵⁴² Wilke, “Adorno and Derrida as Readers of Husserl,” 82.

interpretation is that through his gesturally developed discourses on the temporary suspension of the experiencing subject's internal cohesion, Adorno turns away from the form of self-touch that closes the subject off from the other and instead hints at a form of touch that provides us with noncoincidence and mediated immediacy. To put it in Derrida's parlance from *On Touching*, the pure form of the subject producing a self-erotic circuit that relates the I purely to itself is subverted in Adorno's inverted perspective, which disrupts the circle of self-identification by redirecting it through the object. Mimesis reframes self-touch, shifting the focus away from the self in auto-affection and moving it closer to the other, as hetero-affection: it presents us with a new self-relation through an identification with the other.

4.6. Third Case: Mimetic Repression and the Return of Touch

In this late phase, humanity proceeds to the complete repression of sensuousness characteristic of mimesis, as rationality's omnipotence aggrandizing the intouchness of the self compels the ongoing diversion of the possibility of touch in "sensuous Othering."⁵⁴³ As a result of this shift, the I becomes increasingly decoupled from concrete phenomena, which previously enabled hetero-affection as the sense of being touched by the other. This transcendental, tautological, and abstract species of touch referring to nothing but itself represents the culmination of Idealism's doctrine of identity. This process captured by Adorno in his study on Kierkegaard as philosophies of bourgeois inwardness and treated as a form of escapist fantasy from the external domain of reification leads subjectivity to withdraw in narcissistic auto-affection. Here it would be difficult to ignore the way in which the psychoanalytical imagination that promised to decipher the irrational mental processes of the

⁵⁴³ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 68.

“mysterious self,” contributed in parallel to the modern “quest for authenticity,” prompted by consumer capitalism under various media outlets such as movies and advice literature.⁵⁴⁴

Furthermore, this stage is reflected in the theological ban on graven images echoing the Jewish tradition. The belief that the presence of the depicted resides within the depiction, in other words, that the image achieves divine qualities on the basis of its likeness to the divine, gives rise to the prohibition of idolatry.⁵⁴⁵ In consequence, this indicates a shift in the history of art toward the autonomy of the depiction in relation to the depicted, which later on concretizes in the aesthetics of modernism as the determinate negation of what exists.⁵⁴⁶ Interestingly, it will be precisely art’s autonomous status as the free and separate sphere removed from the everyday domain of rationality that the subject comes to imitate in aesthetic experience. The mimetic taboo – prescribing that “nothing should be moist;” that everything should stay “hygienic” – functions as a prohibition aimed at the senses, most specifically at the sense of touch.⁵⁴⁷ Paradoxically, this very taboo works against itself and becomes a mimetic force. In mimetically enacting art’s free unity, the subject immerses itself in the objectness of the world, whose construction, materiality, and hardness are registered in tactile terms. In this sense, the subject’s autonomy is dialectically measured against its own claim. Art’s autonomy challenges the subject’s illusory autonomy, conceived under the sensation of self-touch. When Adorno claims that the subject extinguishes itself in the process of construction he is referring to a process whereby mimetic co-enactment breaks the narcissistic circuit of touch that relates the I directly to itself, revealing it to be false. In the aporia of aesthetic experience, the subject sinking and losing itself in mimetic abandonment

⁵⁴⁴ Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, 9.

⁵⁴⁵ Gertrud Koch, “Mimesis and Bilderverbot,” *Screen* 34, no. 3 (1993): 217, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/34.3.211>

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵⁴⁷ *AT*, 116.

ultimately comes to inhabit a tactile world that reorients it toward a more flexible and open-ended structure. We can see here how touch is a crucial aspect for both facets of mimesis: whether as an imitation of the unity of reason (conceived as self-reflexive touch producing the quasi-reactionary idea of pure immediacy) or as the sensuous assimilation to an other (whereby the I achieves sameness through alterity via mediation) mimesis and touch are inseparably and circularly linked.

4.7. Beckett's *Endgame*: The Caesura of Self-Touch

Equipped with this understanding, we can now turn to Adorno's engagement with Beckett's work as representing a critical enactment of the mimetic taboo enforced by the administered world. Beckett practices the determinate negation of mimetic repression. His refusal to portray the points of contact between the self and itself as internal cohesion, between the characters as non-logical dialogues, and between the public and the work as the continual alienation and impossibility of gratifying identification, lifts to our attention the crisis of touch posed by the repression of mimesis and simultaneously points to possible avenues of escape. By refraining from depicting the sensuousness and materiality of subjective experience, the play, in line with mimetic prohibition, lays bare the repressed mimeticity essential to modern civilization. My argument is that Adorno's direct interest in *Endgame* stems from the fact that the play illustrates, in its recording of the increasing meaninglessness and isolation of the subject, the fracture of identity. Adorno's lifelong concern with the way in which Existentialist philosophies have struggled to inject meaning in a meaningless world according to the ontological need (and by extension to legitimize subjective expression by recourse to a binding authority) crystallizes in "Trying to Understand *Endgame*." The essay abounds in references to the repressed rather than expressive form of mimesis prevalent across capitalist societies, which I suggest can cast a negative light, and subsequently offer a fuller gloss, on the problem of touch in Adorno's texts.

Endgame presents the consequences of the catastrophes of the twentieth century that have progressively delegitimized the subject's authority to bestow meaning on itself and on the world. Adorno's main argument throughout the text is that Beckettian dramaturgy no longer maintains an imaginary relation to (neither external nor internal) nature. His essay reiterates the thesis that as nature has been displaced by rationality, we adapt to the post-industrial disenchanted world by mimicking its deadliness, simultaneously repressing the expressive mimesis of magical eras. Beckett's strategy in *Endgame* is to put into question this shift, by mimetically "enact[ing] what should not be."⁵⁴⁸ In particular, Adorno is here more interested in using the play's "mimesis of the hardened and alienated" as an anchoring point for a discussion of the disintegrating authority and increasing impotence of self-contact.⁵⁴⁹ In Adorno's modernist canon, since art is prohibited from practical intervention, the play cannot restore the totality of "fragmented subjectivity."⁵⁵⁰ Instead, through its imagery of the interior claustrophobically enclosing its characters, it reflects the limitations of solipsism. By refusing to put the body into tactful contact with the mind, Beckett's work leaves us only with a "corpsed" being,⁵⁵¹ as suggested by Clov's line looking with his telescope out the window. Beckett, Adorno holds, portrays a situation governed not by coherence, but by the absurd, the name for that "which mere existence becomes as soon as it is consumed in naked self-identity."⁵⁵² Throughout the essay, Adorno employs a vocabulary that appeals to emptiness in his critique of rigid self-touch – whereby terms such as "shell-like, self-enclosed existence," "obsolete bunker" figure – to describe the (fictitious) tight contact of the subject's fragmented

⁵⁴⁸ Schultz, *Mimesis on the Move*, 135.

⁵⁴⁹ *AT*, 21.

⁵⁵⁰ Theodor W Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," trans. Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique*, no. 26 (1982): 127. <https://doi.org/10.2307/488027>.

⁵⁵¹ Samuel Beckett, "Endgame," *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), 106.

⁵⁵² Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," 124.

parts, sealing itself off from any relationship to the body.⁵⁵³ This reveals for Adorno that “Endgame posits the antithesis, that precisely this self is not a self but rather the aping imitation of something non-existent.”⁵⁵⁴ In Adorno’s reading, the register of disidentification in which the characters participate indicates a blind spot of authority. Ham and Clove’s subjectivities held together by separation as the “dissociation of the unity of consciousness into disparate elements,”⁵⁵⁵ rather than continuity, raise the issue of the sterility of a self-touch terrified of what Adorno calls “dirtying itself with the specific”:⁵⁵⁶ This argument is suggested by Clov’s fixation on order: The line “I love order. It’s my dream” mirrors the primacy of logic despotically imposing the principle of non-contradiction on the moments of thinking on the one hand, and assuring immediate, identical tactile certitude on the other.⁵⁵⁷

Although Adorno may not have addressed this issue with the sense of touch in mind, his lines of thinking lend themselves to an understanding of the immanence of separation operating in the name of identity. Adorno suggests that the relation between the multiple selves in Beckett’s characters is not a chiasmic one. Beckett’s play thus dramatizes the ways in which contact between the self and the self fails to happen, despite Western philosophy’s compulsion to perceive identity across the various elements constitutive of subjective experience. On the contrary, Beckett’s work confronts dominant ideology with what it claims to achieve. As the chiasm no longer comes full circle, *Endgame* seems to thematize for Adorno a continued situation of near-touch. By denying the intouchness of the subject with itself, Beckett’s oeuvre presents an image of rupture and division between bodily and mental experience. In *Texts for Nothing*, the narrator deepens the problematic in his questioning of

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 124; 126.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁵⁶ *H*, 80.

⁵⁵⁷ Beckett, “Endgame,” 120.

the tactile clarity traditionally working to affirm presence: “What can have become of the tissues I was, I can see them no more, feel them no more, flaunting and fluttering all about and inside me, pah they must be still on their old prowl somewhere, passing themselves off as me.”⁵⁵⁸ This motif is further articulated in *Endgame*, where the main characters constantly engage in irrational dialogues governed by non-sequiturs:

HAMM: Open the window.

CLOV: What for?

HAMM: I want to hear the sea.

CLOV: You wouldn't hear it.

HAMM: Even if you opened the window?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Then it's not worth opening it?

CLOV: No.

HAMM (violently): Then open it!⁵⁵⁹

Rather, what is revealed is the persistent postponement of the possibility of touch, the consequences of which are summarized as follows: “As soon as the subject is no longer doubtlessly self-identical, no longer a closed structure of meaning, the line of demarcation with the exterior becomes blurred, and the situations of inwardness become at the same time physical ones.”⁵⁶⁰ In this sense, mimesis of the disenchanting world takes the form of a materialism that dispels the illusion of binding auto-affective touch, literalizing its meaning.⁵⁶¹ Literal touch sabotages its symbolic configuration, adding a body to abstract

⁵⁵⁸ Samuel Beckett, “Text for Nothing 6,” *Stories & Texts for Nothing* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 103.

⁵⁵⁹ Beckett, “Endgame,” 123-124.

⁵⁶⁰ Adorno, “Trying to Understand Endgame,” 129.

⁵⁶¹ Conti, “Sensation at Odds with Itself,” 108.

identity: Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, literally live in a garbage bin. Mimesis of the absent centre of the subject literally crystalizes in Hamm's obsession to occupy the middle position: "Put me right in the centre."⁵⁶²

Levy's comments on the disintegrating powers at work within the Beckettian imaginary are apt here: "Endgame begins by problematizing indivisible wholeness."⁵⁶³ Touch is the sense that negatively takes over the play. While in the Kantian schematism, time represented the medium in which imagination produces the pure image of transcendental contact between the subject and the object of the self, offering temporal continuity and coherence to the experience of apperception, Beckett subversively refunctions time as a process that accumulates meaninglessly, refusing to indulge in an affirmative instantiation of contact between selves. Instead, time serves in Beckett's work to produce an image of disparate selves, disconnected with one another. What characterizes the experience of self-contact is "not the continuous unfolding of the intrinsic meaning or value of the animate subject in question, but only the accumulation of temporal units which remain extraneous to the subject enduring through them."⁵⁶⁴ Ultimately, mimesis, conceived as a result of tactile and embodied encounters with the other, is represented by Beckett's play through its total absence: it manifests, albeit in a different guise, as the rationality of construction. In other words, the principle of mastery over the work, in being so radical and excluding all emotional components, dispenses with the subject's self-expression and in so doing conveys it objectively as lost. The mimetic dimension that Adorno viewed as an agent of touch demands the dissolution of the subject's claim to cohesion: "by the strength of insight into the artwork as artwork, these experiences are those in which the subject's petrification in his own

⁵⁶² Beckett, "Endgame," 105.

⁵⁶³ Eric P. Levy, "Disintegrative Process in 'Endgame'," *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 12 (2002): 264, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25781423>.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

subjectivity dissolves and the narrowness of his self-posedness is revealed.”⁵⁶⁵ Against this background, Adorno outlines the principle that underlies his own brand of aesthetics, one no longer grounded in the arbitrary principle of taste that works by fitting the object in a pre-existing category, but as I show in this final section, couched in the sense that has the capacity to more adequately convey objective pain and suffering: touch.

4.8. Interpretation: Touch Displaces Taste

The acknowledgement that the multiple facets of the self do not in fact settle into a simple identification motivates the impulse to extend outward and perceive “the emergence of what is not itself subject.”⁵⁶⁶ As Wulf shows, mimesis “leads to momentary contact with what is nondeterminate in the similar-to-itself artwork.”⁵⁶⁷ Perhaps in opposition to Irigaray’s sustained endeavour to cultivate a “necessary return to self-affection,”⁵⁶⁸ Adorno’s efforts to try to establish mimesis as an experience that generates (albeit significantly changed) sites of tactility between the perceiver and the perceived, advocate an alternative experience of hetero-affection. In temporarily loosening the tightly bound self-reflexive touch conceived as proprioception, the shattered subject of aesthetic experience brings into view the possibility of a relationship to otherness, and of forming a new tactile communion, but this time as an encounter that no longer passes through the register of immediacy and hence, no longer affirms the legitimacy of the subject’s haptic coincidence. And this connects back to Adorno’s notion of co-enactment, which as an act of both interpretation and critique, necessarily positions itself against the subjective principle of taste. How so?

⁵⁶⁵ *AT*, 269.

⁵⁶⁶ Adorno, “Trying to Understand Endgame,” 129.

⁵⁶⁷ Christoph Wulf, “The Creation of Body Knowledge in Mimetic Processes,” *Embodiment in Evolution and Culture*, ed. Gregor Etzelmüller and Christian Tewes (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 252.

⁵⁶⁸ Luce Irigaray, *The Mediation of Touch* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 269.

On account of its arbitrariness, Adorno mobilizes an argument against the aesthetic judgement of taste. Taste is viewed as “problematic” because grounding the experience of artworks in subjectivity “means claiming to be largely independent of the supposed randomness of the object and to have recourse to something that is firm and binding because it is immutable, namely the self-identical structure of such a consciousness.”⁵⁶⁹ What Adorno calls new art lacks the predefined categories and styles characteristic of nineteenth-century aesthetics. Radical modern art dispenses with the notion of a priori synthesis and pre-determined language. This is why archaic mimesis, as the meaningful expression of subjectivity, as the sensuous imitation of an other, is seen by Adorno as entertaining an excessively fictitious relationship to nature. As the mimeticity that sensuously “moves and touches us” can no longer do so directly, the modern expressive drive imitates the brokenness or vulnerability of the internally legislating touch. Instead, the animating principle of art comes to reflect the dominating principle of reality: subordination to an imposed unity by the authority of the subject. Thus, construction comes to express “the dawning powerlessness of expression.”⁵⁷⁰ Objective construction also serves to restrict the hostile touches of modern individualism. However, since art’s synthesis is by definition conceptless namely, non-deductive and non-conclusive, the co-enactment of the individual artwork’s inner organization, rather than the imitation of nature or of an other, hints at Adorno’s refunctioned model of touch grounded in hetero-affection, as opposed to the immediate and self-intuitive inner bond of the inner selves. As touch displaces taste, Adorno reworks aesthetic experience in such a way as to echo the structure of a tactile force: “the work of art is simply always something hurtful and that, where it no longer hurts anyone but, rather, blends completely into the closed surface of experience, it essentially ceases to be a living work of art at all.”⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁹ *AT*, 169; 166.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

By immersing itself in the work's objectivity, the subject acknowledges touch's enclosure within the abstract "organic" totality hopelessly trapped in the immediacy of experience, and recreates it, assisted by constructive means. Mimesis of technicization of touch that breaks the chain of self-affection has now come full circle. In the recognition of its own fragmented state, the subject of aesthetic experience assimilates itself to the fragmented state of what is nonidentical in the artwork. Ultimately, Adorno's intriguing form of touch once again signals the structure of a caesura. The shape it takes is that of a wound: the visceral tactile receptivity of what is other to the subject succeeds only at the cost of sacrificing transcendental-idealistic intouchness.

Chapter 5

Immersion and Total Touch

For thought there is really no other possibility, no other opportunity, than to do what the miner's adage forbids: to work one's way through the darkness without a lamp, without possessing the positive through the higher concept of the negation of the negation, and to immerse oneself in the darkness as deeply as one possibly can.

– Adorno, *Metaphysics*⁵⁷²

As the unfolding of each chapter has tried to bring forth, Adorno's entire theoretical and practical striving attempts to mobilize, both through critical and affective approaches, the neglected material substrate that informs our perception. What they have shown, each in their

⁵⁷²M, 144.

own way, is that the non-systematically intertwined key themes of his philosophy form a nexus of relations grounded in tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sense modalities. Against this background, I indicated that touch functions as the index of movement opposing the increasingly reifying mechanisms of instrumental reason that filter lived experience through facts and metrics. At this point, we can already see how the continual interaction between the motifs of Adorno's philosophy anticipates the structure of a tactile subject, capable of being affected and emotionally touched. Its partial and fragmented portrait is sketched out in Adorno's brief, yet significant remarks on the possibility of touch that crop up on the margins of many of his texts. In the face of his observations, we can reconstruct this subject's ability to intellectually mediate the sensory configurations symptomatic of damaged life: namely, the convulsions of the shudder, the shakiness produced by the unsettling return of nonidentity, the shivering caused by cold reason, and the spasms of mimesis, in order to articulate them into a unity of thinking mediated by feeling. As Jay puts it, these steps are taken by Adorno in order to foster an awareness of the preponderance of the object within the subject, of "soma in the psyche,"⁵⁷³ highlighting the repressed materiality of the sentient body. The direction in which Adorno's thinking pushes us then seems to be captured in the following sensuously informed choreography, whose arrangement permeates through various levels of Adorno's writings: in the experience of the shudder, the cold, emotionless subject, caught up in the dominating web that renders it impotent, experiences the intangible non-identical. By engaging in mimetic behaviour, the subject reconnects with a repressed element of itself namely, its materiality, thereby illuminating what Bernstein calls the "bodily cogito,"⁵⁷⁴ whose suppression has historically condemned it to powerlessness. Seen by Adorno as the precondition for the elimination of the principle of violence and the suffering it

⁵⁷³ Martin Jay, *Splinters in Your Eye: Frankfurt School Provocations* (London: Verso, 2020), 65, Kindle.

⁵⁷⁴ Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 305.

causes, this move urges the subject to recognize the nature within, awakening it to an enhanced awareness of cognition and affect. Insofar “as intellect suppresses instinct, it is not yet true intellect.”⁵⁷⁵ The severe separation instituted by instrumental rationality between what Adorno calls eros and knowledge leads him to formulate an authentic form of cognition that exposes the ideology that holds open the gap between the two spheres, rendering them incommensurable with the other. The paths traced by these elements across the thesis bring us closer to an understanding of Adorno’s larger project, which I have aimed to elucidate from the standpoint of what I term an affective form of thinking: conceived as being as much empathetic as fiercely oppositional. By refusing to couch his lines of thinking in the scopophilic gaze on account of its objectifying character, Adorno’s texts, I have argued, engage with their object by appealing to a non-totalizing sense of touch. This sense is meant to designate all species of tactility ranging from localized contacts, to modes of tactfully engaging with both tangibilities and nontangibilities. In so doing, Adorno attempts to enable the “felt” and intuited material core of rationality, increasingly repressed by the Western philosophical tradition, to come to the fore.

However, it is important to remember that the various structures through which touch is instantiated are not fixed in definitive form, but invariably mediated by other concepts (affirmation, negation), mediums (vision, hearing, taste), categories (rationality, otherness), and conditions of possibility (absence, presence), a procedure employed by Adorno to avoid the idealist tendency of deriving experience from a single category. Though Adorno often indirectly encouraged his readers and seminar participants to engage with philosophy tactilely rather than visually (this proclivity is exemplified by his numerous references to a blind and unconscious mode of experience that seems to comprehend through one of the variants of the

⁵⁷⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “Stravinsky,” *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2011), 155.

sense of touch, as the epigraph cited at the beginning of this chapter illustrates), his invitation continuously advocated straying from the classical reading of touch, conceived as an immediate verifier of presence and haptic certainty, as this would have condemned his efforts to undialectically foregrounding the positivist ideal of sense-certainty.

In the previous chapter, mimesis served as a critical means to recover the atrophied touch of self-reflexivity, an activity that we may gasp with Adorno's analogy of new music: "tonality is foregone by a consciousness that will no longer content itself with the nature-like stasis of its existential conditions and, instead, recognizes its own inflammatory productive power."⁵⁷⁶ The form that touch took in mimetic behaviour – eroding the boundaries between the self and other – was no longer grounded in the harmonistic consonance of traditional tonality, but came to resonate with atonality, to reflect a body trembling along impulses that deny the narcissistic, a priori unity of the subject. Having traversed the complex array of concepts that forms the affective core of Adorno's philosophical macrocosm, this study's final exploration turns to a site of tactility that frequently escapes the notice of traditional philosophy: the exercise of micrological immersion and the tactile aporias to which it gives rise. What is it precisely that immersion designates and what are the philosophical implications of Adorno's engagement with it? Immersion is an ambiguous concept, a kind of persistent referent surfacing throughout Adorno's oeuvre. It can be said that along with determinate negation which delineates the boundaries of critique, immersion represents Adorno's dynamic methodological principle, directly engaging with the embodied experience during the process of critique.

My aim in this chapter is twofold. First, I want to suggest that the sense that takes over in the experience of immersion is touch, as Adorno stresses tactility *in absentia*, as it

⁵⁷⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "Atonal Intermezzo," *Night Music*, trans. Wieland Hoban (London: Seagull Books, 2019), 224-225.

were, by anchoring the experience, as we shall see, in coordinates such as “blind,” “unconscious,” and “darkness” – knots that suggest the overcoming of the limits and untenability of vision. Indeed, these elements indicate a manner of engagement in which the embodied subject encounters and tactilely unravels the unique combination of weight, surface, mass, and texture of the object, in short, its nonidentical, individuating differences purged by identity thinking. Furthermore, since for Adorno, immersion involves both an “extreme enhancement of dialectical immanence,”⁵⁷⁷ as well as the preservation not of “distraction” but of “the utmost tension”⁵⁷⁸ from which ensues a clouded, myopic vision that passes into an intensive tactile feeling by compelling the subject to rely on other senses, I propose that we can grasp immersion through the notion of total touch. Moreover, the German word Adorno employs, *Versenkung*, translates as “sinking,” further bringing into relief the total nature of such tactile encounter. Second, having established the importance of this all-encompassing notion of touch, equated with immersion in Adorno’s philosophy, I go on to pursue the ambivalent valences inherent in the concept of immersion: namely, a form of strict immanence interwoven with a moment of transcendence. As it will be determined, this distinction corresponds to the planes of micrology and macrology that the phenomenon of immersion – by instantiating a disjunctive unity – brings into a single landscape. Through this investigation, I aim to suggest that this particular manifestation of touch that Adorno prompts us to consider is invariably haunted, much like the other embodiments previously taken up by the thesis, by an unresolvable paradox.

By closely analysing the principles through which immersion operates throughout Adorno’s writings, I argue that the productive association of the two levels of perception that shape the concept of immersion – transcendence/macrology and immanence/micrology – can

⁵⁷⁷ *ND*, 28.

⁵⁷⁸ *AT*, 245.

bring about a host of liberatory ends. Such potentiality emerges precisely because these levels will no longer align in the traditional sense, their shifting ensuring there is no possible point of continuity between them. The newly achieved “synthesis” points to a peculiar experience whereby the plane of immanence, expressed in the idea of total touch, ultimately serves to ensure transcendence, not through an integral experience of the whole, but against all expectation, through the space of the “extremely small.” The idea that the extreme enhancement of tactile interaction can lead to the suspension of the context to which the subject is bound, thereby transfiguring tactility from its violent character, will be rehearsed in many different ways across Adorno’s philosophy. In any case, the model to which Adorno adheres is given in the image of an action undoing itself precisely at the moment of its enactment: “the closer an author’s contact with his material, the freer he is.”⁵⁷⁹

My broad claim then, is that by proceeding so, Adorno seeks to avoid the danger residing in the decision to collapse experience in a simple empiricism expressed by notions like sensory knowledge or the knowing body, as this would result in a reaffirmation of the purely receptive, instinctual drives. At the same time, he refuses to reduce experience to a pure moment of cognition, since this move would reinforce the narrative of the disembodied mind, devoid of the affective dimension – the “live contact with the warmth of things”⁵⁸⁰ that can prevent universal coldness. Instead, this final chapter culminates in the idea that touch, as it emerges in Adorno’s philosophy, is neither foregrounded in its explicit appearance, nor preserved in the background as a mere condition of possibility, but becomes a stage on which fuller forms of experience are enabled to unfold in more than one possible way. This gesture, my interpretation suggests, offers us a much more unified account of mind and body, working to liberate the subject from their reductive opposition. In a remarkable reversal and different

⁵⁷⁹ “Reaction and Progress,” *NM*, 148.

⁵⁸⁰ *MM*, 43.

from Heidegger's concept of Being, whose transcendence, Adorno criticizes as an "absolutized immanence,"⁵⁸¹ Adorno refuses to indulge in external "sacrosanct transcendence," or to restore the primacy of "closest contact." Instead, with the experience of immersion he will seek to mediate reconciliation and redemption that are absent, within the space of immanence, producing a new vantage point: "where the thought transcends the bonds it tied in resistance – there is its freedom."⁵⁸²

5.1. Immersion in the Dark: Illusion, Spell, Confinement

Adorno's account of immersion is meant to designate a sense of embodied concentration couched not in the ocularcentric discourse, which proves to be an inadequate register due to its association with the "master sense" as the direct extension of the dominating concept. In this sense, he describes concentration and its relationship to sight in terms that make the clash between inside and outside acute: "concentration mediates the exertions of the ego through what is opposed to it. Hostile to thought is avidity, *the distracted gaze out past the window* that wants nothing to escape it; theological traditions such as that of the Talmud have warned of it."⁵⁸³ As Jay similarly points out, in alignment with the theological ban on graven images, Adorno's commitment led him to consider modes of perception that moved away from those that "privileged visual experience."⁵⁸⁴ This relates to Adorno's sustained criticism of what he identifies as "the cold light of reason,"⁵⁸⁵ which can represent even the most atrocious events "as if it were a conversational topic."⁵⁸⁶ In *Negative Dialectics*, this model of perception is

⁵⁸¹ *OD*, 219.

⁵⁸² *ND*, 17.

⁵⁸³ "Notes on Philosophical Thinking," *CM*, 130. (Emphasis added).

⁵⁸⁴ Jay, *Splinters in Your Eye*, 65.

⁵⁸⁵ *MM*, 239.

⁵⁸⁶ *DE*, 79.

outlined as even more radically distanced from vision: “it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images.”⁵⁸⁷ Immersion, it is made immediately clear, occurs in spaces similar to those Adorno envisions as conforming to the principles of new music – “an absolutely darkened space in which lights only flicker in order to render the darkness visible.”⁵⁸⁸ How, then, are we to understand the concept of immersion and its related category of concentration, if, Adorno always reminds us, it must not come to pass through the register of sight?

A good entry point for establishing the context of the present discussion is to begin envisioning the three dimensional, folded surface of Adorno’s imagination onto which he invites us to reflect through the immersive interior of the music hall – as music is one of the central models for his discussions of immersion – captured in a collection of short fragments that explore its “natural history.” With the virtuoso style of a storyteller, Adorno traces its mythical threads in a text that appears to imbricate personal memories, political allusions, stylistic irony, and musical references. The emphasis throughout his descriptions is on the richly tactile figuring of the interior of the music theatre and most importantly, on the permanent sense of haptic pressure that threatens to enclose the spectators in an unconscious, and simultaneously sensory experience. From the depiction of the boxes “gilded in bronze and plush” and “shrouded in darkness,”⁵⁸⁹ evoking the sensory/blind binary of experience rather than visual/rational one, to the seats in the stalls to which the audience is “fixed immovably,”⁵⁹⁰ conveying not the lightness of distraction but the fixity of concentration and confinement, to the “blind act of applauding,”⁵⁹¹ which points to an intoxicating, sensuously

⁵⁸⁷ *ND*, 207.

⁵⁸⁸ “Stravinsky,” *QUF*, 173.

⁵⁸⁹ “Natural History of the Theatre,” *QUF*, 71.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

informed type of engagement, immersion into this space “places a magic circle around both artist and audience from which neither can escape.”⁵⁹² One facet of Adorno’s concept of immersion points to his use of another frequently used concept – *der Bann*, translated as the spell. While the spell indeed points throughout his writings to the rather grim situation of inescapability enforced by capitalism’s totality which colonizes everyday life through the mechanisms of the culture industry, on a closer inspection, it simultaneously encompasses another meaning, identified by Turner as “something like a fairytale realm lying under magical protection, in which monsters, in reality merely what is different and has become unrecognizable, have been driven out and left to die in a wasteland beyond the protective screen.”⁵⁹³ And, as the logic of fairytales has been pointed out by Haynes, “the danger of casting spells is that they can turn on you.”⁵⁹⁴ As Horkheimer and Adorno discuss in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* this “spell of immanence” results in a reified and re-enchanted world.⁵⁹⁵ It is in this abysmal myth of identitarian philosophy and social exchangeability that Adorno’s philosophy plunges, using immanently immersive methods to move beyond the unchangeable, ahistorical, and fated aspects of experience.

To better understand the way in which constrictive force interweaves closely with that power of illusion at the core of Adorno’s concept of immersion, we can take a brief detour into the technological histories of immersive experiences, which began to flourish with the rise of commodity capitalism. Dating back to the nineteenth-century spectacle of phantasmagorias, the prehistory of immersion began with attractions such as diorama, panorama, and cyclorama paintings, progressed in the twentieth century to film and later

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁹³ Christopher Turner, “Under Adorno’s Spell: *Bann* as Fundamental Concept Rather than Mere Metaphor,” *New German Critique*, no. 129 (2016): 214, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44211666>.

⁵⁹⁴ Haynes, *Immanent Transcendence*, 131.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

television, and ultimately reached the computer-based virtual realities of the twenty-first century.⁵⁹⁶ The framework of illusion as depth that characterizes early non-digital virtual reality spaces such as the cyclorama where spectators viewed a painting encircling the walls of a circular building, ensuring a 360-degree view as their bodies turned around to examine the details,⁵⁹⁷ mirrors the auratic quality of illusion identified by Marx in the structure of the commodity. Both address themselves to the senses through immersive techniques such as movement and interaction in the case of virtual realities, or through fetish-induced illusions in the case of the commodities, which in a certain sense, work to limit the subject's freedom. Illusion, confinement, and the magic of capitalism, then, collide in the phenomenon of immersion. This interpretation lines up with Adorno's conception of the spell which in the social plane becomes the "equivalent of the fetish character of merchandise," where the labour involved in making the commodity is forgotten, leaving it as an in-itself, "from which the self cannot escape anymore."⁵⁹⁸ This structure of illusion is better conveyed by the contemporary virtual reality immersive experiences, which aim to make the participant unable "to distinguish between virtual and everyday reality."⁵⁹⁹ As we are going to see, the trope of blindness reflected in the inability to recognize the system of illusions figures here as a reaction to capitalism's blind domination, to nature's blind compulsion, and, in a word, to the blind irrationalism that permeates modern human experience. For this reason, the spell that blinds individuals into the illusion of commodity capitalism will prompt Adorno to shift the focus in the experience of immersion onto the sense of touch, reactivated in the subject

⁵⁹⁶ Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 349.

⁵⁹⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 53.

⁵⁹⁸ *ND*, 346.

⁵⁹⁹ Daniel Palmer, "Contemplative Immersion: Benjamin, Adorno & Media Art Criticism," *Walter Benjamin and the Virtual*, no. 15 (2007): 1, https://www.transformationsjournal.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/01/Palmer_Transformations_15.pdf

through various phenomena such as submersion, sinking, saturation, and floating. As the previous chapter has shown with reference to art's crisis of meaning, this shift crystallized for Adorno as the necessity for artworks to shed their illusory character and instead foreground a mode of comprehension that addresses itself to the (repressed) sensuous materiality of the body by rejecting elements such as costume (theatre), tonality (music), figuration (painting), among others.

At this stage, however, turning to the sphere of literature will enable us to better grasp the inseparable link that ties immersion to compulsion. It is common to say that a reader can be immersed in the narrative of a novel. However, there appears to be something uncanny about complete immersion. The attentiveness and absorption that accompany the experience of immersion evoke a sense of claustrophobic enclosure, pulling in the direction of compulsion. In one of Robert Walser's posthumously published untitled fragments, we find an instance where immersion figures as a heavy force. Here, the narrator describes the activity of immersive concentration in terms that suggest an almost overwhelming pressure and coercion: "I am an attentive person. I am almost completely composed solely of attention. I must pay attention to everything, it forces me, it pulls me. I cannot help myself. I cannot look away. I cannot skip anything."⁶⁰⁰ In aiming to fully integrate the embodied observer, proximity and the sense of being within – drawing in the spectator, rather than distance and exclusion, are emphasized. In this sense, as Grau's comment helpfully suggests, immersion and integration are tightly bound together as concepts, since the illusionistic landscapes seek to "enclose and immerse the observer regardless of the form of the medium."⁶⁰¹ I argue that this model of immersion couched in an almost claustrophobic spatial

⁶⁰⁰ Cited in: Jörg Kreienbrock, "Immersion, Interpolation, Philology: Losing Oneself in Robert Walser," *Robert Walser: A Companion*, ed. Samuel Frederick & Valerie Heffernan (Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 198.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

relation is closely aligned with Adorno's use of the metaphor of sinking that I develop further in the next section.

5.2. Immersion Amplified: Water, Absorption, Sinking

However, the culmination of coercing the subject's freedom is achieved not by the immersion provided by the novel, nor in the obsessive concentration that permits nothing to escape its notice, but rather in the mechanisms of capitalism in the social sphere and its reflection in virtual realities in the digital world. In reconstructing the concept of immersion, the water metaphor becomes particularly prominent. Immersion evokes the notion of spiritual cleansing in the Christian ritual of baptism.⁶⁰²

The term immersion is often associated with virtual realities, where different haptic technologies are used to stimulate the users' tactile sensations, such that they are absorbed into an imaginary world. Literature on virtual reality often deploys immersion as a form of embodied perception, in conjunction with the term "presence," understood as the "feeling of being there."⁶⁰³ From this perspective, immersion draws attention to the tactility and materiality of proprioceptive awareness. This notion aligns closely with a narrative emerging around the end of the twentieth century when Novak envisaged the structure of cyberspace through the related metaphor of "liquid architecture," whereby its fluid interstices permit the being here of the body to become liberated in being elsewhere. In his description of this (non)place whereby "we reassert the body, we grant it the freedom to change at whim, to become liquid,"⁶⁰⁴ the utopia of fluid tactile identities assumes concrete reality. This image

⁶⁰² Palmer, "Contemplative Immersion," 1.

⁶⁰³ Alison McMahan, "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analysing 3-D Video Games," *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Marc J.P. Wolf & Bernard Perron (London: Routledge, 2003), 68.

⁶⁰⁴ Marcos Novak, "Liquid Architectures in Cyberspace," *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. Michael Benedikt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 227.

evokes the cybercultural idea asserted by artist Char Davies with reference to her interactive, fully immersive VR piece, *Éphémère*: that we can “escape the confines of our mortal bodies by merging ourselves with silicon,”⁶⁰⁵ a fantasy that can ultimately be viewed as radicalizing the prevailing Western view of a disembodied, commanding mind, envisioning a space “where flesh is absent and there is no dirt.”⁶⁰⁶ In contrast, Adorno’s view of immersive experience will challenge this problematic perspective, which serves to reassert the cartesian split between affect and intellect, pushing the subject into a downward spiral of increasing bodily repression. As each chapter has attempted to illuminate, Adorno’s injunction is to “argue against the separation of emotion and intellect.”⁶⁰⁷

By grasping immersion in terms of the deceptive spaces created by digital reality, we can see how the liquidation of actual touch paves the way for the simulacrum of virtual touch. What began as a faithful effort to liquify the ossified structures that hindered progress and emancipation, as discussed in Chapter 3 with reference to the social phenomenon of coldness, turned back on itself, and, following the logic outlined throughout the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, resulted in an all-encompassing fluid force prompting total integration. As a result of capitalism’s newfound capacity to assimilate all levels of experience, our bodily being comes to be deeply immersed, enmeshed, and encompassed by its thick, dense, and viscous web. But this narrative, which largely stresses the regressive aspects of immersion, elides its potentially progressive tendencies. As we have seen, Adorno’s criticism was most compelling when it moved beyond choosing between two simple alternatives and when

⁶⁰⁵ Char Davies, “Éphémère: Landscape, Earth, Body, and Time in Immersive Virtual Space,” *Reframing Consciousness: Art, Mind and Technology*, ed. Roy Ascott (Exeter: Intellect Books, 1999), 198.

⁶⁰⁶ Frank Popper, *From Technological to Virtual Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 195.

⁶⁰⁷ *TTMR*, 97.

“wresting truth from where its untruth is obvious,”⁶⁰⁸ managed against the grain, to show how the two coordinates are not external from each other. In this respect, Foster is correct in identifying one aspect of immersion as a cultural politics that leaves “our masters to control every aspect of these terms,” aligning with the culture industry and its associated mode of reception as consumption. Nevertheless, he may be mistaken in viewing our experience of immersion as merely an intensified form of distraction that dispossesses the subject of its autonomy, and which he positions as the opposite of critical thinking – “much more total in its effects than the distraction faced by Benjamin and Krakauer.”⁶⁰⁹ Although he rightly situates the cultural phenomenon of immersion within the consumerist habits that lead to an increasing paralysis of concentration – whose trajectory ranges from “non-artistic immersive encounters, from the Diorama and the Panorama in the 19th century to the IMAX cinema or ‘surround sound’ in the 20th century” –⁶¹⁰ he neglects the fundamentally critical aspect latent in the experience.

Adorno’s work, however, will address precisely this ambiguity inherent in the concept of immersion, tracing its truth content through its apparent untruth. What is interesting about immersion is that its inner core is animated by a contradiction that reemerges throughout Adorno’s works on art, philosophy and sociology spanning decades. On the one hand, the term is introduced to designate a state of mind whereby the subject accords full, undiminished attention to the object of analysis. Here, we could think of immersion through the paradigm of the religious worshipper, who in solitude with God, immerses itself in the auratic experience that implies a distancing medium. In a similar vein, one might consider the bourgeois experience of contemplating a masterpiece as falling into the same category, where

⁶⁰⁸ *H*, 83.

⁶⁰⁹ Hal Foster, “Polemics, Postmodernism, Immersion, Militarized Space,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, no. 3 (2004): 328, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412904048784>.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 329.

distance is key.⁶¹¹ On the other hand, the German word employed by Adorno directly conflicts with the intellectual absorption prompted by many of his formulations. The original *Versenkung* translates as the act of sinking and, in keeping with the water metaphor echoed by immersion, suggests a body literally submerged – perhaps even alluding to a descent into the mysterious, deeper strata of the Freudian unconscious – in the medium of objectivity. In contrast to the optical suggestions inherent in contemplation, this particular instantiation of immersion implies an almost hostile physical proximity between the subject’s body and its encounter with the medium in which it is sinking. By addressing itself to tactile receptivity as an experience that envelops, enmeshes, and engulfs the body in the object of knowledge, immersion indicates a sense of extreme proximity. Here Adorno is referring to an apparent passivity as he emphasises the character of unconscious blindness involved in the encounter between subject and object. At the same time, this extreme proximity suspends the crucial distance required for criticism. Immersion is initially revealed to carry a provocative double meaning. What we are dealing with here, then, is an experience of unfettered closeness, in which through passive surrender and absorption, the subject in some way brings itself to a state of deep concentration – the prerequisite for critical thinking.

Now, the dialectical structure of Adorno’s concept of immersion is brought to realization in a claim that produces an alignment between the this-worldly and the other-worldly: “the transcendence I have in mind is one with the immersion.”⁶¹² Here, we can observe how the experience of constrictive tactile intensity provided by immanent immersion paradoxically works to promote disbandment and allow for self-sublimation, as prefigured by the standpoint of redemption outlined in *Negative Dialectics*:

⁶¹¹ Michael Taussig, “Tactility and Distraction,” *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (1991): 148, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/656411>.

⁶¹² “Philosophy and Teachers,” *CM*, 34.

The perspective vanishing point of historic materialism would be its self-sublimation, the spirit's liberation from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfilment. Only if the physical urge were quenched would the spirit be reconciled and would become that which it only promises while the spell of material conditions will not let it satisfy material needs.⁶¹³

The theoretical practice Adorno proposes reproduces the immanent pressures exerted by social, political and economic factors on the body in order to facilitate the release from these pressing constraints. Adorno's reluctance to offer a model of transcendence leads him to evoke one in which the suffering body negatively conveys a transcendent image – an idea that Haynes helpfully articulates through the notion of “immanent transcendence.”⁶¹⁴ “The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different.”⁶¹⁵ The central point of Adorno's ban on transcendence lies in his focus on secular reason. Adorno is not simply a negative theologian, emphasising the immanence of the material body as opposed to the transcendent divine. Rather, Adorno thinks that despite being locked inside the immanent actuality of social conditions, the subject can nevertheless create a context of transcendence through immanent criticism, producing an inverted image of reality and enacting what should not be. The pressing contact between bodies and the constrictive mediums of immersion highlights the negation of superficial and depthless interaction.

The implicit backdrop of the metaphor presented by the words ‘immersion,’ ‘absorption,’ ‘sinking’ seems to be provided by the feeling of the dynamically sublime, which here arouses not exactly fear, but rather evokes a dimension of touch associated with strong pressure. The emphasis is on the overwhelming nature of an experience in which reason alone fails to properly engage with the matter, resulting in the subject coming to be shaped by the pressure of tactile world. This notion contrasts strongly with what Adorno identifies in the

⁶¹³ *ND*, 207.

⁶¹⁴ Haynes, “Immanent Transcendence,” 144.

⁶¹⁵ *ND*, 203.

example of a listening typology akin to consumption as a superficial mode of engaging with artworks. The senses are not confronted in an analogy to an indulgent swim, ironically described in reference to “easy listening”: “it’s wonderful to be able to wallow in them. You sink right in.”⁶¹⁶ On the contrary, since Adorno’s account relies on an understanding of immersion that bridges the gap between distanced contemplation and physical proximity, this form of sinking will ultimately announce the distancing of subject and object – a kind of ascending. How so?

5.3. Immersion Qua Integration

Adorno’s time saw the emergence of a new coercive phenomenon: the accelerated rise of administered social relations. Caused by the post-war economic boom, often referred to as the “golden age of capitalism,” this period generated unparalleled progress in social conditions including productivity rates, material wealth and technological advances in both the United States and the Soviet Union.⁶¹⁷ This shift, in turn, led to the integration of the working class into mass society, leaving little space for resistance and opposition. As the workers could no longer recognize themselves as a class,⁶¹⁸ the possibility of the creation of a revolutionary social subject was significantly undermined. In “Reflections on Class Theory,” Adorno analyses the mechanisms of this process, which contributed to the elimination of class consciousness and the conflicting relations arising from class differences. In accordance with the water metaphor informing the notion of immersion, he explains integration – its accompanying figure – as a movement in which the proletariat is “directly absorbed into the

⁶¹⁶ “Commodity Music Analysed,” *QUF*, 41.

⁶¹⁷ Charles Andrew Prusik, *Adorno and Neoliberalism: The Critique of Exchange Society* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 58.

⁶¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Reflections on Class Society,” *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 97.

unity of the system that is oppressing them.”⁶¹⁹ Through the appearance of prosperity, the system constructs the façade of false identity that seeks to conceal class differences. No longer living in accordance with the immiseration delineated by Marx, the proletariat comes to be “integrated all the more deeply into the overall context.”⁶²⁰ The following proposition captures Adorno’s reversal of the logic that operates at the heart of ideology, turning it into a program of action: “disintegration through growing integration.”⁶²¹

Despite the promise of what is termed “total socialization,”⁶²² genuine reconciliation fails to materialize since it occurs from above through the culture industry’s ideological functions that compel individuals to consume its products. Adorno’s lecture course *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society* offers a fuller gloss on the potential exits from the powerful mechanisms of integration that subcutaneously work to disintegrate the fabric of society. By refusing to accept an external standpoint, Adorno positions critique as necessarily stemming from within. This approach aims to address integration by mirroring its own implications and modes of existence. Out of the internal nexus of integration, Adorno establishes the postulates of a new form of theoretical resistance: immanent criticism. Its task, then, comes forth as follows: “to incorporate even what is contrary to it, what deviates from it.”⁶²³ And this connects back to the concept of immersion that serves in Adorno’s writing as an objective device used to tackle integration. Thus, Adorno sketches the contours of a method that simultaneously enacts what it seeks to reject. Integration, as the problem to be overcome, and immersion, as that which embodies the critical version of integration, name the two threads interweaved throughout his critical method. Commenting on the paradoxical

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 52.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*, 76.

nature of such a method, Adorno says: “the notion of theory I have in mind, it is precisely the immersion in the concretions that allows us to move beyond the merely factual.”⁶²⁴

Though Adorno claimed that the rigidity of the bourgeois order needs to be overcome, and advocated for a more flexible sense of the self, he simultaneously articulated the intuition that the fluid space of our modernity can no longer offer an Archimedean position. Adorno argued that the movement of disintegration of the traditional categories through which we understand the world has led to their loss of self-evidence and stability. This suggestion implies that as opposed to the place-based value production of early industrial capitalism, the space of financial capitalism reshapes itself to allow the smooth circulation of what Moreno, referring to urban space, calls the “hydraulic flows of ‘loanable capital’.”⁶²⁵ As a response to this deluge, Adorno employed immanent criticism to ground his attack against integration with the very mechanisms of integration itself. Adorno’s aim, in other words, was to push integration to an extreme up to the point where it starts to mobilize disintegration.⁶²⁶ An immersive approach to integration can be viewed as Adorno’s adaptation of Brecht’s concept of critical alienation that serves to intensify the artificiality of second nature precisely as a device that can foreground and heighten awareness of its pervasive effects.

The social model of immersion – integration – becomes an active force in new music. When Adorno speaks of the “rationality of integral composition, in which nothing is left to chance and everything unfolds according to fixed laws,”⁶²⁷ he is referring to a manner of composing in which the principle of construction subordinates all elements to the sovereignty of an imposed unity. This operation mirrors the logic of instrumental rationality. By doing so,

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶²⁵ Louis Moreno, “The Urban Process under Financialised Capitalism,” *City* 18, no. 3 (2014): 262, doi:10.1080/13604813.2014.927099.

⁶²⁶ *AT*, 45.

⁶²⁷ “Vienna,” *QUF*, 205.

it seeks to avoid the dangers hidden in the excessive individualism of subjective expression which poses a threat to the wholeness of social totality.⁶²⁸ Referring to Stockhausen's techniques of rationalization of music, Adorno is attempting to show how by establishing total control over the material, art is able to challenge the totality of the administered world: "it is an aspect of the tendency in the new music to integrate all the dimensions of music in one continuum."⁶²⁹ By coding immersion as the aesthetic extension of the phenomenon of total integration, Adorno's philosophy does not aim to continue integration but rather to resist it. The locus of transcendence is conceived by Adorno materialistically, within the immanence of integration. My broad claim is that while Adorno depicted monopoly capitalism as a force that colonizes our lifeworld and removes the critical distance required in criticism as it inescapably integrates all oppositional sides, he simultaneously mobilized the trope of immersion across his writings as its archmetaphor, as a device through which he could directly confront its mechanisms that absorb all surplus value, or, to use the idiom of Adorno – nonidentical elements. In a certain sense, since there remains no threshold outside of which the subject could step to perform its criticism, since the distance in relation to which thinking can position itself disappears, the critique of the system appears to take the form of the affirmation of the system itself. As the space that sight requires to traverse in order to gaze across dissolves, it falls to the sense of touch to register the anxieties of damaged life and by doing so, inform the production of critique.

5.4. Saturation

It is precisely on account of such diminishing distance that Popper's discussion of technological and virtual art describes the structure of immersive experiences as modelled on a form of pre-rationality grounded primarily in the body – characterized by a "sensorial

⁶²⁸ Jameson, *Mimesis, Expression, Construction*, 343, footnote 18.

⁶²⁹ "Music and New Music," *QUF*, 267.

interactivity” and marked by a “diminishing critical distance from what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening.”⁶³⁰ Against this background emerges the ambiguity of Adorno’s position that he does not confront directly: the role of the tactile body in immersion does not diminish the cerebral dimension (as doing so would simplify his thinking) but on the contrary, serves to reinforce concentration. Adorno points out that “the aspect of negativity” in such “blind surrendering” of the body to the intellect functions, in fact, as a reworked form of understanding, ultimately leading to the “comprehension of the meaning of all aspects” of experience,⁶³¹ rather than resulting in an irrational sensory knowledge. Following Popper’s conception of immersive spaces as mediums that “integrate the observer in a 360-degree space of illusion, or immersion,”⁶³² I argue that the notion of immersion employed by Adorno functions as a 360-degree experience of total touch. Beyond immersion in a given medium, builders of immersive worlds engage their audiences through a further device that ensures the strengthening of the sensation of “being there.” Saturation refers to the level of thickness and density conveyed by the experience of immersion. As the “goal” of immersive worlds, saturation stands for “the occupying of the audience’s full attention, concentration, and imagination, often with more detail, nuances, and subtleties than can be held in mind all at once.”⁶³³

If one follows Adorno’s argument regarding the act of micrological immersion, we learn that what follows the subject’s submersion in the deeper levels of objectivity involves halting thought to capture in eloquent detail the “constellation saturated with tensions.”⁶³⁴

⁶³⁰ Popper, *From Technological to Virtual Art*, 181.

⁶³¹ *AT*, 128.

⁶³² Popper, *From Technological to Virtual Art*, 181.

⁶³³ Mark J. P. Wolf, “Beyond Immersion: Absorption, Saturation, and Overflow in the Building of Imaginary Worlds,” *World Building*, ed. Marta Boni (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 206.

⁶³⁴ *HF*, 90.

Though saturation does not necessarily reflect the haptic register across Adorno's writings, we might imagine the mode of experience to which he points as a sensuously informed knowledge that renders the intersection between vision, hearing, and tactility palpable. As the subject becomes mentally absorbed, the microscopic gaze, assisted by the speculative ear, contributes to a multidimensional perception grounded in a tactilely receptive model, each sense revealing, through a shock-like encounter akin to sinking, the sensuous and determinate contours of the object's nonidentical details.⁶³⁵ In this sense, when Adorno contends that "not experience alone but only thought that is fully saturated with experience" is capable of adequately comprehending the constellation of particulars,⁶³⁶ we can say that he is mobilizing an argument about the undeniable role of corporeality in this exercise, without which the specificities and contingencies of what is other to the subject could not be detected.

5.5. Contemplative Immersion Contra the Distracted Gaze

Adorno's endorsement of contemplative immersion can be viewed as a direct reaction against Benjamin's theory of distraction. As early as their correspondence during the 1930s, Adorno and Benjamin strongly disagreed on the adequate mode of experiencing modern culture. Whereas Benjamin grounded his understanding of contemplative immersion in the Kantian model of disinterested aesthetic contemplation outlined in the *Critique of the Power of*

⁶³⁵ The interplay of these senses evokes Albrecht Wellmer's use of the stereoscopic schema to convey the depth of experience: "The image of a stereoscope would be better still: what would be achieved would be a three dimensional image in which the latent depth of the texts became visible. By reading Adorno 'stereoscopically' in this way, we shall discover that Adorno's incomparable ability for the philosophical penetration of experience has permitted him, even within the limited medium of a philosophical dialectic of subject and object, to express, or at least to intimate, much that is actually resistant to presentation in that medium. My own reflections here were intended, apart from anything else, to promote just such a stereoscopic reading of Adorno." *Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 35.

⁶³⁶ *AT*, 349.

Judgement, Adorno considered this typology to be fetishistic and regressive.⁶³⁷ Commenting on *The Arcades Project* draft, Adorno dismisses the inauthentic products of the culture industry, instead advocating for autonomous art that demands the recipients' full concentration. Here, he expresses his strong opposition: "I cannot find your theory of 'distraction' at all convincing."⁶³⁸ Prior to this exchange, in his "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin articulated his defence of a form of peripheral mode of experience – a kind of "tactility growing out of distracted vision,"⁶³⁹ shaped by, and suited to, engagement with the modern city. This distracted apperception theorized by Benjamin responds to the shocks of modernity such as those advanced by the mechanical rhythms of the factory's assembly line, the piercing quality of Chaplin's cinema, or the impact of radio. Benjamin's optimism centres on the new technical media of the mass culture made available by the capitalist market. Benjamin's examples in his discussion are Dada and architecture. With respect to the visceral effect of dadaist artworks, he elaborates on the crucial role played by tactility:

In the hands of the Dadaists the work of art, from being a sight that seduced the eye or a sound that persuaded the ear, became a bullet. It flew towards the viewer, striking him down. It assumed a tactile quality. In so doing, it furthered the demand for film, the distracting element of which is also a tactile element, being based on changes of setting and camera angle that stab the viewer with repeated thrusts.⁶⁴⁰

Tactility similarly evolves to encompass our reaction to architecture. Benjamin's line of argument emphasizes the fact that architecture is not experienced in the isolated individual's contemplation but perceived through touch by the distracted collective: "buildings," he claims, "are received in a tactile fashion,"⁶⁴¹ that is through the lived spatiality of the body.

⁶³⁷ Carolin Duttlinger, *Attention and Distraction in Modern German Literature, Thought, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 339.

⁶³⁸ Adorno and Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 130.

⁶³⁹ Taussig, "Tactility and Distraction," 149.

⁶⁴⁰ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 32.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

In contrast to Benjamin's tactile experience of distraction, I want to argue that the methodological pivot around which Adorno's work turns is likewise grounded in a relentlessly tactile experience, not one of distraction, but of immersion. Of course, by virtue of his dialectical approach, Adorno not only addresses immersion in relation to its conceptual counterpart namely, distraction, but also indirectly acknowledges the distractive component encoded within the concept itself: namely, the passive element inherent in the act of sinking. This distinction is illustrated in his writings on music, where he contrasts classical compositions which demand the recipient's focused attention to synthesize the elements of the score, with the genre Adorno notoriously dismissed for promoting a distracted reception: jazz. For example, he claims that Beethoven's compositions require "attentiveness that, precisely through taking hold of the work actively and subjectively, distances itself from it at the same time."⁶⁴² Conversely, with an implicit nod to Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay, Adorno holds that "the fulfilment of jazz's function, as a constitutively unconscious one, becomes possible through the fact that it is not generally perceived in its full momentary presence but rather, as an accompaniment to dancing or a background to conversation."⁶⁴³

Duttlinger helpfully translates and comments on one of Adorno's insights about the tactile textures of experience to which the spectator of avant-garde art is exposed. In comparison to the ideological interiority in which the bourgeois typology of audience finds shelter, "new music destroys this distance and invades the listeners' physical space [rückt den Hörern auf den Leib], who cannot respond in any other way than by getting physically close to this music in turn."⁶⁴⁴ Her observation regarding the experience of a body informed by

⁶⁴² "On Jazz," *Night Music*, 114.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

⁶⁴⁴ Duttlinger, *Attention and Distraction*, 361. The original passage in Theodor W. Adorno, "Der getreue Korrepetitor. Interpretationsanalysen neuer Musik," in *Gesammelte Schriften: Vol. 15*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996), 204, reads: "Aber neue Musik so wenig wie alle andere avancierte Kunst setzt ein bei sich geborgenes

tactile sensuousness is apt here: “Adorno expresses his envisaged model of listening not in purely cerebral terms, but with images of the body that cross the line between the metaphorical and the literal.”⁶⁴⁵ However, Adorno appears to highlight a sharp contrast between this particular form of attention that as Duttlinger notes, “is more than a theoretical issue—it is a matter of practice, embodied and enacted,” and that which develops in complicity with the agenda of self-help narratives focused solely on “self-optimization.”⁶⁴⁶

It is thus important to recognize the crucial value of immersion for a form of thinking that frees itself from authoritative principles and aims to dispense with an a priori relation to objects. For Adorno, immersion, which focuses on the internal mediations of the individual concept becomes the only critical alternative to philosophies of origins that operate with ultimate points of reference, attempting to reconstruct the world from a first principle or to ground it in a final one. Adorno is suspicious of these approaches as they become ideological justifications for the status quo. As opposed to these, he claims that “resistance to the decline of reason would mean for philosophical thinking, without regard for established authority and especially that of the human sciences, that it immerse itself in the material contents in order to perceive in them, not beyond them, their truth content.”⁶⁴⁷ This idea is reiterated later in *Negative Dialectics* through the concept of self-externalization: “in philosophy we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories.”⁶⁴⁸

Similarly, in the sphere of art, immersion that unfolds the tensions and contradictions within artworks stands in contrast to previous methods of interpretation rooted in the

Publikum mehr voraus. Die Distanz zieht sie ein, rückt den Hörern auf den Leib, und dem können jene nicht anders antworten, als indem sie ihrerseits der Musik auf den Leib rücken.”

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁶ Duttlinger, *Attention and Distraction*, 381; 278.

⁶⁴⁷ “Notes on Philosophical Thinking,” *CM*, 130.

⁶⁴⁸ *ND*, 13.

predefined forms of styles and canons. As these have been irretrievably “lost,” the individual artwork sinks inwards, “immerses itself unreservedly in its own formal law, without glancing outwards.”⁶⁴⁹ Because artworks are windowless monads – Adorno’s conception underlines their similarity to unique individuals – the only path toward their comprehension is through interpretation. This interpretation aims to unfold each work’s internal law, tension and particularity, a process that requires immersion. Thus, Adorno claims that “immersion in the individual work, which is contrary to genres, leads to an awareness of that work’s immanent lawfulness.”⁶⁵⁰ Immersion, then, becomes the name for an experience of demystification that abandons, in the context of music, “the customary crutches of a listening which always knows what to expect.”⁶⁵¹ Whether represented in the image of the lamp guiding the miner or the crutches that support the subject’s listening experience, these aids are relinquished in favour of an approach that, lacking a unity-founding notion, must reconstruct its coherence through immersion in the artwork’s individual moments. As the canons of art and the categories of philosophy disintegrate, they engender a new obstacle namely, that the whole is no longer provided in advance. And all this means, finally, that immersion finds itself increasingly subject to an aporia. The phenomenon of sinking which it obeys and in which it offers an integrated bodily experience, withdraws, sparking only in the individual detail, which in turn becomes responsible for the image of the whole. Thus, we are presented with an intriguing declaration that testifies to the fact that immersion in details can offer glimpses of the whole: “The smallest intramundane traits would be of relevance to the absolute, for the micrological view cracks the shells of what, measured by the subsuming cover concept, is helplessly isolated and explodes identity.”⁶⁵²

⁶⁴⁹ *A*, 131.

⁶⁵⁰ *AT*, 202.

⁶⁵¹ “Arnold Schoenberg 1874-1951,” *P*, 149.

⁶⁵² *ND*, 408.

How can the two spheres – the punctual and definite perception of the micrologically small that almost pricks the skin in the image of the sparks and the overwhelming totality addressing itself to the entire sentient body in immersion – ever be reconciled if, Adorno constantly reminds us, the whole always recedes in the details? Adorno rearranges the traditional relation between part and whole that assumed continuity and unity, causing “the universal” to “surface again in the innermost recesses of the particular event and set them alight.”⁶⁵³ Total touch is disclosed and rendered legible in each disaggregated deployment of the smallest possible trace of touch. This is because Adorno seeks to avoid the contravention of positively articulating the absolute, or the totality in question. Insofar as it is disclosed as an index of total immersion, each individual tactile encounter between subject and object appears as the negation of the absolute integration it originally sought to resist, presenting itself as both the reflection and inverted image of integration: reflection because it reproduces integration’s all-encompassing stimulation, and inverted because it no longer prioritizes totality, but rather its opposite. In a statement that confirms precisely this peculiar continuity divided by a clear demarcation, or a discontinuity that works to affirm a juncture, Adorno highlights how such a move works to dispel the illusion afforded by totality. Thus, he asserts that “metaphysics immigrates into micrology. Micrology is the place where metaphysics finds a haven from totality. No absolute can be expressed otherwise than in topics and categories of immanence, although neither in its conditionality nor as its totality is immanence to be deified.”⁶⁵⁴

5.6. Tactile Acuity: Smallness, Micrology, Minor Details

Adorno suggests that immersion emerges in resistance to visibility, testing itself across the surface of the entire body through a structure that combines blindness and quasi-

⁶⁵³ “Vers une musique informelle,” *QUF*, 273.

⁶⁵⁴ *ND*, 407.

unconsciousness, an experience that on the basis of Adorno's descriptions, we can read as verging on the hallucinatory. Across the subject's submersion in the potentially limitless depths of the object, the entire body comes to be affected, resulting in a merging of the senses: hearing brings the ear to a vibrating pitch that resonates with the nonidentical, the gaze becomes microscopic as its focus on particularity blurs peripheral vision, and the skin turns into a permeable surface that testifies to the ambiguity and continuity between the internal and external registers. And yet, once again Adorno brings us before an aporetic schema, as he delineates another level of perception – inherent, and not separate from the first – one that challenges bodily totality and instead, highlights the fragment which hints at an incomplete totality: the micrological figure revealed by immersion in particularity. Adorno's task then, across the construction of the concept of immersion is to find a way to make the interaction between fragmentation (partial, localized tactility) and synthesis (total sensory experience grounded in the model sinking) viable.

Adorno's writings are infused with unremitting attention to what may appear to the untrained eye as the infinitely negligible, the minutest textures, the smallest details. These elements of extremity are deliberately raised, since what is at stake in their evocation constitutes precisely their condition of possibility for moving beyond the plane of strict immanence. The following statement from Adorno encapsulates the fragment's capacity to undermine totality: "The smallest intramundane traits would be of relevance to the absolute, for the micrological view cracks the shells of what, measured by the subsuming cover concept, is helplessly isolated and explodes identity, the delusion that it is but a specimen."⁶⁵⁵ Although Adorno practised across his philosophy a rejection of holistic approaches and a disavowal of tendencies towards totality, as made evident by his relentless insistence on the

⁶⁵⁵ *ND*, 408.

analysis of the concrete particular rather than the unified whole, it was Benjamin's model of microscopic analysis, Buck-Morss shows, that profoundly influenced him.⁶⁵⁶ Embodying the character of the ragpicker searching for debris on the periphery of the modern metropolis from his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin's philosophical practice placed a unique emphasis on an intermittent and fragment-oriented approach that unlocked the waste material of history and revalued it from new perspectives, by taking its source of inspiration from the montage, the collage, or the constellation. Against this background, he claimed in his *Trauerspiel* study that "truth-content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter."⁶⁵⁷ This mode of interpretation emphasizing the part over the whole, the minor detail over the pre-determined totality, prevented thinking from carrying out the superficial synthesis of idealist dialectics and instead allowed the nonidentical to come to the fore. As discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to the concept of nonidentity, Adorno came to champion Benjamin's microscopic gaze because it managed to move beyond the purely optical and expanded to stimulate the tactile perception of what is typically unremarkable.

Regarding Benjamin's methodology, Adorno points out that "by permitting thought to get, as it were, *too close* to its object, the object becomes as foreign as an everyday, familiar thing under a microscope."⁶⁵⁸ By stressing not just any form of contact, but an extreme form of closeness, this mode of reflection suggests that tactile perception effectively substitutes for visual perception. And yet, the heightened visual close-up provided by the microscopic gaze that draws too close to the object suggests not the clear apprehension of the object of scrutiny but rather its fragmentation. There appears to be an underlying logic to the extreme optical magnification that ultimately dissolves into blurred vision. Magnification, thus seems to

⁶⁵⁶ Buck-Morss, *Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 74.

⁶⁵⁷ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 29.

⁶⁵⁸ "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," *P*, 240. (Emphasis added.)

disintegrate vision. As the distracted gaze withdraws, what remains is an increased tactile acuity, not merely of the fingertips, but of the entire immersed, embodied subject. Redefined in contrast to Kant's characterization of touch as the "coarsest of the senses,"⁶⁵⁹ this tactile sensitivity akin to a heightened non-visual perception reminiscent of individuals who are visually impaired, is succinctly summarized by Paterson as "a form of seeing feelingly, or seeing through the body."⁶⁶⁰ Following Benjamin's articulation of this aspect of non-visual immersion, Adorno outlines in connection to the structure of the essay – considered the paradigmatic fragmentary form par excellence – as an alternative source to the rigidly fixed, scientific writing, the manner in which "com[ing] so close to the here and now of the object," the essayist establishes a form of contact, which we could say is rooted in tactility and "ironically adapts himself to this smallness – the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in face of life."⁶⁶¹ Moreover, Adorno's own essayistic writing will advocate for "the philosophical call for immersion in detail," more precisely, for "immersion in particularity."⁶⁶² What are the tactile implications furnished by this viewpoint that suddenly produces a disjuncture between the feeling of "total touch" afforded by immersion addressing the subject's corporeal integrity and the microscopic sensuous geographies revealed in each local encounter?

According to Adorno, these highly localized, fine-grained sensations provided by immersion can be glimpsed in the concentrated listening demanded by autonomous music. For example, they can be documented throughout moments of Schoenberg's compositions that offer "the intensive perception of the unique and specific."⁶⁶³ In my interpretation of

⁶⁵⁹ Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 47.

⁶⁶⁰ Mark Paterson, *Seeing with the Hands: Blindness, Vision, and Touch after Descartes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 194.

⁶⁶¹ "The Essay as Form," *NLI*, 9-10.

⁶⁶² *ND*, 303; 28.

⁶⁶³ "Arnold Schoenberg," *P*, 149.

Adorno's account, this experience is conceived as a contact discernible only through intensified tactile precision, "often changing in the smallest space,"⁶⁶⁴ requiring a reception capable of perceiving the minutest pressures, textures, and weights of the scrutinized object. However, it is in the context of Berg's music – "the micrological composer [who] placed the greatest importance on macro-structure" –⁶⁶⁵ that Adorno develops his conception of what can be termed a musical (tactile) acuity. If we recall Adorno's note in Chapter 1 – "music is the process of being touched" –⁶⁶⁶ then we may discern the tactility of affective engagement in each of these instantiations, which translates hearing onto touch. Adorno's text draws on a structure of feeling in which the totality that absorbs the subject is given by a logic of contraction: starting with the "small vestige," progressing to the "ever smaller," the "infinitesimal nature," the "extremely small," and ultimately diminishing as it "fragments itself into the smallest entities."⁶⁶⁷ These stages suggest the cultivation of the fine sense of tactile discrimination, not in the sense of the ear's ability to sense vibrations, but instead, one that in some way leads back to an immersion that sinks and engages the entire corporeal sensorium. Because the embryonically small eludes visual reception, sensing scale comes to be linked to touch. The paradoxical schema to which Berg's compositional praxis adheres, juxtaposes the micrological and the macrological in a single stroke, with neither being external to the other. On the contrary and unexpectedly, by proceeding in this way, "music turned from the whole to the smallest entity" in which it was eventually fulfilled, and through which the former "disappears."⁶⁶⁸ This superimposition of different registers within a singular

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*, trans. Julianne Brand & Christopher Hailey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 63.

⁶⁶⁶ "Note Z," *OD*, 268.

⁶⁶⁷ Adorno, *Alban Berg*, 3; 39; 24.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

landscape enables the subject to simultaneously “immers[e] oneself in the work as a whole and its microstructure.”⁶⁶⁹

This comportment appears to be common to both art and philosophy. The two spheres become analogous in Adorno’s micrological immersion. As it becomes increasingly clear, this form of immersion is not simply the opposite of the unified experience enveloping the senses in complete integration. Though reluctant to immovably fix the dynamics of his approaches, Adorno articulates his own “method” of thinking as one that “tends towards micrology, in other words, to immerse itself in the minutest details, it does so not out of philosophical pedantry, but precisely so as to strike a spark.”⁶⁷⁰ What, then, can we say of the tactile qualities of these sparks? In a slippage from touch to pain, we might decode these sparks as shock sensations that do not engage with the visuality of the eye, but in light of vision’s limits, they point toward a form of tactile engagement that overcomes those limits, suggesting textures akin to tickling or tingling, marked by sensory roughness. These localized tactile encounters pave the way toward what seems to be the goal of immersion: to realize, by arresting such “micrological figures from within the whole,” a way of “com[ing] *into contact* with the riddle character.”⁶⁷¹

What is a riddle and how does Adorno address it? Riddles are ambiguous by their very structure, as they appear to commit themselves to offering some meaning yet simultaneously reject the possibility of an unequivocal one.⁶⁷² In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno once again draws on the logic of the fairytale to describe the connection between totality and particularity as developed by artistic rationality – a form of rationality that, like the riddle, is

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶⁷⁰ *LND*, 70.

⁶⁷¹ “On the Current Relationship between Philosophy and Music,” *NM*, 291.

⁶⁷² Max Paddison, “Riddle-Character, Interpretation, and Dialectical Image: Adorno’s Philosophy and the Case of Musical Performance,” *New German Critique*, no. 129 (2016): 140, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44211663>.

conceptless yet governed by its own autonomous logic: “Artworks speak like elves in fairy tales: ‘If you want the absolute, you shall have it, but you will not recognize it when you see it.’”⁶⁷³ Establishing contact with the whole – insofar as immersion is a total tactile experience – is an event conditioned by disintegration, that relapses into the part. Adorno’s vocabulary in outlining the singularity of each encounter is not accidental: sparks (*Funke*), flashes (*Blitze*), and shimmers (*Schimmern*). In the absence of vision, it is the tactile sensorium that must be mobilized to register these moments.

5.7. Dialectical Stasis: Transition to Floating

In one of the aphorisms entitled “Sur l’Eau” from *Minima Moralia*, Adorno seems to violate the rule of the *Bilderverbot* principle, which forbids him from picturing the content of utopia, by representing the unrepresentable. Here, however, he offers a rare vision modelled on the paradisiacal image of weightlessness,⁶⁷⁴ where water is no longer pictured in relation to immersion but rather as a medium where the subject freely floats on its surface: “Rien fait comme une bête, lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, ‘being, nothing else, without any other definition and fulfilment,’ might take the place of process, act, satisfaction, and so truly keep the promise of dialectical logic that it would culminate in its origin.”⁶⁷⁵ We can trace the way in which the shift from the current society rooted in exploitation and oppression to a post-revolutionary one would reconfigure the sense of touch, as this passage clarifies the change in the subject’s mode of engagement: from the gravitational force of sinking to the tenderness of drifting. The external pressure typically exercised by the preponderance of society over the individual lifts itself as the subject is no longer deformed by the feeling of heavy pressure that compresses, in immersion, its enduring body. Instead,

⁶⁷³ *AT*, 126.

⁶⁷⁴ Duttlinger, *Attention and Distraction*, 377.

⁶⁷⁵ *MM*, 157.

Adorno's lines of thinking come to designate tactility as being shaped by a desire for its own self-overcoming, as he stresses volatility and lightness as metaphors for universal liberation. Contact is figured here in terms that recall the asymptotic touch discussed in Chapter 2, as a form of hovering, a light and effortless touch, or, to extend the argument even further, a non-touch, in which the sense simply loses its function.

Adorno makes a similar appeal to the image of hovering, whereby body and the surface are never brought into actual contact when he is describing the ideal of free atonality that Schoenberg's music brings forth. In this music, "the progressions and the harmonic connections can scarcely any longer be heard in terms of a bass," that is, as dependent on a harmonic foundation, "but hover, sustaining themselves by virtue of their own power."⁶⁷⁶ Floating in the absence of subsumption under a certain principle, they never descend below the low pitch instrumental level. Central to the analysis formulated by Adorno is the precarious balance required in the experience of immersion, between a submersion that risks an overflow threatening to overwhelm the sense of touch and one that can fruitfully unearth new elements. By the same token, reflecting on the nature of Eichendorff's poetry, Adorno observes that its goal to dissolve subjectivity into language achieves this by "confidently let[ting] itself be borne along by the steam of language, without fear that it will drown in it."⁶⁷⁷ Similarly, in the context of Berg's music, Adorno highlights a symmetry between ascending and descending: the composer is able to "immerse himself in the chaos without drowning in it."⁶⁷⁸

The logic of miniaturization, which problematizes wholeness by crumbling the integrity of the bodily experience into individual components attuned to the fragile

⁶⁷⁶ "Vienna," *QUF*, 214.

⁶⁷⁷ "In Memory of Eichendorff," *NLI*, 64.

⁶⁷⁸ "Berg's Discoveries in Compositional Techniques," *QUF*, 194.

contingencies of the object – where the monadological structure of the phenomenon dissolves and preserves totality in each instance of detachment – paradoxically emerges to reinforce magnification as integrative immersion. Yet this immersion appears to be qualitatively different from the form exercised by the system of domination. In so doing, it breaks open an “element of unreality” – that is to say, yielding the smallest possible sign of transcendence – not “identical with delusion and deception in the bad sense” – ⁶⁷⁹ within the reality of immanence. Does this gesture then, in its holding out against a descent that ultimately proves ruinous for thinking since its intrusively close proximity does not ultimately return – in the form of a detached critical perspective – what it eliminates, and an ascent that engenders an untouchable distance that precludes any point of contact, not produce an image of dialectical stasis that floats free of the external pressures of objectivity? Here is a form of hovering touch whose condition of possibility lies not in the act of ‘spacing out,’ nor in the illusion of immediacy, but instead in an “internal immersion” that by closing in upon itself ultimately enables “externality,”⁶⁸⁰ akin to transcendence.

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁶⁸⁰ *ND*, 163.

Coda: A Touch of Hope?

This music, which is celebrated for its static nature, worships the cul-de-sac as its secret ideal; it refuses to move on and *marches on the spot* like Vladimir and Estragon when they set off at the end of *Waiting for Godot*.

– Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia*⁶⁸¹

When, in a moment of fleeting association, *the clip-clop of horses' hoofs* becomes audible as 'meaning' for three bars shortly before the end of the first movement of Beethoven's sonata *Les Adieux*, this passage, beyond all words, tells us that this most ephemeral quality, *the intangible* sound of disappearance, hold more hope of return than was ever revealed by reflections on the primal essence of the sound in search of a shape.

– Adorno, *Night Music*⁶⁸²

Having thoroughly examined the various meanings, valences, applications, and configurations of Adorno's theoretical discourses on the notion of touch throughout the five

⁶⁸¹ "Stravinsky," *QUF*, 153. (Emphasis added.)

⁶⁸² "On the Current Relationship Between Philosophy and Music," *NM*, 291. (Emphasis added.)

chapters, in this Coda I wish to use the remaining space to reflect on how these insights might be incorporated into an understanding of our present and shape our vision of the future. What aspects of the legacy of critical theory in debates about corporeality, affect and emotions render Adorno's work a vital subject for future study? In the face of the failures of the democratic Left to counter the threatening forces of capitalism that pursue the maximization of the possibilities of exploitation, huge numbers of people are ensnared by traps set through the complicity of massive corporations and governments, whose collusion perpetuates widespread immiseration, while generating super-profits. These mechanisms divert attention away from pressing issues such as the ongoing, poverty, affordable housing, and the need for universal access to education and healthcare. Instead, they focus on pseudo-problems and employ the culture industry to anaesthetize emotional responsiveness, fostering passive and contended acceptance that operates contrary to individuals' interests. Our decade, ruinously impacted by the ecological crisis and the rising tide of extremism, xenophobia, sexism, and racism seems to exemplify precisely the dangers Adorno relentlessly warned against throughout his writings spanning decades. While the emergence of enlightened reason marked the subject's emancipation from a context of blind domination and compulsion, the *promesse de bonheur* is delayed in its realization, as its increasing detachment from affect and the somatic has ultimately turned against itself, leading to new, more dangerous forms of violence. The split is exacerbated by a Left that advocates rational insights, distancing itself from the populism of the Right, which exploits emotions such as anger, fear, and disillusionment. Channelling these feelings to construct a distorted image of the Other perpetuates the oppression of women, migrants, and sexual, ethnic, and racial minorities, by systematically undermining their rights.

What appears to be the case then, is the proliferation of rigid disjunctures that always position actors on opposing sides of the divide: whether in the form of minority and majority,

reason and affect, identity and non-identity, or mind and body. The repression of emotions and exaltation of rationality on the one hand, and the exacerbation of affected discourses alongside the suppression of authentic, lucid thinking on the other, constitute the two sides of the same coin. As we have seen, this split, when intensified, returns with a vengeance in the form of collective fascism. Against this background, Adorno's reflections, which negatively delineate the contours of an ethical sensibility, compassion, and solidarity emerge as an invigorating, timely intervention. Adorno's notion of touch has been employed across this study as an image of connection, a point of contact, and a tact, yet it has always been framed through a dialectical lens that negatively reflects on its current impossibility, given the way in which it is presently constructed.

Once again, as is characteristic of Adorno, he reflects on contact through alternative categories – in this case – music and portrays a tension illustrated, as the epigraph suggests, through two models of touch held in tension. The first materializes in the final scene of Beckett's play when the two hopeless characters learn that Godot will not be coming; they decide to leave but can only march in place, suggesting an eternal recurrence of a well-worn touch that does not change its configuration. This stands in contrast to the second image of contact: the sound of horses' hoofs, which, by affirming distance, dialectically anticipates hope. The notion of touch that Adorno proposes is never straightforward and cannot be regarded as a universal solution. On the one hand, touch is framed as a threatening medium through which violence manifests, whether in the form of its absence, as the social phenomenon of coldness makes clear; in illicit touches that shape identity and inscribe the authority of law on our bodies; or in the assertion of power. However, as we have seen with other experiences such as the shudder or immersion, these violent touches are also intimately linked with moments of potential progress, though their presence can be difficult to glimpse throughout Adorno's work. Adorno's recognition was that transformative touches are

frequently blurred with illicit ones, and their realization, against all expectations, emerges not in the ideal of reconciliation but in what stands opposed to them. Yet, what they invariably illuminate is the unwavering material point upon which thinking tests itself – the permanent referent of all suffering: the sentient body. At their very core, as Adorno put it, *les extrêmes se touchent*. And it is precisely this overlap, and our ongoing effort to discern between the two through a thinking that is both affective and rigorously critical, that makes further study of Adorno both necessary and possible.

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