Thought's Last Chances: On Being Bound and Free

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...the glance at what is remote, the hatred of banality, the search for that which has not yet been grasped, for what has not been encompassed by the general conceptual schema, is the last chance for thought. In an intellectual [geistigen] hierarchy, which continually holds everyone responsible, then irresponsibility alone is capable of immediately calling the hierarchy itself by name. The sphere of circulation, whose marks are borne by intellectual outsiders, opens the last refuges to the spirit [Geist], which it is selling off, at the moment when these no longer really exist. Whoever offers something which is one of a kind, which no-one wants to buy anymore, represents, even against their will, freedom from exchange. (§ 41)

This last chance for thought has perhaps escaped us, since Adorno wrote those lines in *Minima Moralia*. Thought is today wholly administered by bureaucracy, workpackages, digitalization, social media. We must search for it elsewhere. Perhaps in art, which has stood in the middle of thought for thousands of years.

The long history of the relationship between art and philosophy speaks for itself. Not only is it long, it is also slow. Philosophy tends to return to the same genres and works; Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, modernists. These are all so familiar to philosophy, and yet so elusive. To Adorno, canonized modernist avant-gardism was still radical. To some, its formal revolution appeared threatening. Avant-gardism made conservatism and fascism join forces in diligent hatred, a hatred rooted in weakness and the incapacity to withstand the deterioration of the self. In contrast, Adorno saw modernist art provide the glimpse of an insight into the possibilities of that which in our times comes across as the impossible: it is both free and bound. It is both bound in and by the warmth of things, and free to move beyond those things.

The object of art which harbours thought is not just any kind of object. It is the conflict-ridden focus of political opposition, social antagonism, affects and drives. The object of art is a body of constant changes, appearing in multiple forms, and it can derive both out of conscious work and what is unconscious in work. Adorno sees all these possibilities. The object of art—at least in the form that Adorno finds radical—is a symbol of almost eternal freedom. But it is also the origin of projections, hopes, and dreams.

How to find warmth in infinite freedom? How can free unbounded thought attach to the rooted life of love, intimacy, closeness? How can art offer routes where these antagonistic spheres are combined, joined, or merged? Most often, Adorno conceives of art in abstract terms of autonomy and freedom. And yet art gives us the hint of a context of life and living beings: social ties of warmth and trust.

With regards to social relations, Adorno forestalls a full climatology containing warmth and cold. We strive towards warmth. It is a fundamental element that we cannot forestall, that we seek but cannot find. It is lost to modern man. There are no societies, known by us, that are governed by warmth. Cold, in turn, is a perversion of warmth. In a cold society, human relations have been formed by technologies and tools. Once

started, this development easily spins out of control. It mutates. It morphs into the natural, into the social, into the self, into thought.

A subject that is truly thinking freely needs to intertwine a form of critical consciousness with an attraction towards the warm and the intimate. To approach the warmth of things requires a kind of dialectic between the free and the bound. Thought cannot naturally be held warm. It does not seek to restore unmediated warmth. Rather, it is seeking to undo the conceptual dualism which has led to the submission of warm life under cold thought. In approaching art, and the hope that art gives rise to, Adorno is seeking to liberate thinking from the cold inherent to it. In the Western tradition, thinkers are expected to master distance and objectivity, with a certain cold. But art can be both hot and cold. A symbol for freedom and for love. The one who is attracted to the warmth of things, does not think through mere distancing, but through the attraction towards a certain light, which may be both cold and warm. In art, lost possibilities are nourished through a hope of experiences beyond the cold of freedom.

Art holds a sensitivity and a sensibility which is not a memory of an original love, but rather an intensification of thought's own process. Through art, the philosopher becomes capable not only of thinking freely, but also of returning to the many intensities that life may offer. Such as erotic intensity, the intimacy of whispered words, or the warmth of a love that has vanished or that is kept hidden. In this way, thought can open itself to a vigour which is almost corporal. Aesthetic experience may bestow us with a powerful sense of life. Art is not weakened by thought, but intensified. It becomes the *daimon* which keeps the possession of thought unresolved, and alive.

Let us see how this continues. Perhaps administered thought will marginalize art even more than today, marginalize the warmth, life and love inherent to it and give up on its lost possibilities, of joining the free and the bound. But still, we can and should keep thinking about art, against the thought administered by sheer bureaucracy.

Biography

Cecilia Sjöholm is professor of Aesthetics at Södertörn University. Her research is particularly focused on the relation between art and politics in contemporary culture. She has published extensively on art, psychoanalysis and critical theory, engaging in particular in how art and aesthetics invite us to rethink political concepts and structures.