Hegel, Danto, Adorno, and the end and after of art

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, I consider Adorno’s claim that art is at, or is coming to, an ‘end’. I consider Adorno’s account in relation to the work of Arthur Danto and G. W. F. Hegel. I employ Danto’s account, together with two distinct interpretive glosses of Hegel’s account, as heuristic devices in order to clarify both Adorno’s own arguments, and the context within which they are being advanced. I argue that while Danto and Hegel see art as coming to an end autonomously, owing to art’s successful realization of its governing principle, Adorno by contrast sees art as coming to an end heteronomously. Art’s narrative is forcibly broken off, rather than completed. Adorno’s account, indebted to Hegel, of art’s commitment both to autonomy and the realization of ‘spiritual needs’ is explored in order to clarify how, on Adorno’s view, this has happened to art; and why, precisely, he believes art is coming to an end.

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Introduction
In 1835, Heinrich Gustav Hotho compiled a collection of Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics – incorporating Hegel’s lecture transcripts, a manuscript now lost, and likely some additions of Hotho’s own.¹ In these lectures, Hegel advanced a claim which inaugurated a line of argument – more durable than popular – that art had, in some important sense, come to an ‘end’. Hegel writes:

…it is certainly the case that art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone, a satisfaction that, at least on the part of religion, was most intimately linked with art […] the conditions of our present time are not favourable to art […] art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.

(Hegel, Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, 11–12)

¹See Gethmann-Siefert (‘Hegels These vom Ende der Kunst und der Klassizismus der Ästhetik’). But for a contrasting view see Bubner, The Innovations of Idealism, 217.
There are a number of ways – which I will outline below – to understand this claim about which way, and with what consequences, art has come to an end. Despite, or perhaps because of, this ambiguity, the claim remains beguiling. It helps, of course, that Hegel made his claim at an extremely opportune time. As artistic practice in modernity increasingly became thematically and formally decoupled from established tradition and furiously exhausted the comparatively meagre ‘pure’ and unconstrained content of free, autonomous artistic creation, it already began to become apparent that art seemed to be in danger of running out of novel avenues to explore. Hegel’s claim was accordingly, in Danto’s view, borne out in relatively short order; Warhol’s Brillo Boxes represented the end of art’s ability to define itself, this task of defining art then being handed to philosophy. (Danto’s argument, of course, proceeds from very different metaphysical premises than Hegel, but the Hegelian resonance is clear – see Carroll, ‘The End of Art?’, 22, 27 and Danto, After the End of Art, 5). Adorno, roughly contemporaneously to Danto, takes up a related but distinct view, minus the finality of Hegel and Danto’s accounts. Art, for Adorno, is in the process of coming to an end. Adorno’s picture is also more gloomy – there is no prospect for the content of art to continue on living and developing in philosophy; partially owing to the incommensurable content of those disciplines (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 180), and partially because philosophy itself is coming to something of an end as well (Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 3; Adorno, Negative Dialektik, 13).\(^2\)

Arthur Danto’s claim about the end of art is, as Noël Carroll has pointed out, not quite as unambiguous as it has been taken to be; and Danto’s later work on this theme seems to show him revising and changing his position, which can further obfuscate matters (see Carroll, ‘The End of Art?’, 26–7). All the same, I believe we have a significant consensus on the core meanings and arguments in play when Danto claims art has reached an ‘end’. Matters are not quite so unified in the case of Hegel – I find two core interpretative glosses of his claim which I believe are the most plausible. One of these understands art’s end to be simply the termination of its development; the other posits art not as only coming to a mere ‘end’ but as entering an ‘after’, a qualitatively new state brought out by the loss of its animating principle.

Matters are far less clear when we turn to Adorno’s claim that art has reached, or is reaching, an ‘end’. The aim of this paper will be to try and unpack Adorno’s claim about art coming to an end, at the level of clarity found in interpretative work on Hegel’s and Danto’s claims.\(^3\) There are a

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\(^2\)As Ashton’s translation of Negative Dialectics is generally seen as unreliable, wherever I refer to Negative Dialectics I have added references to both Ashton’s translation, and the passage in question in Adorno’s Gesammelte Schriften.

\(^3\)Those glosses we do have on Adorno’s idea of the end of art often rely on a story about the struggle between instrumental rationality and ‘mimesis’, which is concluded in the favour of the latter, to the detriment of art. (See, for example, Zuidervaart, Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory, 133). Such readings rely on a model of mimesis which I take to be both false, and too intricate to argue against here.
finite set of meaningful – and philosophically interesting – ways in which one can claim art can come to an ‘end’. I will use Danto’s claim, and the two glosses of Hegel’s claim, to enumerate the most promising members of this set. To anticipate, we will find that Adorno does not see art as coming to an end owing to the autonomous completion of a narrative, nor of a teleological progression. Rather, art will come to an end, and enter a qualitatively distinct ‘after’, just due to heteronomous factors which cause art to exhaust any remaining possibilities of maintaining its autonomy.

Danto – chronicles and narratives

In his paper ‘The End of Art?’ Noël Carroll emphasizes a distinction crucial for any discussion of the ‘end’ of art. When we claim that art has come to an end, Carroll notes, we must be careful to note that we are talking of the end of a narrative, not the end of a chronicle.4 Carroll writes:

Historical accounts may be divided into two sorts: narratives and chronicles. A chronicle of events is a list of time-ordered happenings. First x happens, then y happens, then z, and so on. But in a narrative, the events are connected by more than temporal succession: there is a beginning that gives rise to complications that converge on closure. [...] When Danto says that the history of art is over, he means a certain development – a certain narrative development – is finished. He does not mean that the chronicle of art history is done.

(‘The End of Art?’ 18)

This is as true for Hegel and Adorno as it is for Danto, as we will see. None of them claim that art, as the practice of producing artworks, is at an end. The chronicle of art is assuredly open-ended, and without a conceivable endpoint. Rather, it is some form of narrative – some ordered progression – which is taken to have concluded, or to no longer be at issue, in art.

With this clarification made, we can examine precisely which kind of narrative, in Danto’s case, was seen to be coming to a close in art. For Danto, it was a narrative of what I will call linear development. Art is taken to have had a definitive and unitary goal, against which the progress of art’s development could be linearly measured. For Danto, this single goal was one of self-definition.5 Danto’s infamous claim about Warhol’s Brillo Boxes was that

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4This is, of course, Danto’s own distinction, elaborated in his book Analytical Philosophy of History (Danto, Analytical Philosophy of History, 115–42).

5This goal emerged with full clarity, for Danto, only in modernity. ‘Modern’ art is understood to emerge after the attempt to perfect representation of the world was completed (and, perhaps, usurped by the invention of photography – Danto, After the End of Art, 143–4). As Danto puts it,
these artworks revealed that the question of the definition of the artwork – of what counts as an artwork – was not finally answerable by adhering to the displayed properties of artworks themselves—

what makes the difference between a work of art and something not a work of art when there is no interesting perceptual difference between them? What awoke me to this was the exhibition of Brillo Box sculptures by Andy Warhol […] was convinced that they were art, and for me the exciting question, the really deep question, was wherein the difference lies between them and the Brillo cartons of the supermarket storeroom, when none of the differences between them can explain the difference between reality and art. All philosophical questions, I have argued, have that form: two outwardly indiscernible things can belong to different, indeed to momentously different, philosophical categories.

(Danto, After the End of Art, 35)

Art has reached the point at which self-definition has become sufficiently in need of discursive articulation that art could no longer progress in the pursuit of this goal. Accordingly, the realization of this goal now fell to a fully discursive treatment of the question of what art is; namely, philosophical treatments of the epistemic, ontological, and normative issues thrown up by the question of the definition of art.

What makes it art? […] Never mind that the Brillo box may not be good, much less great art. The impressive thing is that it is art at all. But if it is, why are not the indiscernible Brillo boxes that are in the stockroom? […] What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is.

(Danto, ‘The Artworld’, 581)

Now if we look at the art of our recent past in these terms [of struggling with the question ‘What Is Art?’ …], what we see is something which depends more and more upon theory for its existence as art, so that theory is not something external […] But there is another feature exhibited by these late productions, which is that the objects approach zero as their theory approaches infinity, so that virtually all there is at the end is theory, art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought about itself[.]

(Danto, The Philosophical Disenfranchisment of Art, 111)

Art, then, no longer has any narrative development ahead of it – it can no longer meaningfully advance consideration of its core question of defining what art is. There are a great number of features of this argument we might wish to take issue with. However, what is important for our present purposes is that Danto has given a cogent account of what the end of art might consist in – namely, the linear realization of a goal, or irrevocable entrance into discontinuity … Painting begins to look awkward, or forced (in my own chronology it is Van Gogh and Gaugin who are the first modernist painters).

(After the End of Art, 7–8)
a state wherefrom further progress in pursuit of this goal is no longer possible. The ‘end’ being identified is one which is, in a sense, latent in art all along. Art is understood to be governed by an autonomous principle of development towards a certain goal; and this goal is held to be not merely regulative. As a result, art will inevitably come to an end, so long as its principle continues to be developed, and its goal continues to draw closer.

**Adorno – linear development**

At first glance, this might not appear to be a promising means of comprehending Adorno’s claim that art has come or is coming to an end. Danto’s approach requires us to be capable of enumerating some one goal, or some limited set of goals, towards which progression in artistic form is linearly related. Adorno finds no one single normative or definitive goal associated with the artwork which could be conclusively realized (as we will see). However, a narrative of linear development need not only be related to some normative or definitive goal – it can also be a narrative of technical development, in relation to some existent technical task. Jason Gaiger provides a concrete historical example, in miniature, of linear progression in the realization of a technical task.

A painter who sets out to represent the biblical theme of the Last Supper is confronted with a specific compositional task. At least thirteen figures need to be accommodated within the picture, seated at a table, with due prominence given to the figure of Christ. [...] Giotto in 1305 depicts Christ at the far left and his companions are arrayed on both sides of the table [... as a consequence of this ‘natural’ arrangement] five of the apostles are seated with their backs to the viewer, their facial expressions either partly or entirely obscured. [Fra Angelico in 1442 separates the apostles into two groups, one of which kneels in the centre of the room rather than sitting at the table, which] allows the figure of Christ [...] to be clearly distinguished, and none of the apostles are now seen from behind [...] at the expense of a highly artificial arrangement that breaks the dinner party into separate groups. [In Leonardo’s *The Last Supper*, painted in 1495–1497] all thirteen figures are seated on the same side of the table – a highly unusual, not to say impractical arrangement for a dinner party. The emphasis is on clarity and purposefully articulated visual order [...] Isolating these] paintings and considering them in the same historical order in which they were made, as I have done, it is tempting to see a later solution as a ‘response’ to an earlier one.

(Gaiger, ‘Value Conflict and the Autonomy of Art’, 67–8)

At least one sense in which art can be said to linearly come to an end is *in the realization of and solution to its technical problems*. And Adorno does add a linear narrative of technical refinement into his account of art.

[We cannot close our] eyes to the fact that the techniques of art also develop in accordance with their own logic[.]

(Adorno, ‘Reconciliation under Duress’, 162)
In Adorno’s later work, this is often referred to as ‘aesthetic technology’ (e.g. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 44, 76–7), or more generally as ‘technique’ (e.g. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 43, 61, 78).

The socially most advanced level of the productive forces, one of which is consciousness, is the level of the problem posed at the interior of the aesthetic monad. In their own figuration, artworks indicate the solution to the problem [...] Each and every important work of art *leaves traces behind in its material and technique, and following them defines the modern as what needs to be done.* (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 44, my emphasis)

‘Aesthetic technology’, for Adorno, is produced in response and as a solution to the technical problems found in artworks. We saw an example of the development of ‘aesthetic technology’ in Gaiger’s account of the progressive refinement of the depiction of the Last Supper. These innovations in technique are binding on those artworks which come afterwards (‘following them defines the modern as what needs to be done’) and represent advancements in the development of the technical resources and technical articulation available to the artwork. For Adorno, then, art is always at least partially a technical practice; and the development of the artwork is likewise determined by progress in the production of technical solutions to technical problems. When Adorno claims the artwork has reached an ‘end’, then, we must consider if he does not at least in part mean to imply that the artwork has become importantly technically perfected in its essential structure and form. Adorno does in fact identify some limited sets of ‘technological’ aesthetic problems as closed. One example is of the expansion of the tonal resources available to composers of music. Adorno writes:

*The expansion of musical material has gone ahead limitlessly. [...] But if one leaves out of consideration the bichromatic subdivisions of the tonal system [...] then the possibilities of new sounds within the sphere of the twelve equally tempered halftones are virtually exhausted. It is not that all the sound combinations have already been used: ever since the emancipation from the system of triads their mathematical possibilities have been virtually unlimited. The issue here, however, is that of quality, not quantity [...] the important fact is that the space has been staked out, and no additional sound would actually alter the musical landscape. [...] When the mature Wagner added the minor fourth to the diminished-seventh chord, and when Schoenberg in his *Verklärte Nacht* used the forbidden last inversion of the ninth chord, the potential of such chords unfolded into what Webern called a sea of never-heard sounds [...] No sound today could so easily announce the claim of never before having been heard. If an insatiable composer were to go hunting for such a sound, he would fall victim to that powerlessness that always sets in as soon as musical material is no longer broadened by an inner compulsion but is instead ransacked in the interest of turning up new sensory stimulation.* (Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 190)
For Adorno, musical composition had embedded in it a narrative of the opening out of the compositional resources available. Wagner is understood – and this is scarcely an original claim – to have made giant strides in this respect owing to his successful mixing and resolution of assonant and dissonant tonal resources. With Schoenberg’s complete suspension (prior to the adoption of the twelve tone row, at least) of exterior tonal ordering, this process is complete. Like Danto, Adorno carefully notes that this is the completion of narrative, and not of a chronicle – the ‘mathematical possibilities’ of tonal combinations remain ‘virtually unlimited’. However, the key point is that the efforts of any composer to advance this narrative of tonal/atonal expansion will inevitably now ring false as mere ‘sensory stimulation’. There is no longer true technical innovation (with regard to the expansion of musical compositional resources) available; this technical narrative, in Adorno’s view, is at an end.

It does appear, then, that for Adorno art can reach an ‘end’ to a given narrative of the development of solutions to given technical problems, or fields of problems. However, Adorno cannot simply identify the end of art with such linear, technical progression. Adorno understands technical problems not to be finite – a linear progression along a set path of development – but rather contingent, and continually modulating, sets of socio-historical problems.

The same historical experiences are expressed in the rise and fall of technical allergies as are expressed in the content: in this, content communicates with technique.

(Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 282–3)

As Hegel and Marx knew, in art the concept of progress is more refracted than in the history of the technical forces of production. To its very core, art is enmeshed in the historical movement of growing antagonisms. In art there is as much and as little progress as is in society.

(Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 272)

The pathway of [socio-historical] mediation is construable in the structure of artworks, that is, in their technique.

(Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 365)

In Adorno’s argot, technical problems are ‘mediated’ – which is to say that they are caused by and reflective of socio-historical facts outside of the artwork. And this entails, as he notes above, that technical problems (‘technical allergies’) will continue to be generated and alter, so long as these socio-historical facts continue to change. Of course, this introduces a question of how apparently autonomous and asocial technical problems can be reflective of, and determined by, social content. We will broach this question further below. For now, it suffices to note that the completion of technical innovations, or solution of determinate technical problems encountered in artistic production, can never constitute the ‘end’ of art for Adorno, as the problems within which these technical innovations
take place are continually being changed by alterations in the socio-historical context in which he takes these problematics in turn to be embedded. The practice of art, for Adorno, assuredly generates and linearly responds to technical and definitional problems of the sort which Danto identifies as plausibly generating ‘ends’. However, for Adorno art can never be described in isolation from the socio-historical context in which it is embedded. This implies two claims – first, that the apparently autonomous processes of artistic creation are in fact heteronomously animated by extra-aesthetic content, and secondly that society itself comprises some collection of principles or processes which do not merely govern mundane social facts, but enter into art as well.

This model – in which art is penetrated by society; and society is underwritten by some putative process or principle – is without doubt inherited from Hegel (as Adorno himself intimates above). It is just this claim that art is underwritten by some principle which, as we will see, allowed Hegel to claim that the narrative of art had ended. We will now look at two interpretations of how this model allowed Hegel to make this claim, and then see how they can clarify Adorno’s own view on the end of art.

**Hegel’s objective-genitive claim**

We saw at the outset of this paper that Hegel claimed that art was ‘for us’ now ‘a thing of the past’. Hegel’s account of this ‘coming to an end’ is expansive, but we can perhaps pick out the central, driving force of this claim as the idea that Geist, an intersubjective principle of self-consciousness which progressively realizes itself through human history, has as its core task the progressive refinement and articulation of its self-consciousness. Geist, as intersubjective, is developed across history through collective activity (namely, culture and history itself), and progressively refines its awareness of itself, and of its own freedom. There are three primary media for the self-reflexive development of Geist. These are Art, Religion, and Philosophy. As Geist refines its self-consciousness – and this refined self-consciousness requires increasingly discursive and complex forms of articulation – these media shift in terms of their pre-eminence. These shifts in articulation and medium track the changes found in the way in which Geist, and its self-consciousness, demands expression.

Art reached pre-eminence as the prime site for the refinement of the articulation of self-consciousness in what Hegel terms the ‘classical’ stage; at which (unlike at the earlier ‘symbolic’, and the later ‘Romantic’ stages) there is a complete adequacy between the spiritual content being expressed, and the sensuous form of the artwork.

In the second form of art which we will call the *classical*, the double defect of the symbolic form is extinguished. The symbolic shape is imperfect because, (i) in it
the Idea is presented to consciousness only as indeterminate or determined abstractly, and, (ii) for this reason the correspondence of meaning and shape is always defective and must itself remain purely abstract. The classical art-form clears up this double defect; it is the free and adequate embodiment of the Idea in the shape peculiarly appropriate to the Idea itself in its essential nature. With this shape, therefore, the Idea is able to come into free and complete harmony. Thus the classical art-form is the first to afford the production and vision of the completed Ideal and to present it as actualized in fact. (Hegel, Aesthetics, 77)

Here, art was capable of existing as an apparently seamless expression of the abstract content of religion. At this stage, the articulation of our consciousness of ourselves as free beings had not reached a level of abstraction which was incompatible with sensuous expression. On the contrary, Greek abstract thought about freedom, right, and justice were quite literally embodied in the Greek Gods, who themselves were accordingly eligible for embodied expression in the plastic arts without remainder.

The progressive articulation of Geist, however, begins to move away from this seamless parity between the development of self-consciousness and artistic expression of this self-consciousness. This shift should be understood at least partially in terms of the development of religion, one of the media through which Geist is capable of refining its awareness of itself. The emergence of Christianity provided a further refinement of our awareness of ourselves as free – with more abstract, less capricious, forms of thought about freedom and self-consciousness – but introduced a distance between this content and sensuous expression. This religious and conceptual shift forced a move from artistic embodiment (as employed in the Classical stage) to Vorstellung (representation). While Jesus Christ is representable in religious thought, he and his ‘inwardness and purely universal spirituality’ cannot be fully sensuously embodied in art (Hegel, Aesthetics, 536).

This shift in Geist’s requirements for articulation – from sensuous embodiment in art to representation in religion, and still further to conceptual thought in philosophy – began to decouple art from progression in the articulation of self-consciousness. Awareness of freedom and self-consciousness reached a level of abstraction at which the goal of Geist (self-knowledge) was no longer compatible with artistic embodiment of the abstract content of Geist. Self-consciousness, the refinement of which is shuttled through the three eligible media, began to take on a nature which was less compatible with artistic depiction, and more compatible with religious representation (Hegel, Aesthetics, 103), and philosophical conceptualization.

The development of reflection in our life today has made it a need of ours, in relation both to our will and judgement, to cling to general considerations and to regulate the particular by them, with the result that universal forms,
laws, duties, rights, maxims, prevail as determining reasons and are the chief regulator. But for artistic interest and production we demand in general rather a quality of life in which the universal is not present in the form of law and maxim, but which [is] […] brought into unity with a concrete sensuous appearance. […] the point is that our whole spiritual culture is of such a kind that [the artist] stands within the world of reflection and its relations, and could not by any act of will and decision abstract himself from it; nor […] organize a special solitude to replace what he has lost.

(Hegel, Aesthetics, 11–2)

With the intensification of abstraction required in order for spirit to be known and articulated, art comes to be superseded, and no longer identified with the leading edge of Geist’s development. Rather, Geist becomes pushed forwards by religion and philosophy, which are sufficiently discursively articulated as to be capable of reflecting and developing self-consciousness at the appropriate level. At the base level, then, the end of art is for Hegel a decoupling of art from Geist’s developmental edge; the development of Geist can no longer drive any further narrative development in art, as art is incapable of expressing the full meaning of Geist. As Robert Pippin puts it,

[F]or Hegel the essential limitation of traditional art [is that … ] representational art cannot adequately express the full subjectivity of experience, the wholly self-legislating, self-authorizing status of the norms that constitute such subjectivity […] Only philosophy can heal such a self-inflicted wound and allow the self-determining character of experience its adequate expression.

(Pippin, ‘What Was Abstract Art?,’ 19)

There are two main ways of comprehending the nature and character of this end of art. Hegel himself advances the claim that the end of art generates its ‘after’.

But just as art has its ‘before’ in nature and the finite spheres of life, so too it has an ‘after’ [Nach], i.e. a region which in turn transcends art’s way of apprehending and representing the Absolute. For art has still a limit in itself and therefore passes over into higher forms of consciousness.

(Hegel, Aesthetics, 118–9)

As Ayon Maharaj notes, this claim that art has entered das Nach der Kunst can be understood as applying both in the objective-genitive (as applying to those spheres which came into further prominence after art – namely, religion and philosophy), and/or in the subjective-genitive ‘impl[y]ing] that art’s “after” is a property of art itself’ (Maharaj, The Dialectics of Aesthetic Agency, 120). The objective-genitive version of the claim simply picks out that art has come to an end, and points towards the qualitatively novel forms which its successors, religion and philosophy, will take on. The subjective-genitive, by contrast, emphasizes that art itself takes on the character of being ‘after’; of having come to an end. This lends a qualitatively novel
character to *art itself* after its coming to an end. Both of these glosses capture an important aspect of Hegel’s position. However, addressing these two readings separately gives us a way of elucidating two important means of grappling with the idea of an end of art; and both will allow us to elucidate Adorno’s own position further.

### Adorno’s response to Hegel

Adorno directly addresses Hegel’s thesis of the ‘end of art’, and appears to primarily do so in connection with the objective-genitive reading of his claim. Perhaps characteristically, what we find in Adorno is a rephrasing of the issue posing as a direct response. Adorno writes:

> He who was first to envision the end of art named the most compelling reason for its continuation: the continuation of needs, mute in themselves, that await the expression that artworks fulfil by proxy.  
> (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 437)

The reference to the ‘continuation of needs’ is not immediately clear – here Adorno is likely referring to Hegel’s claim that art proceeds from ‘spiritual needs’ (*Hegel, Aesthetics*, 10).

Now granted that the work of art is made by man as the creation of his spirit, a final question arises, in order to derive a deeper result from the foregoing [discussion], namely, what is man’s *need* to produce works of art? […] [A]rt seems to proceed from a higher impulse and to satisfy higher needs, – at times the highest and absolute needs since it is bound up with the most universal views of life and the religious interests of whole epochs and peoples. […] The universal need for art, that is to say, is man’s rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self.  
> (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 30–1)

In the first place, then, art for Hegel responds to a need to be able to posit the world as a place in which he finds his capacities and needs recognized – ‘in which he recognizes again his own self’. Now, for Hegel, these ‘spiritual needs’ eventually come to be met outside of art. Indeed, the ultimate realization of the world as a place within which consciousness can recognize itself is accomplished by philosophy and, equally importantly, within a rationally ordered *social order*, which models and is responsive to our spiritual need for an articulation and reciprocated awareness of ourselves as rational and free (*Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §27. See also Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind*, §385, §483, §484). However, in Adorno’s view society does not even begin to satisfy our need for a social order in which we ‘recognize our own self’; on the contrary, our social order is hostile to the realization of capacities for true reason and freedom (*Adorno, History and Freedom*, 203). Our need for a pacified relation between ourselves and our world persists, in
Adorno’s view, and so at least partly for this reason art continues to be necessary.

So, Adorno hypostatizes the element of Hegel’s account of art which links it into the realization of needs, and reframes art as intrinsically linked to the need to express ‘needs’ which are generated by a society which is not fully rationally ordered. Adorno reframes art as not part of a broader teleological process, but rather as produced by antagonisms in the fractious and broken off process of realizing social freedom. It is these antagonisms which allow art to exist, and without which it would indeed come to an end.

Hegel’s theorem of art as the consciousness of needs is compelling, and it is not outdated. In fact, the end of art that he prognosticated did not occur in the one hundred fifty years that have since lapsed […] Because there has not yet been any progress in the world, there is progress in art […] Progress in art is neither to be proclaimed nor denied. […] At most, series are to be discerned that have a successive continuity that then breaks off, often under social pressure […] any abrupt change in social structure, such as occurred with the emergence of a bourgeois public, brings about an equally abrupt change in genres and stylistic types.

(Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 272–3)

Here again we see that Adorno has embedded aesthetic technical progress in its socio-historical context. And the shifts in that socio-historical context entail ruptures in the technical problems the artwork is confronted with. More importantly, Adorno is positing art as a function of socio-historical tensions; it is the expression of needs, and only the vanishing of these needs – or the vanishing of an appreciable way of expressing these needs – which would cause the end of art. We know, from Adorno’s remarks about the malign nature and developmental trajectory of society (Adorno, ‘Reconciliation under Duress’, 320; Adorno, Negative Dialektik, 312), that these needs have not and will not disappear. And so the end of art, for Adorno, must be related to some kind of frustration of art’s ability to express these needs. This will become important presently.

As a consequence of all this, Adorno’s work does not map neatly onto the objective-genitive reading of Hegel’s claim that art has entered an ‘after’. Art only ends, for Adorno, when its narrative – of continuing to find ways of giving expression to our spiritual needs – is broken off. By virtue of this narrative being broken off, art’s ‘after’ is not found in the existence of improved, more developed forms of expression of these needs which come after art. That is the disturbing aspect of Adorno’s account of the end of art – there is no ‘after’ of art in the objective-genitive sense; there will be no improved means of expressing man’s spiritual needs, and possibly, ultimately, no more means of expressing them at all. Adorno says, in this connection, that:

Since Hegel the prophecy of the imminent end of art has more often been a component of a cultural philosophy […] than element of artistic experience
The situation has, however, always looked different from within art. The Beckettian zero point – the last straw for a howling philosophy of culture – is, like the atom, infinitely full. [...] What is new is that art must incorporate its own decline [...] The self-reflection of art penetrates to its own foundation and concretizes itself in it.

(Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 403)

Adorno’s closing claim is highly important – it shows that, though the chronicle of art assuredly continues, in his view it is now moving into a new stage, in which it must ‘incorporate its own decline’, the fact of its having reached a ‘zero point’. This suggests that while Adorno has argued robustly against an end to the chronicle of art, and assuredly does not agree with the objective-genitive reading of the end of art, he does nonetheless think that art’s narrative is at or nearing its end in some sense, and that this very fact has gone on to affect the nature of art in itself. Indeed, art has now become self-reflective, and this self-reflexivity – concerned with the decline into which art has entered – now affects and vitiates the artwork as a whole. In order to clarify this, I will now look at a second reading of Hegel’s claim that we have entered an ‘end’ of art – the subjective-genitive reading – and then use it as an optic for clarifying Adorno’s position further.

**Hegel’s subjective-genitive claim**

The contrasting rendering of Hegel’s claim focuses on the subjective-genitive reading of Hegel’s claim that art has entered das Nach der Kunst. Art’s ‘afterness’ is a state which it itself exhibits, and which comes to mark and determine the texture of art itself. We find not merely an arresting of art’s development (which would leave the nature of artistic production untouched, and merely bereft of progress), but a modification of artistic practice itself. Art’s development was driven by an indwelling principle – namely, Geist – which marked it as the primary site for the articulation and development of that principle. This preferment is withdrawn, and art is no longer a site for the further development of Geist. As a consequence of this loss of the animating principle, art now abides with this loss and seeks to articulate and exhibit it. Art exhibits its own supersession, and reflects on its own loss of primacy. As Maharaj puts it,

Hegel conceives art’s ‘after’ in this later sense as the ‘time in which art points beyond itself’ [...] In this case, the ‘after’ of art designates not the post-aesthetic forms of religion and philosophy but the paradoxical dynamics of Romantic art itself, which is able to reflect on – and ‘point beyond’ – its own epistemic limitations.

(Maharaj, The Dialectics of Aesthetic Agency, 120)

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6Incidentally, it is interesting to compare this claim with Danto’s account of artworks ‘approaching zero’ above.
Here, then, Hegel claims that the end of art comes to be reflected in art itself. For Hegel, this reflection is realized in art’s ultimate dissolution into the twin currents of either a mere imitative play with shapes and forms in a kind of realism, or the confinement to a kind of ‘subjective humour’ in which art makes unrestrained use of irony (there is, perhaps, a tacit critique of Friedrich Schlegel in the background here).

If after thus determining in a general way the subject-matter peculiar to this stage, we now look back at what we have considered in conclusion as the forms of the dissolution of romantic art, we have stressed principally how art falls to pieces, on the one hand, into the imitation of external objectivity in all its contingent shapes; on the other hand, however, into the liberation of subjectivity, in accordance with its inner contingency, in humour.

(Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 608)

This dissolution of art into the currents of realism and irony is deleterious to it, and can at best be salvaged by a move into what Hegel calls ‘objective humour’.

In the course of romantic art this opposition developed up to the point at which we had to arrive at an exclusive interest, either in contingent externality or in equally contingent subjectivity. But if this satisfaction in externality or in the subjective portrayal is intensified, according to the principle of romantic art, into the heart’s deeper immersion in the object, and if, on the other hand, what matters to humour is the object and its configuration within its subjective reflex, then we acquire thereby a growing intimacy with the object, a sort of objective humour.

(Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 610)

Hegel is not particularly forthcoming about the precise constitution of objective humour, but it is apparent it is at least entwined with some degree of irony, in which a pure pleasure is taken in the free play of aesthetic creativity, and some degree of realism in the depiction of non-fictional figures and historical periods. However, the key feature is that the inability of this free play to capture and completely express objectivity is made manifest, and makes up part of the aesthetic experience itself (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 611–2). Objective humour exhibits and reflects upon its own inadequacy in relation to the external world.

There has, of course, been considerable criticism of objective humour, usually in terms of its failure to properly integrate with Hegel’s systematic account of *Geist* more generally. However, its key feature for our purposes is that it outlines how, for Hegel, the end of art in fact causes a self-reflexive alteration in the qualitative make-up of art itself. Art’s reaching the end of its narrative in fact causes a change in art itself; in what it means to produce artworks, and in what options are open to the artist in doing so.

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7See particularly Bubner, ‘Hegel’s Aesthetics’, 30, but also Gethmann-Siefert, ‘Hegels These vom Ende der Kunst und der Klassizismus der Ästhetik’.
I believe we will see below that this is in fact the prime optic through which to understand what Adorno means when he refers to the end of art. Cashing out Adorno’s ‘after’ of art will also bring us to an important point of difference between Adorno and the Danto/Hegel explanation of the end of art. In Danto’s case the end of art is *autonomously* generated – art reaches the conclusion of its ability to pose and articulate a response to the question of what art is owing to its own efforts to address this question. Likewise, for Hegel art autonomously pushes its constitutive task as far as it can, and then hands over the further development of this task to religion and philosophy – *Geist* (of which art is a part) autonomously reaches a level of abstraction and complexity which mere semblance is no longer capable of handling. For both Danto and Hegel, then, art’s narrative is completed owing to art’s autonomous pursuit of its motivating principle. There is another way of viewing the end of art, however. Namely, that art may come to an end *heteronomously*, despite itself; that art’s narrative might be forcibly broken off, rather than completed. And this breaking off might have a deleterious effect on the ongoing practice of art itself.

**Adorno – self-preservation and art**

Art, for Adorno, is autonomous. 8 This is not merely a descriptive claim, but also a normative one. Only autonomous art production, in Adorno’s view, has the capacity to produce ‘authentic’ art (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 23). ‘Authentic’ art takes precedence over other forms of aesthetic production – as found, say, in commodity design, advertising, or mass-produced art – as only authentic art is capable of (1), pushing forward the technical development of art (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 59–60) and (2), producing aesthetic experiences untouched by heteronomous kinds of value (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 168). Oddly, Adorno takes features (1) and (2) to be part of and coeval with art’s fulfilling its main function – the expression of our ‘spiritual needs’. The reasons for this are complex, but at base we can say that for Adorno the organization of authentic art is an image of a kind of undistorted rationality (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 177), of the sort which we would need to be realized in a social whole in order for our spiritual needs to be met (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 14–5, 42).

It is the artwork which, for Adorno, vouchsafes an image of the proper relationship between reason and object, and universal and particular. 9 Society, by contrast, is a model of a *distorted* and *harmful* means of employing reason. Adorno’s diagnoses of the pathologies of social rationality are

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8Adorno continually expounds this theme throughout his work, but see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2, 310, 323, 384.

9For a helpful exposition of this, see Chapter 6 of Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, but especially Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 137.
multifarious, but two central themes are that of instrumentalization – coming to cognize and experience objects only insofar as they further our practical projects (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 23) – and the intensification of socially expressed self-preservation – only relating to objects insofar as they have economic value (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 128, 179). It is crucial – for aesthetic, normative, and epistemic reasons – that art resist the social form of reason, in which objects only appear in relation to their economic fungibility and instrumental value. And this entails that the artwork must be *radically* autonomous; it must refuse all appearance of economic or instrumental value.\(^{10}\)

Autonomy, then, is the crucial feature of art, in Adorno’s view. It is only autonomy which lends art the power to realize and express our needs; and to stand against the instrumentalized model of reason exterior to it. However, Adorno does not think that autonomy is an intrinsic or necessary feature of art. On the contrary, it is contingent; the autonomy of art has enabling conditions, which might fail to be met. And, unlike in Danto and Hegel, these enabling conditions for the furtherance of art’s narrative are *heteronomous*. In a dialectical twist, Adorno holds that society itself realizes these enabling conditions, by positing the sphere of art as a sphere of leisure, free from economic speculation and instrumental reasoning.

No matter where music is heard today, it sketches in the clearest possible lines the contradictions and flaws which cut through present-day society; at the same time, *music is separated from this same society by the deepest of all flaws produced by this society itself*. \(\ldots\) Music, however, insofar as it did not submit to the command of the production of commodities, was in this process robbed of its social responsibility and exiled into an hermetic space \(\ldots\) Meanwhile, music, *lacking proper knowledge of the social process* – a condition likewise socially produced and sustained – *blamed itself and not society* for this situation.


Art is allowed to be free of the heteronomous, self-preserving demands of the market and commodity exchange, and this freedom allows art to autonomously produce novel artworks. However, art’s being free of the self-preserving pressures of the social whole has been brought about by that social whole itself – art has been ‘separated from this same society’ by ‘this society itself’. It so happens – contingently – that the social order has found it apposite to outline certain social activities and spheres as free from the immediate demands of self-preservation. As Wellmer puts it, art is a sphere

\(^{10}\) By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as ‘socially useful’, it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined.

(Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 296)
where freedom from instrumental reasoning and self-preservation has been ‘culturally/spiritually [als geistige] preserved in the process of civilization’ (Wellmer, ‘Wahrheit, Schein, Versöhnung’, 141). However, this is a revisable state of affairs.

In Adorno’s view, these enabling conditions are beginning to be reneged upon; economic and instrumental value are beginning to be sought in the art sphere. And art, in order to continue to be able to express our needs, must remain autonomous; must continue to demonstrate itself as radically non-instrumental and radically distinct from economic value. This combination of art’s need to remain autonomous, with the increasing power of heteronomous forms of instrumental and economic value to encroach on the sphere of art, is leading to the end of art, in Adorno’s view. But to see why this is, we need to look at Adorno’s theory of autonomy in more detail.

**Adorno’s after of art**

It is Adorno’s view that modern art is ‘ageing’ just because art’s separation from the demands of instrumental and economic structures of value are beginning to waver and disappear. Of course, one does not have to have the commitments of Theodor Adorno to think something like this could be true. For example, in writing on abstract art, Pippin states:

> The fact that nonfigurative art, without identifiable content in any traditional sense, was produced, appreciated, and, finally, eagerly bought and, even, finally, triumphantly hung in the lobbies of banks and insurance companies, provokes understandable questions about both social and cultural history, as well as about the history of art. The endlessly disputed category of modernism itself and its eventual fate seems at issue.

(Pippin, ‘What Was Abstract Art?’, 1)

While Adorno was writing before the invasion of financial speculation into the artworld – which perhaps began in earnest in the late 1980s – he was nonetheless convinced that art was on a path to being subsumed by instrumental and economic processes; and that art-appreciators would increasingly be precluded from taking up an aesthetic rather than efferent stance (Adorno, Essays on Music, 303) (to use Rosenblatt’s phrase\(^\text{11}\)). This is primarily owing to art being subsumed by social standards of value.

> To the extent that art corresponds to manifest social need it is primarily a profit-driven industry that carries on for as long as it pays, and by its smooth functioning it obscures the fact that it is already dead.

(Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 24)

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\(^{11}\text{See Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, the Poem.}\)
The artwork is pressed on all sides. The marketability of the artwork sets up orthogonal kinds of value which the artwork seeks to elude, in order to maintain its autonomy. But just this being ‘pressed’ by the intensification of economic exchange and economic self-preservation in the art sphere is both reflected in, and impoverishes the artwork itself. For Adorno, artworks must conserve and insist upon their autonomy – they must differentiate themselves from the realm of heteronomous forms of value. As Horowitz, writing on Adorno, has pointed out, artworks are in a particularly difficult position when it comes to demonstrating autonomy as they must do so non-discursively, through the medium of their appearance.

[[If autonomy in art is the work’s refusal to let anything outside itself determine its form, then the autonomous work is just the appearance of that refusal […] But this of course entails that the work is bound irredeemably to what does not determine it; it is constrained to show what does not constrain it. […] It must must visibly negate something and can only appear as the negation of that thing. (Horowitz, ‘Art History and Autonomy’, 274)

Autonomy for Adorno, then, must be negative – it is a visible refusal of congruency with that which is external to the artwork. The artwork must refuse marketable and ‘ideological’ traits – like easy accessibility, sensuous pleasurableness, colourfulness – and instead become ever more self-contained and forbidding and ‘black’, in order to differentiate itself from commodities produced for sale and easy consumption.

To survive reality at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality. […] Art indicts superfluous poverty by voluntarily underoing its own […] Along with the impoverishment of means entailed by the ideal of blackness – if not by every sort of aesthetic Sachlichkeit – what is written, painted, and composed is also impoverished; the most advanced arts push this impoverishment to the brink of silence.

(Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 50)

Art seeks to resist its progressive absorption by market exchangeability through enervating itself. As Horowitz outlined, the artwork must continually resist heteronomy by negating any semblance to that which is external to itself. This stratagem is successful but not, in Adorno’s view, as successful as the ability of the market to eventually press these novel and forbidding aesthetic features (dissonance; discontinuity; et cetera) into the service of economic and instrumental forms of value, and thereby force the artwork to negate itself still further. Just this is the reason for art’s ‘decline’ and ‘ageing’. Art’s attempts to display its autonomy are being reabsorbed by the market it stands against. For example, Adorno notes that dissonance has already, even if in an ersatz form, in his time begun to be absorbed by popular music.
To be sure, dissonances occur in jazz practice, and even techniques of intentional ‘mis-playing’ [Falschspielen] have developed. But an appearance of harmlessness accompanies all these customs; every extravagant sonority must be so produced that the listener can recognize it as a substitute for a ‘normal’ one. While he rejoices in the mistreatment the dissonance gives to the consonance whose place it takes, the virtual consonance simultaneously guarantees that one remains within the circle.

(Adorno, Essays on Music, 306)

Dissonance, which once stood for a complex and difficult display of artistic autonomy, is now a ubiquitous feature of popular music. It has become a shorthand to convey the existence of emotional intensity, energy, or individualism. It is marketable, and can be used instrumentally to advertise goods, or make musical recordings produced for sale more appealing. Accordingly, dissonance – once the most radical and unpalatable of compositional instruments – is now heteronomously useful. And hence the artwork will be obliged to negate the use of dissonance, too, in its increasingly desperate search to display its autonomy through negation.

The use of dissonance, the forfeiture of ‘sensuous’ aspects, and so on, is designed to hold art away from the sphere of self-preservation and market exchange. As the market is increasingly capable of turning aesthetic features into economically valuable features, art is forced to increasingly negate more and more of itself. This principled retreat increasingly affects the nature of art, causing it to become ‘impoverished’ (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 46, 50), to ‘age’ (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 47) and to begin to enter the end of its narrative, if not its chronicle. The more that art negates features of itself in order to appear autonomous in response to the endless ability of the market to absorb artworks, the more that art exhausts the finite resources eligible to be so negated. As Adorno puts it, this is the ‘fatal aging of the modern’ (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 434). Art is ending, for Adorno, just because society is revoking art’s status as a sphere immune to self-preservation and economic exchange. And art is quickly running out of resources to resist or slow this revocation.

The narrative of art is ending, then, not because it has completed a technical or teleological process, but because it is entering an ‘after’ of art. The enabling conditions for the realization of art’s core principle – of resisting heteronomous spheres of value, in order to express our spiritual needs – are being heteronomously withdrawn from it, owing to the ability of heteronomous forms of value to invade the art sphere, and the rapid exhaustion of those forms of resistance to this invasion available to the artwork.

**Conclusion**

I hope here to have lent some clarity to Adorno’s infrequent, but intriguing, claims about the ‘end’, ‘ageing’ and ‘decline’ of art. I have shown that
Adorno himself was not always clear on this issue, but that we can reconstruct a reasonably clear account of Adorno’s position. Art, as a narrative of developing attempts to autonomously express the needs of people subject to irrational social structures, is only sustainable so long as the social order posits art as free of self-preserving requirements. Adorno takes it that society is increasingly revoking this arrangement; and that art is increasingly incapable of resisting this revocation. Art can only continue to insist on its autonomy through negating those aspects of itself which have been heteronomously absorbed by the market. This is a finite stratagem, however – there is a limit to the novel aesthetic approaches with which art can negate itself, and no limit to the ability of the market to absorb them. Accordingly, art is ‘ageing’ and coming to an end, by virtue of progressively negating and undermining the enabling conditions for its own existence. As a consequence, the narrative of art is coming to a close, and though art’s chronicle continues, it does so in a radically modified way. As in Hegel, for Adorno art is now obliged to self-reflexively display its own senesence, and to explore what meagre resources this state of affairs might have left to it.

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