

# AESTHETICS, ENGAGEMENT, RESISTANCE

Gabriel Zammit

According to an anecdote recounted by Theodor Adorno in an essay titled *Commitment*, “[w]hen an occupying German officer visited [Picasso] in his studio and asked, standing before the *Guernica*, ‘Did you make that?’ Picasso is said to have responded, ‘No, you did.’”<sup>1</sup> This moment demonstrates how artworks transcend themselves, becoming something more than their material form. The *Guernica*, according to Picasso, is the suffering caused by the bombing at Guernica. Assuming this to be true immediately begs the question of usefulness. It is easy for Picasso to utter these words, standing comfortably in his Paris studio, but art cannot change the present like violence can, and neither the *Guernica* nor the act of painting it intervened in the moment of suffering when a sleepy Spanish village was obliterated by a squadron of bombers. Does this make the *Guernica* and, more generally, the aesthetic response to human tragedy futile? Art is beleaguered by the problem of non-material engagement and retrospect. This vexation will constitute the focal point of the current essay and will guide the arc of an argument which suggests that art becomes meaningful in a manner which action cannot by superseding itself, providing moments of unmediated experience and thus standing critically against the structures of normalisation. By becoming the pure ‘other’ to relationships of constraint, good art manages to become the non-rational explication of utopic potential in a world which has become defined through the perpetual action of erasure and destruction – both

---

1 Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” in *Notes to Literature vol. 2*, ed. Rolf Tiedmann, trans. Shierry Weber (New York, New York: Colombia University Press, 1992), 89.

physical and conceptual – which have become the operative principles of a diminished absolute which is lodged (perhaps irreversibly) at the centre of our most basic rational assumptions. Standing starkly against a world which has relinquished the imponderables which once suffused reality with a deeply meaningful narrative, art embraces pathlessness and creates meaning out of it. Aesthetic resistance does not depend on totality to function effectively, and by being able to alter the subjectivity of both the artist and the perceiver, the engagement with art objects apotheoses into an experience defined through its defiance.

In 1936, Walter Benjamin crystallised the contemporary experience of destruction and dissolution in no uncertain terms when he wrote that “never ha[d] experience been contradicted so thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.”<sup>2</sup>

The seeds of the change noted by Benjamin can be traced to the Baroque, wherein uncertainty took root as a historically significant force. The tension which developed between faith and rationality in the seventeenth century changed the course of human consciousness. During the 1600’s rational thought became synonymous with self-doubt and this laid the foundations for the critical perspective which accelerated into the development of science, mechanisation, and a vastly increased capacity for destruction and the rationalisation of contradiction.<sup>3</sup> Behind the mathematics and the science of the seventeenth century there lay a new awareness of the limits of human knowledge. The certainty afforded by a previously indubitable theological paradigm was shaken.

In the late 1700’s Friedrich Hölderlin drew the Baroque feeling of groundlessness into the structure of judgement and subjectivity itself. In a fragmentary text titled *Judgement and Being*, Hölderlin claims that language contains within itself an inescapable contradiction which makes any human

---

2 Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London, England: Pimlico, 1999), 83–109, 84.

3 See Didier Maleuvre, *The Horizon, a History of Our Infinite Longing* (London, England: University of California Press, 2011), 180-182

judgement or expression the perpetuation of a metaphysical irony. Taking the etymology of the German word for judgement (*urtheil*) as his cue, Hölderlin argued that separation lay at the root of any linguistic expression deployed in argumentation against the dissolution of indubitable principles, including that of wholeness. *Urtheil* can be traced back to *ur-teilen*, which when translated literally, reads as ‘original-separation.’ Judgement therefore, which can be said to synthesize fragments of perception into meaningful experience in the construction of language and reality, depends on a perspective of original separation to be able to differentiate the parts it goes on to unite. In Hölderlin’s own words, “[j]udgement in the highest and strictest sense, is the original separation of object and subject, [...] that separation through which alone object and subject become possible, the arche-separation in the concept of separation.”<sup>4</sup>

Given this background, Benjamin’s sentiment comes into focus as expressing the apex of humankind’s experience of the destruction which flows from a rationality which has placed doubt at the root of meaningfulness. Benjamin diagnoses the malady of an era wherein the absolute could only be present in the negative, and human rationality accelerated into self-destruction out of the insuperable principle of separation. In the mid-1900’s human bodies were objectified and turned into human matter in death camps while, in more recent years, the planet has suffered a similar fate of objectification, exploitation and destruction.

Within this context, art falls prey to the same constraints, and narrative based art, which comments explicitly on destruction and trauma, is exposed as an extension of the principles which led to destruction and trauma in the first place. In György Lukács’ words, art of this kind becomes symptomatic of “an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”<sup>5</sup> After the 1800’s, lived experience did not impel human beings into a perspective of wholeness. Contemporary art objects and art forms which do not take this into account fail to respond meaningfully to the modern experience of suffering and remain trapped within the metaphysical structure of constraint outlined above. Adorno puts this succinctly in an essay

4 Friedrich Hölderlin, *Friedrich Hölderlin: Essays and letters on theory*, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (New York, New York: University of New York Press, 1988), 37.

5 György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 56.

on Kafka, where he writes that “in a world caught in its own toils, everything positive [...] helps increase entanglement.”<sup>6</sup> The creation of Renaissance art and Medieval art is therefore impossible in the contemporary context. The modern subject has nothing in common with Fra Angelico’s light filled spaces, Botticelli’s exuberant narratives or Michelangelo’s David. Historical art-moments cannot be repeated.<sup>7</sup>

We must therefore ask ourselves, ‘what art becomes relevant in a post-absolute world where an insuperable limit is embedded into the architecture of experience?’ Adorno gives one rebuttal by telling us that “art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concepts and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fibre.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, artworks can come to embody truth through a position of disengaged engagement, and this paradoxical autonomy becomes the condition for an aesthetic moment which manages to exceed the normalising power of dominant thought paradigms. Genuine artworks and art-moments manage to function critically and reveal fragments of unmediated truth through a form of self-concealment. In order to remain separate from rational modes of constructed meaning-making they must appear to be ‘difficult,’ but by doing so open themselves up to meaning which runs much deeper than anything paradigmatically possible. By maintaining its separateness from the conditions of life, good art engages the social conditions within which it functions, merging a countless number of peripheral glances, so to speak, and building a negative image which does not limit its subject matter. Under this schematisation, good art does not, and cannot, merely say or directly expound some idea in narrative form. The contemporary condition for meaningful aesthetic engagement is that the art object must resist definitive delineation. Two responses to the destruction of

---

6 Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997), 271.

7 That is not to prompt the interpretation that pre-existing art becomes meaningless outside of its historical moment, and it is easy to adduce several works which acquire a prophetic dimension as time passes. Giulia Privitelli’s article in the *Times of Malta*, for example, uses Caravaggio’s masterpiece *The Beheading of St John* as a lens to analyse the corrupt and amoral political situation in Malta (see Giulia Privitelli, “Masterminds, Master Killers and Masterpieces,” <https://timesofmalta.com/>, 8 December, 2019). Gericault’s *Raft of the Medusa* is another example in its commenting on immigration and the suffering of human beings expelled from their native lands. And what of the universality of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*? The themes contained therein are inexhaustible.

8 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: The Athalone Press, 1997), 2.

World War Two will help illustrate this concept – Winfried Georg Sebald’s on the one hand, and Frank Auerbach’s on the other.

WG Sebald’s novels enact and embody the unsayable truth of suffering by aspiring to a synoptic perspective which provides a dreamlike atmosphere within which a sustained obsession with detail, description and the contingent interweaving of fact, fiction, and image, accumulates into a whole which, in the author’s own words, fulfils the “utmost need to communicate [which] comes together with the ultimate speechlessness.”<sup>9</sup> Sebald’s texts do not try to circumscribe a subject which the author recognises to be inaccessible to a constructed trajectory of analysis. Instead, the texts build into a nearly non-narrative edifice, which in its indeterminacy overwhelms the reader, causing insight into what is otherwise unrepresentable through a kind of performance. Sebald’s books bear witness to the truth of suffering by incorporating its ‘unconstructedness,’ into the (lack of) narrative, and enacting this same suffering through a semantically open ended text which effects a sublime response in the reader.<sup>10</sup> Sebald’s method does not diminish the truth of experience through a structure of ostensive representation which would necessarily fall short of true expression. In the author’s own words, his texts demonstrate the “notorious irrationality to which rational arguments lead”<sup>11</sup> and very cleverly step around the traps set up by that very rationality.

Auerbach does something similar in paint. Auerbach’s experience of exile and the second world war caused an extremely deep and silent suffering in the artist who felt that conventional portrait and landscape painting just couldn’t get to the spirit of the thing he was trying to depict. As a result, he began to produce the thickly smudged and warped images which are so typical of Auerbach, where the paint often protrudes centimetres off the canvas and looks almost sculptural. Each of his images documents a process of destruction whereby Auerbach would paint all day only to scrape the canvas the next morning, a process which he repeated over long periods. The end result is as much about what is absent as about what is left. His paintings challenge

---

9 Winfried Georg Sebald, “Strangeness, Integration and Crisis: On Peter Handke’s play *Kaspar*,” in *Campo Santo*, ed. Sven Meyer, trans. Anthea Bell (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 55-67, 67.

10 See Gabriel Zammit, “WG Sebald and the Poetics of Total Destruction,” *Antae* 6, no. 2-3 (December 2019): <https://antaejournal.com/api/file/5df5110d55d1946b04932573>

11 Winfried Georg Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 66.

us, refusing to confirm the forms we are familiar with, dissolving categories and participating in suffering through their process. One has to surrender to Auerbach's paintings. They accumulate into a sedimented detritus of implications and layers of damage through which the viewer moves, alluding to something far more primitive and elemental than what is ostensibly their subject. "I'd destroyed all the remainders (that is, of painting)," Auerbach tells us, "to get a unique thing ... it began to operate by its own laws ... but it's senseless and irrelevant unless it's tied, anchored to truth. It's a question of freeing the possibilities of improvisation which contain the mysteries."<sup>12</sup> Auerbach twists the process of destruction against itself, and by obliterating his subjects and his own work, he enables both to emerge intuitively in the clearest and freest of detail.

The work of both Auerbach and Sebald disengages from the concerns of the art-world and the world in general, unfolding a unique internal logic which, through its resistance to interpretation and its independence from social conditions, stands defiantly against the levelling powers of instrumental rationality. Within Adorno's schematisation then, this is an act of resistance and the artist becomes a force for social change; the cumulative effect of his work and of others like his seeps into general consciousness, informing future decisions, shaping the drift of personal and collective memory while at the same time revealing and preserving the hidden truths of suffering, heretofore inaccessible through ordinary discourse. Art becomes a political act by being disengaged from hegemonic power-discourse structures<sup>13</sup> and through its very existence, good art critiques the anatomy of normalisation and the thrust of consciousness which leads to trauma and catastrophe. In Sebald and Auerbach the disengagement from literary, painterly and overt social concerns lifts their subject matter into a non-rational clarity which steps around the hazards of narrative-based meaning making. The art-encounter becomes an encounter with the art-object's subject matter, which is now freed from the social narrative which is necessarily limited in truthfulness of vision.

In *Commitment*, Adorno goes on to make the point outlined above about Picasso's *Guernica*<sup>14</sup> and following this line of thought, the *Guernica* becomes

---

12 Auerbach as quoted in Catherine Lampert, *Frank Auerbach: Speaking and painting* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 104.

13 See Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 23.

14 Adorno, *Commitment*, 89.

the illustration of a metaphysical order thrown out of synch. All the figures transcend their painted expression and become fragments of experience which Picasso can gesture to, embodied only inasmuch as elemental suffering requires human consciousness which it can act on and blot out. Picasso himself said that “a painting is a sum of destructions.”<sup>15</sup> The aesthetic object of resistance destroys the perspective which it functions against, and destroys itself as an artwork, becoming the truth and experience contained within itself.

Adorno’s position on engagement and resistance holds a great deal of weight, yet it falls prey to the accusation that, in the face of tragedy, the soft and dispersed influence of art seems rather inadequate. Should artists therefore abandon their efforts and arm themselves with pickets and weapons instead? In wider terms, art is often labelled as useless because it seems not to contribute to the *materiality* of survival – at least not directly, like tools or weapons.<sup>16</sup> However, the fact that societies which do not produce aesthetic objects are unheard of, evidences the deep necessity of art as an institution of thought which responds to patterns of behaviour, both social and personal. Whether as mechanisms of psychological warfare, as Alfred Gell, would have it,<sup>17</sup> or as a force for bringing together the abstract notions that govern a world still imponderable and full of mystery, as John Berger suggests in a subtle essay on the Chauvet cave paintings,<sup>18</sup> art and art objects have existed for as long as thinking has existed. The conceptual flexibility and infinite malleability of aesthetic objects is the most basic reason for their existence. By virtue of these properties, human beings have been able to think reflexively and shape reality through a process of knowledge which is separate from and moves across the general stream of consciousness, commenting on it and changing it.

Art has never had any pretensions of replacing human action, and to ask it to respond to the physicality of destruction is to ask the wrong question. The twentieth century saw the development of an art which, in Sebald’s words was an attempt at a new understanding of “[t]he horrible, the shocking and disturbing

---

15 Pablo Picasso, Domenico Porzio, and Marco Valsecchi, *Understanding Picasso* (Michigan: Newsweek Books, 1974), 79.

16 While even this is debatable – and most anthropologists would debate it – I think it is safe to say that art does not shorten the route towards some desired physical end in the same way that tools do. Materiality is lacking in its technique.

17 See Alfred Gell, “Technology and Magic,” *Anthropology Today* 4, no. 2 (April 1988): 6–9.

18 See John Berger, “The Chauvet Cave Paintings,” in *Portraits*, ed. by Tom Overton (London: Verso, 2015), 1–6.

things that previously haunted only the darkest corners of the Romantics.”<sup>19</sup> Modern and contemporary art is therefore marked by a recognition of its own limits and an impulse towards the unique new forms which grew alongside the non-rational and unintelligible structures of nineteenth and twentieth-century suffering. The moment of aesthetic engagement and resistance pushes through the limits of reason and supersedes the constrictive materiality of the art object. In Maleuvre’s words, it is “[t]he unknown [which] is at the basis of art’s enduring power to fascinate and overwhelm us.”<sup>20</sup> The aesthetic moment therefore responds to materiality by producing a non-paradigmatic and intractable experience. Aesthetic resistance happens though the fact that art occurs in spite of, and despite, the conditions within which and parallel to which it exists. Art tends towards itself in a perpetual struggle to make itself into its own end and critically engages and comments on constrained modes of existence by becoming the pure ‘other’ of a society which is structured by antithetical sociohistorical forces. Active, corporeal rebellion works very differently to aesthetic resistance, and the informative atmosphere provided by aesthetic defiance bolsters the reach of action by subtly shifting the architecture of thought within which physical rebellion happens. It is thus that the paradoxical position of engaged autonomy supersedes the argument of non-materiality.

At this point, the analysis is drawn into the space of the individual aesthetic experience, and it is here that we can speak of utopia regained. Standing starkly against the loss of an absolute that previously functioned to ground meaning, aesthetic engagement doesn’t require a metaphysical context of totality to function with force and, as we have seen, embraces pathlessness, creating deep and intuitive meaning-moments out of indeterminacy. By being able to alter the subjectivity of both the artist and the perceiver, good art becomes the explication of utopic potential. Art therefore retrieves utopia by existing externally to the flow of life regulated by the totalising mechanisms of structured understanding. By uniting disparate fragments of experience, the art object becomes an occasion for the manifestation of a truth constantly in recession. Art creates a moment of infinite potential which is not limited by the synthetic

---

19 Sebald quoted in David Kleinberg-Levin, *Redeeming Words: Language and the promise of happiness in the stories of Döblin and Sebald* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 36.

20 Didier Maleuvre, *The Religion of Reality* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 195.



constructs of consciousness and thereby it brings the potentiality of utopia into play.<sup>21</sup> It is in this manner that art objects can destroy the perspectives against which they function by destroying themselves, turning themselves into pure and unmediated experience which cannot be fully comprehended. Following the etymology of the word ‘experience,’<sup>22</sup> and George Bataille’s definition as “a journey to the end of the possible,”<sup>23</sup> pure experience is understandable as a deep participation in the world which, in its excess,<sup>24</sup> apotheoses into an intimation of utopia, of non-rational truth. Art therefore bypasses the figures of consciousness that lead to suffering and tragedy by moving through them and subverting them against themselves.

Aesthetic engagement supersedes the rational structure of meaning making, which is exposed as the perpetuation of groundlessness. In clearer terms, art must be anti-teleological and intentionally refuse any guiding end which would limit the scope of aesthetic objects. The artwork does not seek to fit into a pre-determined idea of what it should be or should do. Kant intimated this concept in the *Third Critique* when he stated that for something to merit the title of art, it must have purposiveness without purpose.<sup>25</sup> In the moment of moving towards it, in the subjective aesthetic moment, the art object comes into being-for-the-subject in a relationship defined by indeterminacy, and every instance of this relationship draws embodied subjectivity beyond itself. The artwork is a mechanism for moving beyond the limits of consciousness and Maleuvre summarises this in the phrase “[a]rt is the dedicated practice of non-knowledge.”<sup>26</sup>

Adorno’s ideas track powerfully into the concept of art as pure and sublime experience. “The experience of art, as that of its truth or untruth,” Adorno

---

21 Of course, it is debatable whether utopia is actualisable. As soon as it is drawn out of potentiality it acquires the limits of the context within which it comes to exist, thereby prompting the current author to opine that utopia is probably more productive as a limit concept which orients the course of thought.

22 “By etymology *experience* suggests daring, strain and danger. The root word, *experiri*, ‘to try’, carries an image of passing [...] beyond borders” (Maleuvre, *The Religion of Reality*, 196).

23 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 7.

24 In relation to understanding which tries to structure it and fails.

25 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 105-106.

26 Maleuvre, *The Religion of Reality*, 196.

writes, “is more than a subjective experience. It is the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness.”<sup>27</sup> Art becomes the final haven for truths which have been obliterated by discourse which levels the world to whatever axiomatic first principles assume absolute authority. When we speak about extreme trauma or global suffering, representation mediated by synthetic concepts necessarily diminishes the truth of an experience which exceeds the abilities of embodied consciousness and is defined through the extent to which it obliterates personal subjectivity.<sup>28</sup> By *embodying* the subjective experience of incomprehensibility, good art manages to push beyond its own limits and say something truly objective in the face of terror, warfare and a dying planet. “Along the trajectory of its rationality,” Adorno writes, “and through it, humanity becomes aware in art of what rationality has erased from memory.”<sup>29</sup> It is this conceptual background that colours Picasso’s words to the visiting German officer, and the defiance in his statement and flippant gesture is impelled forwards by the weight of non-rational truth.

### Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor. “Commitment.” In *Notes to Literature vol 2*, edited by Rolf Tiedmann, translated by Shierry Weber: 76–94. New York, New York: Colombia University Press, 1992.
- Adorno, Theodor. *Prisms*. Translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997.
- Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: The Athalone Press, 1997.
- Bataille, Georges. *Inner Experience*. Translated by Leslie Anne Boldt. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Benjamin, Walter. “The Storyteller.” In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 83–109. London, England: Pimilco, 1999.
- Berger, John. “The Chauvet Cave Paintings.” In *Portraits*, edited by Tom Overton: 1-6. London: Verso, 2015.
- Gell, Alfred. “Technology and Magic.” *Anthropology Today* 4, no. 2 (April 1988): 6–9.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Friedrich Hölderlin: Essays and letters on theory*. Edited and translated by Thomas Pfau. New York, New York: University of New York Press, 1988.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Translated by Paul Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

---

27 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 244-245.

28 See Winfried Georg Sebald, “Between History and Natural History: On the literary description of total destruction,” in *Campo Santo*, ed. Sven Meyer, trans. Anthea Bell (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 68-101, 92-95.

29 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 67.

- Kleinberg-Levin, David. *Redeeming Words: Language and the promise of happiness in the stories of Döblin and Sebald*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013.
- Lampert, Catherine. *Frank Auerbach: Speaking and painting*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2015.
- Lukács, György. *The Theory of the Novel*. Translated by Anna Bostock. London: Merlin Press, 1971.
- Maleuvre, Didier. *The Horizon, a History of Our Infinite Longing*. London, England: University of California Press, 2011.
- Maleuvre, Didier. *The Religion of Reality*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006.
- Picasso, Pablo, Domenico Porzio, and Marco Valsecchi. *Understanding Picasso*. Michigan: Newsweek Books, 1974.
- Privitelli, Giulia. "Masterminds, Master Killers and Masterpieces." *The Times of Malta*, December 8, 2019. <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/masterminds-master-killers-and-masterpieces.755689>
- Rancière, Jacques. *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Cambridge: Polity, 2009.
- Sebald, Winfried Georg. *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Translated by Anthea Bell. London: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Sebald, Winfried Georg. "Strangeness, Integration and Crisis: On Peter Handke's play *Kaspar*." In *Campo Santo*, edited by Sven Meyer, translated by Anthea Bell: 55-67. New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Sebald, Winfried Georg. "Between History and Natural History: On the literary description of total destruction." In *Campo Santo*, edited by Sven Meyer, translated by Anthea Bell: 68-101. New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Zammit, Gabriel. "WG Sebald and the Poetics of Total Destruction." *Antae* 6, no. 2-3 (December 2019): 198-212. <https://antaejournal.com/api/file/5df5110d55d1946b04932573>

**Gabriel Zammit** currently works as a research assistant at the archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mdina. Having graduated with a first class degree in philosophy in 2016 from the University of Malta, Zammit went on to do a Masters in aesthetics, philosophy and art theory with the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, in London, graduating in 2017 with a dissertation which explored the metaphysics of representing excessively traumatic events, making specific reference to Kant and the literature of WG Sebald. He has published various essays in the field of aesthetics and plans to further develop his interest in the interstices of art, literature and philosophy by embarking on a PhD in the near future. Gabriel also works as a freelance curator and has produced exhibitions and cultural events both at home and abroad.