

Adorno's Critical Theory of Laughter:  
The Political Possibilities and Dangers of Laughter in the Social Order

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Abstract: This paper examines the important ways Theodor Adorno illuminates the politics of laughter today. While most philosophers conceive of laughter as an irreducibly spontaneous and subversive experience that originates in the human subject, Adorno's work on the culture industry, lighthearted art, Samuel Beckett, and Charlie Chaplin suggests an alternative approach that attends to how laughter is produced by and exerts effects on the social order as a whole. I advance three arguments along these lines. First, Adorno demonstrates that the politics of laughter are neither inherently subversive or oppressive, but rather complex and dialectical. Laughter serves subversive, emancipatory ends only when it bears traces of social oppression within itself, and it serves oppressive ends precisely when it is thought to provide an escape from power. Laughter is constitutively double-sided and split against itself in this way because it always occurs within a fractured, contradictory social whole. Second, Adorno illustrates that grasping how laughter functions politically requires abandoning the conventional subject-centric framework in favor of theorizing laughter in terms of the question of social order. Third, Adorno models what a critical theory of laughter might look like today. An Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter engages concrete events of laughter in their dialectical complexity, searching for their previously unrecognized oppressive tendencies and emancipatory possibilities. It contributes to social reconciliation by itself generating an aesthetic experience of laughter that displaces and transforms social reality.

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“Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness...In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 112). So Adorno delivers the sentence against laughter. That Adorno objects to laughter is not at all surprising: perhaps no twentieth century philosopher is more closely associated with a melancholic ethos than Theodor Adorno (Rose 2014). But as is the case with almost any topic treated by Adorno, his views on laughter are not as simple and straightforward as they might initially appear. Adorno exhibits an unyielding commitment to dialectical thinking, and while he certainly criticizes laughter – particularly that manufactured by the capitalist culture industry – he also grants laughter a privileged role in his account of how aesthetic experience makes possible political resistance in an unjust social order. In this paper I examine Adorno's complex understanding of laughter in order to demonstrate the important ways he illuminates the politics of laughter today.

Most philosophers conceive of laughter as an irreducibly spontaneous and disruptive experience that originates in the human subject.<sup>1</sup> Hobbes, for example, understands laughter as stemming from a sudden change in an individual's position of power relative to others, while for Kant laughter arises when the subject's cognitive powers enter into a discordant relation with one another. This focus on how laughter originates in the human subject extends to the work of philosophers from diverse traditions, including Nietzsche (1982), Freud (2003), Bataille (2001),

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<sup>1</sup> They likewise follow Aristotle's dictum that “Mankind...is the only one of the animals that laughs” (Aristotle 2001, 673a).

Derrida (2001), and Critchley (2002). By emphasizing laughter's spontaneous and disruptive quality, these subject-centric accounts call our attention to laughter's subversive (and as I have argued, *democratic*) political possibilities (Giamario 2016). For all their merit, however, these accounts leave us with an incomplete and inadequate picture of the politics of laughter. In particular, they overlook how laughter is produced by and exerts effects on social structures and processes that exceed the subject. For instance, when I find myself laughing along with a sitcom's laugh-track (even when the jokes are not very funny), can I really describe my laughter as a spontaneous reaction originating entirely within myself? Or is this laughter better understood in part as the product of an entertainment and advertising apparatus with interests of its own? As another example, can we really explain the audience's laughter at Donald Trump's sexist remarks about Rosie O'Donnell during a recent presidential debate (Zaru 2015) solely in terms of processes occurring within individual subjects? And does this laughter really resemble the subversive experience described by subject-centric theories? Perhaps interpreting the audience's laughter in terms of a broader social order that has historically afforded less value to women's lives and bodies would lead to a different assessment. While subject-centric approaches reveal important dimensions of the politics of laughter, they do not tell the whole story about how laughter functions politically today.

The main innovation Adorno introduces to the theoretical study of the politics of laughter is an attention to how laughter occurs within and is to a large extent produced by a broader social order. The social order (which Adorno often refers to as the "social whole" (Adorno 1973, 37; 1997, 68; 2005b, 153; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xviii) or "social totality" (Adorno 1973, 47; 1997, 55, 234; 2005b, 17)) is a complex concept that originates in a Benjamin-inflected

reading of Marx (Buck-Morss 1977). According to Adorno, society forms a determinate whole that is nevertheless permeated with contradictions: “society is full of contradictions and yet determinable; rational and irrational in one, a system and yet fragmented; blind nature and yet mediated by consciousness” (Adorno 1976, 106). Adorno’s conception of social order establishes a dialectical tension between traditional empiricist and idealist modes of sociological analysis in order to critically negate them both. Against empiricism (and on the side of idealism), Adorno insists on theorizing society as a *whole*. Knowledge of particular phenomena requires attending to how they are mediated by a larger social system that develops historically: “the usual empirical asceticism with regard to theory cannot be sustained. Without the anticipation of that structural moment of the whole, which in individual observations can hardly ever be adequately realized, no individual observation would find its relative place” (Adorno 1976, 107; see also Horkheimer 1999). But against idealism (and on the side of empiricism), Adorno resists the epistemological presumption that the subject can grasp the social whole as an entirely determinable system: “societal totality does not lead a life of its own over and above that which it unites and of which it, in its turn, is composed. It produces and reproduces itself through its individual moments. Many of these moments preserve a relative independence” (Adorno 1976, 107). Adorno thus advises close attention to particular material events whereby society contradicts its own governing logic and becomes non-identical with itself: “For the mind is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality” (Adorno 1977, 133). Bringing Adorno’s conception of social order as a “fractured totality” (Jay 1984, 94) to

bear on the material event of laughter raises the question of the extent to which laughter supports or undermines the logic governing society as a whole.

The present paper advances three arguments in response to this question. First, I argue that Adorno demonstrates that the politics of laughter are neither inherently subversive or oppressive, but rather *complex* and *dialectical*. This is not a straightforward argument that “context matters” when determining laughter’s political valence. Laughter for Adorno is constitutively double-sided and split against itself because it always occurs within a fractured, contradictory social whole. Laughter serves oppressive ends precisely when it is thought to provide an escape from social power, and it serves subversive, emancipatory ends only when it bears traces of social oppression within itself. Second, Adorno illustrates the necessity and fruitfulness of theorizing laughter in terms of the question of social order. While recent scholarship almost uniformly emphasizes laughter’s salutary effects on political life (Hariman 2008; Lerner 2009; Lombardini 2013; Tønder 2014; Willett 2008), Adorno’s attention to the issue of social order yields a richer and more nuanced understanding of how laughter functions politically.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I argue that Adorno models what a critical theory of laughter might look like today. In contrast to the recent “ethical turn” in political theory and philosophy that seeks to promote particular practices of laughter as capable of enriching a democratic political ethos (Connolly 1991; Hariman 2008; Lombardini 2013; Willett 2008), Adorno understands the task of

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<sup>2</sup> The authors cited above might object to my claim that they neglect the question of social order. However, as Chambers notes, there is an important distinction between noting a relation to broader social factors (that is, using “the word *social* mainly as a descriptor to indicate relationality, to mark contextuality, and to suggest a basic sense of plurality”) and analyzing something in light of *an account* of social order (Chambers 2014, 56). Adorno, along with other Frankfurt School theorists and students of Marx like Louis Althusser, provide such accounts. Only when we attend to the question of social order in this way do we overcome subject-centric approaches to laughter and the myth of subversion that frequently accompanies them. Mary Beard (2014) and Alenka Zupančič (2008) provide analyses of laughter that take the question of social order seriously.

thought to be to critically engage concrete events of laughter in their dialectical complexity, searching for previously unrecognized oppressive tendencies and emancipatory potentialities. Against the dominant Frankfurt School understanding of critical theory as a project of “demystification” that prepares the way for the rational reconstruction of society (Benhabib 1986; Habermas 1990; Honneth 2009), an Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter contributes to a more reconciled mode of social life by generating an aesthetic experience of laughter that displaces and transforms existing social reality.

In keeping with the densely-layered and often circuitous composition of Adorno’s texts, this paper does not advance the above arguments in a straightforward, linear fashion. It instead proceeds by way of several close engagements with Adorno’s analyses of modern society, laughter, and aesthetics, and I present my arguments in full form only in the concluding section (Section IV). With that disclaimer in place, the paper unfolds as follows. Section I introduces the basic contours of Adorno’s critique of the modern capitalist social order. Section II describes Adorno’s criticisms of laughter manufactured by the “culture industry” as well as his less familiar objections to practices of “polemical” laughter directed *against* forms of social power. Section III turns to the conception of art and aesthetic experience offered in *Aesthetic Theory* and essays on lighthearted art, Samuel Beckett, and Charlie Chaplin in order to explicate how laughter can constitute an “aesthetic experience” capable of resisting the social order. Section IV considers a scene from David Simon’s *The Wire* in order to bring these various threads together and defend the paper’s three main arguments.

## I. The “Systematized Horror” of Modern Society

An account of Adorno’s views on laughter requires a familiarity with his broader critique of the modern capitalist social order. In this section I introduce Adorno’s conception of modern society as obeying an intrinsically violent and self-defeating logic of enlightenment.

*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno’s famous 1944 joint venture with Max Horkheimer, provides the clearest and most forceful statement of his critique of modern society. In the opening essay the authors offer a polemical origin story for the “advance of thought” known as enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 1). They explain that enlightenment begins when archaic humans seek to disenchant the chaotic, violent forces of nature in order to control them for their own benefit (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 2). Enlightenment entails an idealist epistemology wherein the subject’s consciousness is held to be constitutive of and adequate to the objective natural world. In enlightenment “being is split between *logos*—which, with the advance of philosophy, contracts to a monad, a mere reference point—and the mass of things and creatures in the external world. The single distinction between man’s own existence and reality swallows up all others. Without regard for difference, the world is made subject to man” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 5). Elsewhere Adorno describes this enlightenment epistemology as a philosophy of *identity*: the objective world is – or can be made – identical with the the subject’s concepts and designs (Adorno 1973, 146–48). Enlightenment’s belief in the equivalence of all natural objects from the perspective of the human subject finds expression in the methodological priority afforded to mathematics, quantification, and formal logic along with the emergence of self-preservation and utility-maximization as principles of action (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 4). For Horkheimer and Adorno, enlightenment involves an exercise of power

that gives birth to the self-sufficient, knowing human subject who rules over the known, objective world.

The enlightenment logic of identity saturates the entire social field in capitalism. The commodity form reduces all qualitative differences between objects to mere differences in price; everything in the world becomes exchangeable with everything else because everything is ultimately for-man. Horkheimer and Adorno explain that “bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 4). As Marx shows in the first volume of *Capital*, however, capitalism does not merely entail the reduction of non-human nature into objects of exchange. Capitalism’s decisive innovation is the commodification of *human* labor-power. The philosophy of identity achieves full extension in the profitable exchange of human labor-power.

The barter principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Barter is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no barter; it is through barter that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. (Adorno 1973, 146)

The emergence of capitalism illustrates how enlightenment is not a relationship to the world that humans achieve once and for all, but rather a social-historical process with its own internal dynamism. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that “enlightenment is totalitarian” because it constitutes an insatiable demand by the subject that everything submit to his calculation and control: “For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion. Once the movement is able to develop unhampered by external oppression, there is no holding it back” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 3–4).



Enlightenment begins with human exercises of power over nature, and it culminates historically in the mass objectification of humans beings themselves in capitalism.

Horkheimer and Adorno conclude that enlightenment betrays its own promise of securing human freedom. When reason devotes itself single-mindedly to self-preservation and utility-maximization, it abjures its capacity for critical self-reflection and transformative thought and likewise functions to bind humans to their prevailing conditions of existence even more strongly. Horkheimer and Adorno explain that “what appears as the triumph of subjectivity, the subjection of all existing things to logical formalism, is bought with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 20). The apparatuses of control developed in modern mass capitalism exemplify this deeply conservative and repressive aspect of enlightenment. Whatever escapes, resists, or simply appears to be outside the system of profit-based exchange must be incorporated, disciplined, or eliminated: “Everything which is different, from the idea to criminality, is exposed to the force of the collective” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 21–22). The Holocaust in particular reflects the gruesome consequences of taking the logic of identity to its endpoint. Adorno writes, “Genocide is the absolute integration...Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death” (Adorno 1973, 362). Auschwitz marries enlightenment’s antipathy to the non-identical with its most technologically advanced systems of control and destruction. Horkheimer and Adorno find that attempts to deliver humanity from the violence of nature by installing the human subject as sovereign culminates in the unleashing of even greater violence by humans against themselves: “humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xiv). This is the dialectic of enlightenment.

The stark and unyielding force of Horkheimer and Adorno's narrative corresponds to what the authors consider to be the horrifying reality of enlightenment in the mid-twentieth century European and North American social order. For Adorno, enlightenment and capitalist rationality governs the workings of society as a whole. "The world is systematized horror" (Adorno 2005b, 113) and "wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno 2005b, 39) because literally every thought or action predicated on the dichotomy between knowing human subject and known objective world reinforces the violent logic of identity. Adorno's 1951 text *Minima Moralia* illustrates how thoroughly enlightenment principles have penetrated spheres of life conventionally thought to resist or escape their influence.<sup>3</sup> Despite his dismal tone, we should not interpret Adorno as simply promoting a "melancholy" or "pessimistic" view of history. As Susan Buck-Morss notes, Horkheimer and Adorno do not advance a "self-contained philosophy of history" or straightforward structural account of the capitalist social order (Buck-Morss 1977, 61). Such a project would simply re-inscribe the enlightenment conception of a self-sufficient subject capable of grasping the whole. The origin story told by Horkheimer and Adorno instead functions to critically negate idealist philosophies of history that glorify enlightenment and capitalism as inherently progressive and liberating (Buck-Morss 1977, 61). Adorno, in short, seeks to understand the social whole without providing an ontology of the whole. One way he does this, as we will see below, is by critically examining the social order's practices of laughter.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, although marriage is idolized as the paradigmatic non-instrumental human relationship, Adorno argues that in modern society marriage functions to distract partners from the wrong they commit in their endeavors outside the home: "Marriage...usually serves today as a trick of self-preservation: the two conspirators deflect outward responsibility for their respective ill-doing to the other while in reality existing together in a murky swamp" (Adorno 2005b, 30–31).

## II. Adorno's Critique of Laughter

In this section I examine Adorno's critique of laughter in light of the account of modern society outlined above. I argue that Adorno levels a two-pronged attack against laughter. First, laughter manufactured by the capitalist "culture industry" entrenches social power<sup>4</sup> by distracting subjects from the oppressive conditions governing the whole. Second, polemical laughter, or laughter directed against forms of social power, inadvertently bolsters the latter by re-inscribing the idealist principle of the self-sufficient subject. Adorno's critique calls into question the adequacy of subject-centric approaches to laughter as well as the belief in laughter's intrinsically subversive quality that commonly accompanies them.

### II.i. Laughter in the Culture Industry

The culture industry essay from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* features Adorno's most frequently-cited discussions of laughter. Here he and Horkheimer consider the Durkheimian thesis that the loosening of traditional social ties in modernity yields cultural chaos. They argue that this thesis "is refuted by daily experience. Culture today is infecting everything with sameness" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94). Modern culture is homogenous and homogenizing because it has become an *industry*. What counts as "culture" in the mid-twentieth century social order are Hollywood films, television shows, radio broadcasts, and print periodicals. Culture has ceded the autonomy it once enjoyed with respect to the economic process and has subordinated itself to the capitalist imperatives of profit, efficiency, mass

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<sup>4</sup> The following sections make frequent reference to "power" and "social power". Consistent with his account of enlightenment (Section I), Adorno believes that subjects exercise "power" when they make nature or other humans into objects for their use or control. In the modern capitalist social order, such exercises of power congeal into various relations of domination (e.g., capitalist over laborer; monopoly over consumer; humans over nature) whereby society as a whole reproduces itself. I call these relations of domination "social power".

production, and total administration (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 128). As an industry, culture entrenches the “total power of capital” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94).

Horkheimer and Adorno contend that the culture industry performs a continuous bait-and-switch that disciplines its consumers to accede to their own domination by capital (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94). Radio programs, television shows, and blockbuster films (today we could add Youtube, Netflix, and twenty-four hour sports networks) promise the individual subject a pleasurable escape from the toils and miseries of the daily work process. However, the spectacle of the Hollywood film and the booming voice of the radio announcer impose existing social conditions on the subject even more strongly:

Film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination...thus it trains those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality. The withering of imagination and spontaneity in the consumer of culture today need not be traced back to psychological mechanisms. The products themselves, especially the most characteristic, the sound film, cripple those faculties through their objective make up. They are so constructed that their adequate comprehension requires a quick, observant, knowledgeable cast of mind but positively debar the spectator from thinking. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 100)

Cultural products secure the power of the social order by repeatedly diffusing the subject’s dissatisfactions in a way that leaves the social order responsible for them essentially unchanged: “the culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 111). The pleasures the culture industry provides are ephemeral and hollow (and, of course, always for profit), and they systematically distract the subject from any thought of resisting or changing the whole. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, subjects enforce their own domination through the consumption of cultural products.

Horkheimer and Adorno begin their discussion of laughter about halfway through the culture industry essay. Consistent with the broader critique described above, they target the laughter generated by newspaper comics, Hollywood cartoons, and early stunt films as a distracting pseudo-pleasure that only increases its subjects' subservience to social power (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 110–14).<sup>5</sup> Miriam Hansen notes that Horkheimer and Adorno's attention to laughter constitutes a direct response to Walter Benjamin's arguments in the second version of his famous "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" essay (Hansen 2012, 163–82). Here Benjamin contends that the collective laughter generated by Disney films like *Mickey Mouse* can have salutary – even revolutionary – political effects by diffusing the public's violent, fascistic tendencies. According to Benjamin,

If one considers the dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large – tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic character – one also has to recognize that this same technologization has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychoses...American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies. (Benjamin 2002, 118)

For Benjamin, the collective laughter generated by Disney films can help forestall outbreaks of mass violence. Hansen explains that "by activating individually based mass-psychotic tendencies in the space of collective sensory experience and, above all, in the mode of play, the cinema

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps today we could add "laughter yoga clubs" to this list of sources that produce laughter as a pseudo-pleasure. Laughter clubs first emerged in India in the 1990s, and they are now popular all over the world. Laughter yoga aims to harness the physiological and psychological benefits associated with laughter (Cousins 1976; Mora-Ripoll 2010) by generating laughter in a controlled setting (Alvarez 2010). From an Adorno-inspired perspective, laughter clubs distract and console subjects from the suffering inflicted by the social order without calling that order into question, and they thus function as an ideological support for that order.

might prevent them from being acted out in reality” (Hansen 2012, 165). Benjamin understands the laughter manufactured by the culture industry as serving progressive political ends.

Horkheimer and Adorno take issue with this assessment of laughter. In a 1936 letter to Benjamin, Adorno expresses doubts about the therapeutic and subversive power of laughter manufactured by the culture industry. He writes that “the laughter of a cinema audience...is anything but salutary and revolutionary; it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism instead” (Adorno 1999, 130). He and Horkheimer make this disagreement with Benjamin a major theme in the culture industry essay. They argue that collective laughter generated by Disney films *intensifies* (rather than diffuses) the public’s violent tendencies. When an audience laughs at the comic mishaps of Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck, they engage in an act of cruelty that embodies and re-inscribes the social order’s hostility to non-conformity and non-instrumental activity:

Cartoon and stunt films were once exponents of fantasy against rationalism. They allowed justice to be done to the animals and things electrified by their technology, by granting the mutilated beings a second life. Today they merely confirm the victory of technological reason over truth...The quantity of organized amusement is converted into the quality of organized cruelty (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 110).

Adorno repeats this argument in *Minima Moralia* when he describes “the collective of laughers” at newspaper comicstrips as those “who have cruel things on their side” (Adorno 2005b, 141).

The audience that laughs at cartoon characters disciplines itself by publicly reaffirming that non-instrumental, “silly” behavior will be met with a cruel and overwhelming collective response:

To the extent that cartoons do more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 110).

Horkheimer and Adorno reject Benjamin's rosy assessment of the laughter manufactured by the culture industry and instead emphasize how it mechanically re-inscribes and intensifies the cruelty of the social order. They conclude that "in wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 112).

This, however, is not the end of the story when it comes to laughter in the culture industry essay. Horkheimer and Adorno introduce a decisive distinction between "wrong" and "reconciled" laughter. Wrong laughter, like that manufactured by the culture industry, embodies and entrenches social power. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that wrong laughter succeeds at doing so because it *convincingly parodies* the achievement of social reconciliation: "the collective of those who laugh parodies humanity...Their harmony presents a caricature of solidarity. What is infernal about wrong laughter is that it compellingly parodies what is best, reconciliation" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 112). A full account of Adorno's conception of "reconciliation" requires turning to his aesthetic philosophy (Section III), but for now it suffices to note simply the following. While Adorno rejects the Hegelian vision of reconciliation as a social *state* or *condition* where the subject-object dichotomy has been overcome, he allows for an alternative vision of reconciliation as a fleeting moment where an object enters into a non-coercive relationship with the subject. He writes: "Reconcilement would release the non-identical, would rid it of coercion...Reconcilement would be the thought of the many as no longer inimical, a thought that is anathema to subjective reason" (Adorno 1973, 6). Crucially, Horkheimer and Adorno contend that when wrong laughter parodies reconciliation, it parodies an achievement that *laughter itself actually makes possible*. They identify "reconciled laughter" as a type of laughter that produces an experience of reconciliation (understood as a fleeting moment):

“Reconciled laughter resounds with the echo of escape from power; wrong laughter copes with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire it” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 112). The ability of the “wrong laughter” manufactured by the culture industry to entrench the power of capital depends, in short, on the possibility of a “reconciled laughter” that resists such power.

The concept of “reconciled laughter” transforms how we understand Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of laughter in the culture industry essay. Unlike an initial reading might suggest, Horkheimer and Adorno do not simply reject Benjamin’s argument that collective laughter serves progressive political ends. Their critique of the “wrong” laughter manufactured by the culture industry in fact *requires* the possibility of a reconciling laughter that resists forms of social power (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 112). Earlier in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno describe the contradictory tendencies of laughter:

If laughter [throughout class history] has been a sign of violence, an outbreak of blind, obdurate nature, it nevertheless contains its opposite element, in that through laughter blind nature becomes aware of itself as such and thus abjures its destructive violence...Laughter is in league with the guilt of subjectivity, but in the suspension of law which it announces it also points beyond that complicity. It promises a passage to the homeland. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 60)

Adorno thus *agrees with* Benjamin about the emancipatory potential of laughter, but he believes that Benjamin takes a too one-sided (i.e., non-dialectical) view of the politics of laughter under mid-twentieth century social conditions.<sup>6</sup> Adorno insists on distinguishing between laughter’s contradictory tendencies in the modern social order.

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<sup>6</sup> Adorno in fact overstates the extent to which Benjamin ignores the political dangers associated with laughter manufactured by the culture industry. In a footnote to the “Work of Art” essay quoted above, Benjamin writes, “A comprehensive analysis of these films should not overlook their double meaning. It should start from the ambiguity of situations which have both a comic and a horrifying effect...What is revealed in recent Disney films was latent in some of the earlier ones: the cozy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence” (Benjamin 2002, 130n30).



I examine Adorno's conception of reconciled laughter more closely in Section III, but before continuing we should take stock of just how far we have departed from conventional philosophies of laughter. As noted in the Introduction, philosophers from diverse traditions conceive of laughter as an irreducibly spontaneous and disruptive experience that originates in the human subject. Horkheimer and Adorno radically complicate this view by demonstrating that laughter in the modern social order is often anything but spontaneous, disruptive, or centered in the subject. A great deal of laughter is instead *manufactured* by society's apparatuses of control. While laughter *passes through* individual subjects, subjects are not the primary loci of laughter. Adorno insists that the political origins and effects of laughter can only be understood in light of the conditions governing society as a whole. Treating laughter at a Disney film (for example) as beginning and ending in an individual subject yields a woefully inadequate account of how this laughter functions politically. Adorno believes that such an approach leads Benjamin to overstate this laughter's subversive quality and neglect how it operates as a mechanism of social control and domination. For Adorno, the conventional philosophical conception of laughter as spontaneous, disruptive, and centered in the subject is a myth born of an inattention to the question of social order.

### II.ii. Polemical Laughter

There is a second, less familiar facet of Adorno's critique of laughter. Given his antipathy to the culture industry, one might suppose that Adorno sympathizes with "polemical" practices of laughter that take apparatuses of social control as their targets and aim for the emancipatory political effects attributed to reconciled laughter. Certainly Adorno supports laughing at capitalism, right? In this section I examine Adorno's reservations about polemical laughter.

Adorno first raises the issue of polemical laughter in a *Minima Moralia* aphorism titled “Juvenal’s error”. Citing Juvenal’s remark that “it is difficult not to write satire,” Adorno seeks to determine what role irony (particularly satire) can play in modern society (Adorno 2005b, 209). He explains that satire works by exposing the distance between reality and ideological presentations of reality: “Irony convicts its object by presenting it as what it purports to be; and without passing judgment, as if leaving a blank for the observing subject, measures it against its being-in-itself...In this it presupposes the idea of the self-evident, originally of social resonance. He who has laughter on his side has no need of proof” (Adorno 2005b, 210). While modern society could certainly benefit from satiric criticism, Adorno argues that the saturation of life by the imperatives of self-preservation and utility-maximization has transformed reality into its own justification such that the gap between reality and ideology on which satire depends has disappeared:

The impossibility of satire today should not be blamed, as sentimentality is apt to do, on the relativism of values, the absence of binding norms. Rather, agreement itself, the formal *a priori* of irony, has given way to universal agreement of content. As such it presents the only fitting target for irony and at the same time pulls the ground from under its feet. Irony’s medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared...There is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail. (Adorno 2005b, 211)

For Adorno, the modern social order has made polemical laughter – that is, laughter directed at forms of social power – both necessary and impossible.

Adorno revisits the issue of polemical laughter in a 1958 essay on Samuel Beckett’s play *Endgame*. I examine this essay more closely in Section III, but for now it suffices to reflect on how Adorno enlists Beckett to question the value of polemical laughter. He writes that

the laughter [Beckett's play] arouses ought to suffocate the ones who laugh. This is what has become of humor now that it has become obsolete as an aesthetic medium and repulsive, without a canon for what should be laughed about, without a place of reconciliation from which one could laugh, and without anything harmless on the face of the earth that would allow itself to be laughed at. (Adorno 1991, 257)

Building upon *Minima Moralia*'s claim about the impossibility of satire, Adorno contends that humor is "obsolete" because the all-encompassing nature of the capitalist social order makes it impossible for the subject to occupy a position outside this order from which to laugh at it in a critical manner. The subject is bound up with his object of laughter under modern social conditions. Laughter that presumes to originate from a privileged, external position is "repulsive" because it embodies and reinforces the idealist conception of the self-sufficient subject. Instead of achieving reconciliation by closing the distance between subject and object, polemical laughter expands this gap. When Adorno argues that satire has become impossible and that humor is obsolete, he does not mean that these genres cease to exist in modernity but rather that they bolster the social order they intend to undermine. Laughter that aims to resist social power reinforces the latter by entrenching the enlightenment principle of the self-sufficient subject.

Adorno crystallizes his objections to polemical laughter in a 1967 essay, "Is Art Lighthearted?". In this piece Adorno assesses the political value of comedies or parodies that target the very worst products of the modern social order like German fascism: "Several years ago there was a debate about whether fascism could be presented in comic or parodistic form without that constituting an outrage against its victims" (Adorno 1992, 251). (Adorno is almost certainly referring to films like Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (Adorno 1974, 81).) Adorno quickly rejects the notion that laughter at fascism can serve positive political ends: "By now the polemical form of humor has become questionable as

well...One cannot laugh at [fascism]...Comedies about fascism would become accomplices of the silly mode of thinking that considered fascism beaten in advance because the strongest battalions in world history were against it” (Adorno 1992, 251–52). Comedies about fascism disrespect its victims not because they violate some code of moral decency, but because the laughter they generate presumes to originate from a position external to the social order. Such laughter intensifies the idealist myth of the self-sufficient subject Adorno identifies at the root of fascist politics, and it absolves the viewer of responsibility for resisting the fascistic tendencies that survive in the social order today. Adorno explains that “the historical forces that produced the horror [of fascism] derive from the inherent nature of the social structure. They are not superficial forces, and they are much too powerful for anyone to have the prerogative of treating them as though he had world history behind him and the Führers actually were the clowns whose nonsense their murderous talk came to resemble only afterwards” (Adorno 1992, 252; see also Adorno 1974, 81). Adorno believes that polemical laughter reinforces the violent subject-object dichotomy that governs the social order as a whole.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s distinction between wrong and reconciled laughter now appears quite slippery. While the culture industry essay suggests that laughter’s efficacy as a force of social oppression depends crucially on its ability to achieve a moment of reconciliation, Adorno’s critique of polemical laughter demonstrates that efforts to harness this reconciliatory capacity of laughter only strengthens social power. The problem with laughter manufactured by the culture industry *and* polemical laughter is that they both re-inscribe the idealist conception of self-sufficient subject who can escape from or subvert social power through laughter. Making sense of reconciled laughter – the concept upon which Adorno’s whole account of laughter

hinges – consequently requires conceiving of laughter beyond the terms of the constitutive, self-sufficient subject. For this, I turn to his aesthetic philosophy.

### **III. Aesthetic Experience and Reconciled Laughter**

Adorno argues that art provides the sole hope for reconciliation in modern society. If laughter can in fact serve the ends of social reconciliation, then turning to Adorno's aesthetic philosophy is essential for determining how it does so. This section begins by briefly reviewing some of the key concepts and arguments advanced in *Aesthetic Theory*. I then turn to Adorno's essays on lighthearted art, Beckett, and Chaplin to contend that laughter constitutes a key form of aesthetic experience for Adorno. Laughter serves the ends of reconciliation when it harnesses the violence of the social order to undermine the idealist notion of the constitutive subject.

#### III.i. Art's Double Character

Adorno's central argument in *Aesthetic Theory* is that art achieves *autonomy* with respect to the social order. In a world where “wrong life cannot be lived rightly” (Adorno 2005b, 39) artworks break free from the conditions governing existing social reality. Adorno explains that “artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous reality. Thus, however tragic they appear, artworks tend a priori toward affirmation” (Adorno 1997, 1). Art tends toward affirmation (i.e., reconciliation) because its existence is indifferent to the subject and his interest in utility-maximization. Through this non-identity with the social order, art exerts a “counter-pressure to the force exerted by the *body social*” and keeps alive the possibility of reconciliation (Adorno 1997, 33).

Adorno does not issue a straightforward endorsement of art as the “solution” to social oppression, however. Art, he writes, has a “double character” (Adorno 1997, 5). Although art is autonomous with respect to society, it remains a “social fact” (Adorno 1997, 1, 5). It is produced by subjects in a determinate historical situation (Adorno 1997, 43), employs the most advanced techniques of production (34), takes existing social content for its thematic material (225), and generally offers itself for sale in the marketplace. According to Adorno, “art is related to its other [i.e., society] as is a magnet to a field of iron filings. Not only art’s elements, but their constellation as well, that which is specifically aesthetic and to which its spirit is usually chalked up, refer back to its other” (Adorno 1997, 7). The autonomy that art achieves with respect to society is thus itself mediated by that society: “Art negates the categorial determinations stamped on the empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance” (Adorno 1997, 5). Adorno’s aesthetic philosophy thus revolves around a constitutively impure object: an artwork that is both autonomous and socially produced.

Rather than viewing this impurity or “double character” as a shortcoming that limits art’s reconciling potential, Adorno contends that it constitutes the source of art’s distinctive political value. Were art to achieve absolute autonomy from social reality, it would no longer be able to critically engage that reality. Like the polemical forms of laughter discussed above, art that imagines itself as having escaped the terms of social life ultimately leaves the latter unchanged and perhaps even strengthened. Conversely, were art were to shed its claim to autonomy, it would devolve into the mere entertainment and pleasure-peddling of the culture industry. Adorno explains that “if art had absolutely nothing to do with logicity and causality, it would forfeit any relation to its other and would be an a priori empty activity; if art took them literally, it

would succumb to the spell; only by its double character, which provokes permanent conflict, does art succeed at escaping the spell by even the slightest degree” (Adorno 1997, 138). The political efficacy of art consists in how it maintains a dialectical tension between its autonomous and social qualities.

How does an artwork achieve autonomy without sacrificing its connection to existing social reality? Adorno argues that art transcends society by embodying within itself the tensions active in society. He writes: “because the spell of external reality over its subjects and their reactions has become absolute, the artwork can only oppose this spell by assimilating itself to it” (Adorno 1997, 31). An artwork pushes its own social features to their limits such that they become non-identical with themselves. Adorno claims that “by reenacting the spell of reality, by sublimating it as an image, art at the same time liberates itself from it; sublimation and freedom mutually accord” (Adorno 1997, 130; see also Adorno 1974). A piece of objective reality becomes otherwise in an artwork. The composer Schoenberg, for example, presses the existing musical form of tonality to such an extreme that it gives rise to a new musical form (atonality) (Adorno 2002b, 399). Art achieves autonomy from society by immanently overcoming its own social features.

By making objective reality non-identical to itself in this way, art undermines the enlightenment principle that the objective world is or can be made identical to the subject’s concepts and interests. Art, in other words, reveals the subject’s inadequacy to the object. “Aesthetic experience,” or the experience of an artwork, likewise takes the form of a challenge to the subject: “aesthetic experience...is a countermovement to the subject. It demands something on the order of the self-denial of the observer, his capacity to address or recognize what aesthetic

objects themselves enunciate and what they conceal” (Adorno 1997, 346). Aesthetic experience makes the subject non-identical to his own self-conception of himself as an autonomous, world-constituting entity. It undoes the constitutive subject, revealing the latter to be a product (rather than the origin) of a broader social and historical process. Adorno writes: “aesthetic experience... breaks through the spell of obstinate self-preservation; it is the model of a stage of consciousness in which the I no longer has its happiness in its interests, or, ultimately, in its reproduction” (Adorno 1997, 346). By opening the subject up to a non-coercive relation with objectivity, aesthetic experience makes possible a fleeting moment of reconciliation.

Adorno describes aesthetic experience as a “shock” to the subject. He writes that “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” (Adorno 1997, 244–45). Aesthetic experience occurs in sudden, momentary shocks because an anticipated or sustained experience of the non-identical is impossible (lest the non-identical become identical to itself). Despite characterizing it as a shock (or “shudder” (Adorno 1997, 245–46)), Adorno insists that aesthetic experience is not a *feeling* or *affect* because it calls into question the very subject in whom feelings and affects occur: “aesthetic feeling is not the feeling that is aroused: It is astonishment vis-à-vis what is beheld rather than vis-à-vis what it is about; it is a being overwhelmed by what is aconceptual and yet determinate, not the subjective affect released, that in the case of aesthetic experience may be called feeling” (Adorno 1997, 164). If “spirit” is “that through which artworks, by becoming appearance, are more than they are” (Adorno 1997, 86), then aesthetic experience is best understood as a spiritual event whereby



the subject becomes otherwise. As we will see below, Adorno understands a certain type of laughter as constituting just this kind of momentary, subject-undoing, spiritual experience.

### III.ii. Laughter and Aesthetic Experience

Adorno's critique of laughter (Section II) introduced the notion of "reconciled laughter," or laughter that is not premised on the constitutive subject and likewise resists social power. In light of Adorno's aesthetic philosophy described above, I argue that reconciled laughter should be understood as a form of aesthetic experience. To trace the connection between laughter and aesthetic experience, I begin by revisiting Adorno's essay on lighthearted art.

In "Is Art Lighthearted?" Adorno considers Schiller's thesis that art provides a "lighthearted" escape from the concerns of "serious" life (Adorno 1992, 247). This thesis, Adorno contends, prefigures the culture industry's notion of art as entertainment and consolation: "Art is to be incorporated into and subordinated to bourgeois life as its antagonistic complement...For all the noblesse of his gesture, Schiller secretly anticipates the situation under the culture industry in which art is prescribed to tired businesspeople as a shot in the arm" (Adorno 1992, 247–48). Adorno nevertheless acknowledges a grain of truth to Schiller's argument. While individual artworks are not lighthearted (lest they devolve into mere entertainment), art *as such* features a lighthearted quality: "The thesis of art's lightheartedness is to be taken in a very precise way. It holds for art as a whole, not for individual works...A priori, prior to its works, art is a critique of the brute seriousness that reality imposes upon human beings" (Adorno 1992, 248). Art is lighthearted – even playful (Adorno 1997, 39) – because it resists and points beyond existing social forms: "That is what is lighthearted in it; as a change in the existing mode of consciousness, that is also, to be sure, its seriousness" (Adorno 1992, 248).

Previewing his argument about the double character of art, Adorno explains that art's political potency consists in how it embodies a dialectical tension between serious life and lighthearted escape. Art is serious because it emerges from, bears the traces of, and critically engages social reality, but it is lighthearted in how it resists the terms governing that reality. Adorno concludes that “as something that has escaped from reality and is nevertheless permeated with it, art vibrates between this seriousness and lightheartedness. It is this tension that constitutes art” (Adorno 1992, 249).

Adorno leverages this conception of art to restate the critique of laughter he and Horkheimer leveled in the culture industry essay. He argues that laughter that functions solely as a lighthearted diversion from oppressive social conditions inevitably becomes an ally of the social order: “laughter, once the image of humanness, becomes a regression to inhumanity” (Adorno 1992, 251). The distinction between wrong and reconciled laughter reappears here as a distinction between laughter that contributes to human regression and laughter that enacts an “image of humanness”. However, Adorno says more about the latter type of laughter than he did in the culture industry essay. Laughter that is an “image of humanness” maintains a tension between its lighthearted and serious qualities. It is lighthearted in that it pokes fun at existing social reality, but it is serious in how it acknowledges its embeddedness in that reality and calls its own conditions of existence into question. Adorno writes that “the moment of lightheartedness or humor is not simply expelled from [artworks] in the course of history. It survives in their self-critique, as humor about humor” (Adorno 1992, 252). Reconciled laughter laughs at prevailing practices of laughter (e.g., the culture industry and polemical laughter) in which the subject participates. Adorno reiterates this point by invoking Beckett:

“humor is salvaged in Beckett’s plays because they infect the spectator with laughter about the absurdity of laughter and laughter about despair” (Adorno 1992, 253). Unlike practices of laughter that re-inscribe the subject’s distance from the object of laughter, reconciled laughter involves an irruption of lightheartedness that implicates and in turn undermines the subject who laughs. Reconciled laughter embodies the serious-lighthearted dialectic Adorno identifies as essential to autonomous art.

Adorno’s work on Samuel Beckett further demonstrates the centrality of laughter to his account of aesthetic experience. Adorno held Beckett in very high regard (he intended to dedicate *Aesthetic Theory* to the playwright (Adorno and Tiedemann 1997, 366)), and he particularly admired Beckett’s 1957 play *Endgame*. *Endgame* features a series of dark, absurd dialogues and interactions between a wheelchair-ridden blind man, his restless servant, and the former’s elderly parents who live in garbage cans. The play is set in a barren, completely depopulated world where the characters are all waiting to die (Beckett 1978). Adorno interprets *Endgame* as depicting the “general disaster” in which the enlightenment logic of identity culminates historically (Adorno 1991, 266). Having completely used up and destroyed the natural world, humans have descended into a state of complete meaninglessness and alienation from one another:

The Beckettian situations of which his drama is composed are the photographic negative of a reality referred to meaning. They have as their model the situations of empirical existence, situations which, once isolated and deprived of their instrumental and psychological context through the loss of personal unity, spontaneously assume a specific and compelling expression – that of horror. (Adorno 1991, 253)

Adorno argues that Beckett’s absurdism reveals the social order’s non-identity with its own claims to rationality. By depicting “the absurdity into which mere existence is transformed when

it is absorbed into naked self-identity,” (Adorno 1991, 246) *Endgame* “renders reality unreal with a vengeance” (Adorno 1997, 31). This artistic sublimation of social reality makes it possible to imagine alternative, more reconciled forms of social organization. Adorno concludes that “the immanent contradiction of the absurd, the nonsense in which reason terminates, opens up the emphatic possibility of something true that cannot even be conceived of anymore. It undermines the absolute claim of the status quo, that which simply is the way it is” (Adorno 1991, 273). Beckett turns existing social reality against itself in *Endgame*, and Adorno consequently understands the play as a prime example of autonomous art.

Laughter is the aesthetic experience Adorno associates with *Endgame*. Adorno writes that “the sequence of situations in Beckett, which flows on without opposition from the individuals, ends in the stubborn bodies to which they regress. Judged in terms of this reality, the schizoid situations are comical, like hallucinations...But the laughter it arouses ought to suffocate the ones who laugh” (Adorno 1991, 257). The claim that Beckett’s play generates laughter that *suffocates* the subject recalls Adorno’s account of aesthetic experience as a “shock” whereby the subject becomes non-identical to himself. The subject literally cannot survive the laughter generated by *Endgame* because it calls into question his own conditions of existence as a self-sufficient, world-constituting entity. The subject who laughs at the play is laughing at himself. Laughter at Beckett’s absurdism sustains the critical tension between seriousness and lightheartedness such that a reconciled mode of social life that overcomes this dichotomy becomes imaginable: “In the face of Beckett’s plays especially, the category of the tragic surrenders to laughter, just as his plays cut off all humor that accepts the status quo. They bear witness to a state of consciousness that no longer admits the alternative of seriousness and lightheartedness” (Adorno 1992, 252).

Beckett's work gives rise to a dark, self-reflexive laughter that undermines the subject and makes possible a fleeting moment of reconciliation.

Adorno's numerous reflections on clowns and clowning constitute a third facet of his work that indicates laughter's importance as an aesthetic experience. Adorno explains that clown performances recall an archaic rationality premised on close, affective, mimetic relations that is distinct from the distant, detached, instrumental rationality that predominates in modern society. By playfully imitating or parodying elements of social reality, clowns trouble the self-evidence of enlightenment rationality. Clowns embody an "anarchistic and archaic immediacy [that] cannot be adapted to the reified bourgeois life, and becomes ridiculous before it – fragmentary, but at the same time allowing it to appear ridiculous" (Adorno 2002a, 489). Clown performances exemplify the double character of art: by eschewing enlightenment rationality in favor of mimesis and parody, clowns strive for autonomy with respect to society, but by appearing within and engaging elements of social life, they remain a social fact. In fact, Adorno believes that *all* art features a clownish quality. He identifies "that element of the ridiculous and clownish that even the most significant works bear and that, unconcealed, is inextricable from their significance" (Adorno 1997, 119). Adorno even suggests that philosophy *itself* obeys a logic of clowning. That is, philosophy imaginatively reconfigures, modifies, and at times subverts elements of existing reality in order to make possible knowledge of the unknown (e.g., a reconciled society):

Philosophy contains a playful element which the traditional view of it as a science would like to exorcise...the un-naïve thinker knows how far he remains from the object of his thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning. He must not deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give

him hope for what is denied him. Philosophy is the most serious of things, but then again it is not all that serious. (Adorno 1973, 14)

Adorno understands the logic of clowning – obeyed by art and philosophy in general – as a key mode of resisting the enlightenment rationality that governing modern society.

Given the importance Adorno attributes to clowns and clowning, it is not surprising that he admires his era's most famous clown, Charlie Chaplin. In a short but crucial 1964 essay, "In Malibu," Adorno recalls meeting Chaplin at a California dinner party during his exile in the United States (Adorno 1996; see also Habermas 1983, 99). Adorno writes that Chaplin struck him as embodying two opposed tendencies. On the one hand, Chaplin views the world as mere material for parodic imitation, and his insatiable will to performance evokes the violence of enlightenment reason. Chaplin's "powerful, explosive, and quick-witted agility recalls a predator ready to pounce...There is something about the empirical Chaplin that suggests not that he is the victim but rather, menacingly, that he would seek victims, pounce on them, tear them apart" (Adorno 1996, 59–60). On the other hand, Chaplin's clown performances playfully subvert this violent element by embodying a mimetic rationality whereby the subject becomes otherwise. Adorno notes that "it is as though he, using mimetic behavior, caused purposeful, grown-up life to recede, and indeed the principle of reason itself, thereby placating it" (Adorno 1996, 60). Adorno argues that Chaplin's aesthetic genius consists in how he accommodates these two opposed impulses without resolving their antinomy. Chaplin is "a vegetarian Bengal tiger," who "projects upon the environment his own violence and dominating instinct, and through this projection of his own culpability produces that innocence which endows him with more power than all power possesses" (Adorno 1996, 59–60). Rather than offering hollow entertainment *or* a

detached polemical indictment of the social order,<sup>7</sup> Chaplin’s performances turn the social order’s violent tendencies against themselves.

Adorno concludes by reflecting on an episode at the dinner party when Chaplin selected Adorno himself as an object of parody (an event surely not to be missed!). Adorno writes that “all the laughter he brings about is so near to cruelty; solely in such proximity to cruelty does it find its legitimation and its element of the salvational” (Adorno 1996, 60–61). This quotation is perhaps the most illuminating statement about laughter that Adorno offers in his entire *oeuvre*. Chaplin gives rise to a “salvational” experience of laughter – that is, an experience that undoes the subject and thus makes possible a fleeting moment of reconciliation. Yet this salvational, reconciling power of laughter depends crucially on its “proximity” to its opposed tendency – cruelty. Laughter resists the oppressive social order and offers a glimpse of reconciliation only when it embodies the cruelty of that order. Reconciled laughter harnesses the violence of wrong laughter but at the very last second deploys it against the social order. As Adorno notes in *Aesthetic Theory*, “only by the strength of its deadliness do artworks participate in reconciliation” (Adorno 1997, 134). Without this violent, “suffocating” element, laughter lacks the seriousness necessary to avoid lapsing into mere entertainment or consolation. For Adorno, laughter contributes to social reconciliation only when it bears the traces of the oppressive social order within itself.

To summarize: Adorno’s aesthetic philosophy reveals the possibility of theorizing laughter beyond the constitutive subject. The concept of reconciled laughter introduced in “The

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<sup>7</sup> Chaplin’s film *The Great Dictator* (which concludes with Chaplin pleading with the audience to resist authoritarianism) is the obvious exception here, and Adorno takes issue with this turn in Chaplin’s style (Adorno 1974, 81).

Culture Industry” is best understood as the aesthetic experience of laughter Adorno describes in his essays on lighthearted art, Beckett, and Chaplin. Reconciled laughter embodies the dialectical tension between lightheartedness and seriousness that undermines the myth of the self-sufficient subject at the root of prevailing practices of laughter and social power more generally.

Reconciled laughter is not a feeling or affect because as an aesthetic experience it calls into question the very subject in whom feelings and affects arise (Adorno 1997, 164). It instead reflects a quasi-spiritual movement wherein the subject is made non-identical with himself.

Reconciled laughter harbors no pretensions of achieving an absolute escape from social power, and its emancipatory capacity depends crucially on the extent to which it bears traces of the social order’s violence within itself.

## **VI. Adorno’s Critical Theory of Laughter**

I conclude by bringing together the various threads pursued above and stating the paper’s arguments in their full form. However, in keeping with the socially- and culturally-engaged nature of Adorno’s work, I present my arguments by way of a concrete example of laughter from recent popular culture, namely a scene from David Simon’s *The Wire*. This scene provides an opportunity to demonstrate the multiple ways in which Adorno illuminates the politics of laughter today.

In Season Five, Episode Six of the *The Wire*, Scott Templeton, a newspaper reporter with *The Baltimore Sun*, interviews a homeless veteran, Terry, for a story about a suspected serial killer targeting homeless men. Terry mentions that he developed PTSD while serving in Iraq, and Templeton asks him to describe what happened. After briefly hesitating, Terry recounts the incident that “fucked me up good”:



We had a month left on the tour. We were working a mission outside Fallujah... We finished our sweep, headed back in, right? It was all good. Then bam. Our lead vehicle was hit with an elevated IED. The blast tore the M-50 gunner in half, flipped the Humvee like a matchbox car. Driver lost both his hands, blood shooting out all over. He's fucking laughing, saying over and over, "Look ma, no hands." [Pause] It's the laughing I can't shake. Weird, because he's okay. He's better than me.

Terry's chilling account brings us about as far as possible from typical discussions of the politics of laughter that focus on how satiric television programs influence popular political discourse (Euben 2003; Lichter, Baumgartner, and Morris, 2015; Hariman 2008; Tønder 2014; Willett 2008). Yet this deeply disturbing, haunting laughter is perhaps one of the *most* politically significant events of laughter imaginable, as it originates in and constitutes an immediate response to an exercise of state violence. While it remains unclear the extent to which Terry's story is inspired by real events, numerous medical and journalistic accounts suggest that the story is at minimum quite plausible. For instance, the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been associated with an unprecedented increase in cases of pseudobulbar affect syndrome, a condition wherein subjects suffering from traumatic brain injuries experience unexpected and inexplicable bouts of laughter and crying (Fonda et al. 2015). And in something of an inversion of Terry's story, American soldiers have on multiple occasions acknowledged or been accused of laughing as they attack Iraqis and Afghans (McGreal 2010; Nadem and Haroon 2012; Quade 2010). Whether or not the story recounted in *The Wire* is itself based on actual events, an account of the politics of laughter must prove itself capable of elucidating the troubling relationship between laughter and contemporary state violence to which it alludes.

Adorno provides the theoretical resources necessary for making sense of the laughter haunting Terry. Adorno demonstrates that the politics of laughter are neither inherently

oppressive or emancipatory, but rather *complex* and *dialectical*. This is the paper's first argument. According to Adorno, laughter that embodies and entrenches forms of social power ("wrong laughter") necessarily contains within itself possibilities for emancipation and reconciliation. As the culture industry essay illustrates, if wrong laughter did not make reference to this reconciling capacity, its oppressive efficacy would be lost as subjects would no longer believe it provides an escape from power. Conversely, laughter that actually resists social power and serves the ends of reconciliation ("reconciled laughter") always emerges out of and bears the traces of social violence. If reconciled laughter were not contaminated by serious life in this way, it would sacrifice its critical force and become an ideological support for the social order. Adorno shows that any given event of laughter is dialectically complex and contains its opposed political tendency within itself.

Terry "can't shake" the laughter of his fellow soldier because it is divided against itself in the way Adorno describes. Horkheimer and Adorno write that "what is infernal about wrong laughter is that it compellingly parodies what is best, reconciliation" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 112). Terry experiences this "infernal" character of wrong laughter to perhaps the greatest degree imaginable. Because the soldier's laughter originates in a traumatic injury, it parodies (perhaps even *mocks*) the pleasure, subversion, and freedom typically associated with laughter. Terry cannot stomach the juxtaposition of the soldier's gruesome injury with a reaction that appears to deny that reality. Whereas subjects of the culture industry generally do not perceive the violence in which their laughter participates, in Terry's story the contradictory character of wrong laughter is laid bare to horrifying effect. Only an account of the politics of laughter as complex and dialectical can explain how laughter assumes such a double-sided, uncanny quality.

Adorno does not advance an *ontology* of the politics of laughter as complex and dialectical, however. Laughter only assumes this character within a contradictory social whole, and understanding the politics of laughter thus requires attending to the question of social order. This is the paper's second argument. The inadequacies of conventional subject-centric theories of laughter (i.e., the superiority, incongruity, and relief theories (Morreall 1983; Critchley 2002)) become evident when brought to bear on Terry's story. These theories would explain the soldier's laughter as a result of sudden strength (superiority theory), overturned expectations (incongruity theory), or psychological relief (relief theory). Only the incongruity theory offers an even remotely plausible account, but it fails to explain why laughter (rather than say, screaming or crying) should result from the unexpected injury. Making sense of the soldier's laughter requires shifting our focus away from the soldier himself and toward his relationship to the social order as a whole. We can then grasp the contradictory quality of this laughter as expressing a conflict between the subject and the social order. In particular, the soldier's laughter embodies a conflict between the values of individual strength, freedom, and happiness celebrated by the social order and the objective violence and bloodshed required to secure those values. The contradictory quality of the soldier's laughter embodies and expresses the contradictions permeating society as a whole. Attending to the question of social order dispels the myth of laughter's inherently subversive or liberating quality and allows us to grasp the complex ways laughter functions politically today.

The paper's third and final argument concerns what we are to *do* with Adorno's account of laughter. One possibility is to interpret Adorno as laying the groundwork for an ethical practice of "reconciled laughter" capable of contributing to social reconciliation. Such an

approach accords with the recent “ethical turn” in political-theoretic studies of laughter (Euben 2003; Lombardini 2013; Willett 2008) and in political theory more generally (Connolly 1991; White 2009). Shea Coulson pursues this strategy and argues that Adorno’s work on the culture industry, aesthetics, Beckett, and Chaplin yields a “theory of critical laughter” (Coulson 2007, 142–43). Seeking to rescue Adorno from charges that he simply dislikes laughter, Coulson claims that Adorno only disapproves of uncritical practices of laughter (e.g., laughter manufactured by the culture industry) and that he finds aesthetic and political value in the more critical forms of laughter generated by artists like Beckett and Chaplin. Coulson writes that “Adorno’s apparent mirthlessness is actually disdain for an uncritical use of laughter that simply concretizes social repression. Laughter, for Adorno, should act violently against reified structures and unhinge the subject from reification” (Coulson 2007, 143). According to Coulson, Adorno distinguishes between uncritical and critical laughter and endorses the latter as an “art of laughter” that can help achieve social reconciliation (Coulson 2007).

While Coulson’s claim that Adorno advances a “theory of critical laughter” may at first appear consistent with this paper’s arguments, closer attention to Adorno’s methodological commitments suggests an alternative interpretation. Adorno is first and foremost a dialectician, and he consistently refuses – to his critics’ great consternation – to advance straightforward ontological or programmatic arguments (Benhabib 1986; Buck-Morss 1977; Habermas 1990; Honneth 2009). Indeed, *Minima Moralia*, *Negative Dialectics*, and *Aesthetic Theory* read less like treatises that advance “theories of” anything or that advise particular ethical or political practices than they do densely-layered critical engagements with concrete elements of modern social life. But if Adorno lacks an argument about the kind of laughter subjects should practice in

modern society, then what is the point of his various reflections on laughter? Adorno insists that theory's value consists in its *autonomy* from practical concerns (Marasco 2015, 109–113).

Theory is autonomous in the same mediated sense that art is autonomous: it transcends existing social reality not by distancing itself from it and offering recommendations for practice but by assimilating itself to reality to such an extreme extent that it displaces and transforms the very terms of practice (Adorno 2005a, 276). Adorno writes that “thinking becomes aware of what within the matter extends beyond what was previously thought and thereby breaks open the fixed purview of the subject matter” (Adorno 2005c, 131). Adorno contends that theoretical texts that bear witness to the non-identical in this way ultimately contribute to the production of a better social life more effectively than those that take utopia as their explicit subject matter or objective (Adorno 2005a, 277–78; Adorno 1998, 292–93). According to Adorno, only ostensibly “disengaged” theory achieves the autonomy necessary to actually transform social and political practice.

With these considerations in mind, I do not understand Adorno as advancing a “theory of critical laughter” along the lines suggested by Coulson. Rather, I argue that Adorno's texts on the culture industry, aesthetics, Beckett, and Chaplin model a *critical theory of laughter*. A critical theory of laughter engages laughter as a constitutively complex, double-sided event that emerges within and exerts political effects on the social order as a whole. It does not promote a particular type of laughter (e.g., “critical laughter”) for its salutary political effects; it instead delves into particular events of laughter, bearing witness to the non-identical within each of them by searching for previously unrecognized oppressive tendencies and emancipatory potentialities. On the one hand, a critical theory of laughter identifies and warns against the violent tendencies of

emancipatory (i.e., “reconciled”) laughter. For example, it demonstrates how laughter generated by satiric television programs like *The Daily Show* or *Saturday Night Live*, while often resisting and undermining social power, always risks becoming a detached and arrogant polemical laughter that re-inscribes social violence. On the other hand, a critical theory of laughter identifies and seeks to cultivate the potentials for social reconciliation latent in oppressive (i.e., “wrong”) laughter. For example, the audience that laughs at Donald Trump’s sexist remarks imagines itself as transgressing the rules of “political correctness,” and their laughter likewise embodies a revolutionary political energy that has been redirected to reactionary ends. Adorno models a critical theory that attends to laughter’s dialectical complexity and seeks to discern its political risks and possibilities.

How would an Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter approach the laughter recounted by Terry in *The Wire*? Attending to the contradictions embodied in and expressed by the soldier’s laughter (that is, its non-identity to itself) generates a richer understanding of its political dangers and potentialities. On the one hand, the soldier’s apparent disregard for his own injury can serve to entrench the violence of the social order. For example, his laughter might bolster contemporary conceptions of warfare as a video game wherein all injuries are temporary, repairable, and in service of entertainment. On the other hand, this laughter’s radically contradictory quality could instead enact a rupture within the social order. The utter irrationality of a world in which young men laugh when their hands are blown off might trigger a change in how subjects conduct themselves with respect to one another and the objective world. These two options are not mutually exclusive. As Adorno notes, the distinction between violence and reconciliation is porous and unstable (Adorno 1996, 60–61; Adorno 1997, 134), and one gets the

sense that the soldier's laughter generates contradictory political impulses even within Terry himself. A critical theory of laughter intervenes in and transforms the social order not by promoting particular practices of laughter but making the political dangers and possibilities of laughter thinkable and urgent.

An Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter eschews the logic of demystification commonly attributed to “critical theory” (particularly the Frankfurt School and French poststructuralist traditions) (Bennett 2009; Chambers 2013; Latour 2003). As Chambers explains, a critical project of demystification seeks to reveal (or “demystify”) the essential truth of the social order that has been concealed by ideology (Chambers 2013, 126). The theorist *knows something* about society that the ignorant masses do not, and it is his duty to impart this knowledge to them. Habermas and his followers generally understand demystification as the first step in the reconstruction of society according to rational principles (Benhabib 1986; Habermas 1990; Honneth 2009), and Habermas accuses Adorno of pursuing demystification so relentlessly that he leaves behind no resources for this second step (Habermas 1990, 106–130). This critique, along with other characterizations of Adorno as a theorist of demystification, fail for a simple reason: Adorno consistently rejects the notion that there exists a stable, essential “truth” about the social order that the theorist can grasp. As noted in the Introduction, Adorno understands society as contradictory and non-identical with itself (Adorno 1976, 106). “Truth” about the social order emerges only in fragments, and it is not a foundation upon which to build a more rational society, but rather “a constantly evolving constellation” (Adorno 2005c, 131) that functions to “displace and estrange the world” in its current form (Adorno 2005b, 247; see also Adorno 1997, 131). While it is certainly *plausible* to interpret many of Adorno's texts as obeying

a logic of demystification,<sup>8</sup> reading Adorno in this way runs against his core philosophical objective of undermining the idealist notion of a subject capable of adequately grasping the whole. When we appreciate that for Adorno “the task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret unintentional reality” (Adorno 1977, 127), a more accurate image of his critical theory of laughter comes into view.

An critical theory of laughter does not simply take laughter as its object of study; *it also generates its own laughter*. Recall Adorno’s claim that philosophy obeys a logic of clowning. Adorno understands an aesthetic experience of laughter whereby the subject is made non-identical to himself as intrinsic to philosophical activity (Adorno 1973, 14; Adorno 2005a, 262). A critical theory that dwells in laughter’s dialectical complexity thus challenges the subject to become otherwise such that he or she can laugh at these practices of laughter as something that has been overcome. The laughter generated by such a critical theory is not detached, polemical laughter but rather the self-suffocating, spiritual movement of aesthetic experience. The enormity and significance of this task is made evident by events of laughter like that recounted in *The Wire*. What type of political transformation must occur for subjects to become capable of laughing at the laughter of Terry’s fellow soldier? By producing laughter that intervenes in and

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<sup>8</sup> The culture industry essay in particular appears to follow a logic of demystification (it is, after all, subtitled “Enlightenment as Mass Deception”). However, a closer attention to this essay’s argumentative structure suggests a problem with the demystification interpretation. An essay that indicts modern culture for exploiting the image of a self-sufficient subject cannot invoke this very same image of subjectivity by claiming to provide access to a demystified view of culture. The culture industry essay’s formal features, particularly its stark and unforgiving prose, suggests an alternative interpretation. In particular, by generating a sense in the reader that capitalism has rendered the individual subject utterly helpless and impotent, Horkheimer and Adorno turn the violence of the culture industry against itself. That is, whereas the culture industry inflates the subject’s sense of power and autonomy only to dominate him or her ever more relentlessly, “The Culture Industry” negates the subject’s sense of power and autonomy in order to undermine the social apparatus that exploits this self-conception. The elevation of social objectivity over individual subjectivity functions to critically negate the conception of autonomous subjectivity at the root of the culture industry’s operation. The truth delivered by this essay is thus not an unobstructed knowledge of the whole, but rather a fragmentary and contingent glimpse of the subject’s relation to the whole, and it functions to subvert – not enhance – the subject’s position with respect to society. In short, while “The Culture Industry” certainly does feature demystifying elements, these elements work to undermine the logic of demystification.



displaces existing social reality in this way – and not in the demystification and rational reconstruction of society – an Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter makes possible, however obliquely, the possibility of a more reconciled mode of social life.

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