
ADORNO AND THE BORDERS OF EXPERIENCE:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NONIDENTICAL FOR A
"DIFFERENT" THEORY OF *BILDUNG*

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ABSTRACT. In this essay Christiane Thompson discusses the systematic outcomes of Theodor Adorno's philosophical work for a reworked theory of *Bildung* (an important term in the German tradition of philosophy and history of education). In his essay "Theory of *Halbbildung*," Adorno revealed the inevitable failure of *Bildung*, on the one hand, and the necessity of *Bildung* (in view of a critique of society), on the other. After having exposed this contradiction, Thompson seeks to analyze *Bildung's* systematic role by turning to Adorno's reflections on art and metaphysics. Adorno's concept of aesthetic experience hints at the possibility of a more genuine approach to *Bildung* and culture, one that makes the borders of our experience visible and, as a result, suggests a different relation to ourselves and to the world. She concludes by examining the critical dimensions of this different *Bildung* as well as its pedagogical relevance.

If "culture" is not to turn into disgrace and cultural fetishism, it can only be understood as the realization of an integer and appropriate spiritual gestalt.... Yet, the spirit receives its vigor out of nothing other than what has formerly been called *Bildung*. If, however, spirit can only remain faithful to society by not dissolving into society, it is about time for the anachronism: to hold on to *Bildung* after society has withdrawn its basis. *Bildung*, then, does not have any possibility for survival other than through critical self-reflection as to why it must necessarily deteriorate into *Halbbildung*.
— Theodor W. Adorno¹

What is the living space of culture? How can it fulfill the demands of critical self-reflection regarding human existence? For Theodor Adorno, these questions are inextricably linked to *Bildung*, an important concept in the German tradition of philosophy of education since the final decades of the eighteenth century.² The Adorno passage that opens this essay speaks to the relation of culture

1. Theodor W. Adorno, "Theorie der Halbbildung" [Theory of *Halbbildung*] in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 121 (translation by author). This work will be cited as *TH* in the text for all subsequent references, and all translations of this text are my own.

2. Since *Bildung* is so strongly intertwined with the German history of the past 200 years, it is indeed difficult to offer a proper English translation of the term. Interpreters have tried to capture it by translating it as "cultivation," "edification," or "liberal education" (see, for example, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and John Cleary and Pádraig Hogan, "The Reciprocal Character of Self-Education: Introductory Comments on Hans-Georg Gadamer's Address 'Education is Self-Education,'" *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35, no. 4 [2001]: 519–527). These terms adequately demarcate the distinction from such educational terms as "upbringing" or "raising" (referring to the intentional parental activity meant to integrate and prepare their offspring for society). However, these translations fail to convey the specific idea that thinkers like Friedrich Schiller and Wilhelm von Humboldt attributed to *Bildung* (which I will therefore leave untranslated in this essay). For now, I only want to indicate its immense philosophical content: it refers to the individual's self-formation and enriching self-determination in and out of an engagement with the diversity of the world. In a special issue of *Educational Philosophy and Theory* on *Bildung*, the guest editor Walter Bauer has summarized for the English-speaking audience the different systematic traits inherent to German *Bildung*; see Walter Bauer, "Introduction," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 2 (2003): 133–137. In addition, Lars Lövlie and Paul Standish have thoroughly explicated the philosophical and societal contexts of *Bildung* in their article, "Bildung and the Idea of a Liberal Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 3 (2002): 317–340.

and spirit through *Bildung*: on the one hand, *Bildung* constitutes the moving force of the spirit while, on the other hand, it makes culture accessible to that spirit. In other words, *Bildung* is the necessary precondition for genuinely understanding and forming culture, and, therefore, it is of crucial importance for a critical social theory.

In this context, Adorno's claim that the basis of *Bildung* has been destroyed is a cause for despair. The preconditions of *Bildung* and culture are, according to him, no longer present in late-capitalist societies. However, the analysis does not come to rest here, for, on his view, the very idea of *Bildung* necessarily entails its deterioration into *Halbbildung*, that is, "semi-" or "pseudo-edification." This latter claim is much more far-reaching because it does not limit Adorno's critique to the present circumstances in society: it reveals that the difficulty lies partially in the idea of *Bildung* itself.

It will require some effort to show that Adorno's claim does not put an end to the purpose of this essay. Indeed, the opening quote seems to be detrimental to the question posed here — that is, whether Adorno's analyses of art and metaphysics in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* might allow for the formulation of a *different* theory of *Bildung*. For now, I would like to draw attention to the paradoxical description that he gave to the task of *Bildung*: a *timely anachronism*. Even though *Bildung* may no longer offer an adequate characterization of present-day culture and its formation by individuals, it still seems to play a role in reflecting this changed situation.

Before turning to Adorno's later works, I would like to explicate more thoroughly the theoretical context of his "theory of *Halbbildung*," which will elucidate his ambivalent position regarding the classical idea of *Bildung* itself. Then, I will turn to Adorno's posthumous work *Aesthetic Theory*, in which his conception of aesthetic experience seems to offer a "clue" as to a different, perhaps more genuine approach to culture and *Bildung*. I will next argue that the last chapter of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* allows us to trace the metaphysical implications of this approach. Finally, I will consider the results of my analysis against the opening quote from Adorno in order to evaluate the possibility of a *different theory of Bildung*.

THE FATE OF *BILDUNG*: FROM HUMBOLDT TO ADORNO

The term *Bildung* is related to the rise of the German civil society in the late 1700s and, accordingly, to the philosophical and pedagogical developments surrounding the Enlightenment. The philosophical discourses at the end of the eighteenth century focused on the significance of Reason in determining the order of society and developing a conception of the fulfilled life. The rationalization of educational discourse was accompanied by the idea that a valuable life can only be

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achieved by being a useful individual within society. In accordance with this idea, the so-called philanthropists (that is, the friends of human beings) suggested a utilitarian curriculum that would help to develop citizens' useful and profitable talents — in other words, those talents that would help to sustain their lives and that would correspondingly promote their happiness.

The classical discourse of *Bildung* can be understood as a countermovement to this utilitarian approach to education. In contrast to the philanthropists, Wilhelm von Humboldt suggested that human beings need to become *human beings* before being prepared for their future vocations.³ Correspondingly, he postulated the necessity of coming to "the highest and most proportionate development of all talents to a whole," a process that he called *Bildung*.⁴ Humboldt underscored his ideas by proclaiming that human beings are not destined by nature but that they determine themselves through their practices in the world.⁵ This anthropological principle goes back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau ("*perfectibilité*") and was promptly introduced into the German philosophical discourse by thinkers like Johann Gottfried von Herder.⁶ In connection with the "unwritten nature of human being," Humboldt thought of *Bildung* as an unceasing request to engage with the world in various ways.⁷ In order to protect *Bildung* from social restraints and to prevent its reduction to a mere means to some political or social end, he demanded a wide-ranging and free engagement of individuals with the world. Such a general and unlimited concatenation of the ego with the world allows for individuality, which, for Humboldt, can be the only measure for humanity.

Humboldt conceived of *Bildung* as a successful process of experience and, thus, a successful constitution of self. Even though Humboldt incorporated Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's concept of "talent" or "force" into his idea of the ego's activity in the world,⁸ this does not necessarily imply an entelechial or teleological structure for *Bildung*.⁹ The talent or force expresses the gap between potentiality and actuality: the ego can only become manifest through engaging with the world. In order for this to be a genuine engagement, its results must remain unforeseeable.

3. Compare with Jörg Ruhloff, "Bildung heute" [*Bildung Today*], *Pädagogische Korrespondenz* 21 (1997): 2–17.

4. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Schriften in 5 Bänden* [Works in Five Volumes], vol. 1, eds. Klaus Giel and Andreas Flitner (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), 64.

5. See Dietrich Benner, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Bildungstheorie: eine problemgeschichtliche Studie zum Begründungszusammenhang neuzeitlicher Bildungsreform* [Wilhelm von Humboldt's Theory of *Bildung*: A Problem-Oriented Historical Study on the Foundation of the Modern Reform of *Bildung*] (Weinheim: Deutscher Studienverlag, 2003).

6. Günther Buck, *Rückwege aus der Entfremdung. Studien zur Entwicklung der deutschen humanistischen Bildungsphilosophie* [The Way Back from Alienation: Studies on the Development of a German Humanist Philosophy of *Bildung*] (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1984).

7. Humboldt, *Schriften in 5 Bänden*, vol. 1, 234ff.

8. Clemens Menze, *Wilhelm von Humboldt's Lehre und Bild vom Menschen* [Wilhelm von Humboldt's Conception and Idea of Humanity] (Ratingen: Henn, 1965).

9. Alfred Schäfer, *Das Bildungsproblem nach der humanistischen Illusion* [The Problem of Education After the Humanist Illusion] (Weinheim: Deutscher Studienverlag, 1996), 44–50.

I would like to explicate this thought briefly by referring to Günther Buck's interpretation of *Bildung* and experience as a hermeneutical process.¹⁰ While every experience commences with prejudgment or preunderstanding, it does not exhaust itself in it. Using Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics, Buck claims an irreducible *negativity* of experience and *Bildung*, in which the self cannot remain the same — what is experienced always exceeds the previously delineated horizon. That the world never coincides with our expectations, that our engagement with the world always bears surprises, might be the strongest argument for the infinity of the process of *Bildung*. Similarly, Humboldt did not interpret *Bildung* as a *perfectum* but as a concrete dialectical process. *In Bildung, complete self-fulfillment is out of reach.*

The notion of *Bildung* became very popular in the German social history and philosophy of education of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most notably, it played a decisive role in the emancipation program of bourgeois society. Until recently, the term *Bildung* was usually associated with positive connotations, and it has become a commonplace in educational science as well as everyday discourses. To be sure, the propagation of *Bildung* was always accompanied by a criticism of *Bildung* and culture. Less than one hundred years after Humboldt, the young Friedrich Nietzsche complained that *Bildung* has become a vehicle for cultural and national self-affirmation. At the same time, Nietzsche employed the term *Bildung* himself in order to demarcate a different relation between the individual and the (ancient) world. Like Nietzsche, Adorno maintained an ambivalent relation to the idea of *Bildung*. On the one hand, he believed the "living engagement of the individual with the world" to be the very heart of *Bildung*. On the other hand, as noted, Adorno thought that existing social conditions no longer allowed for the possibility of *Bildung*. *Bildung* has deteriorated into its own "mortal enemy," *Halbbildung* (TH, 111). Pervaded by conformism and socialization, the object of *Bildung* — that is, culture — suffers in various ways from this development.

First of all, culture has been infected by the omnipresence of the exchange of goods (*Warentausch*). As merchandised and distributed products, literary and art works no longer stand for themselves: "Their reception does not follow immanent criteria, but is exclusively determined by what the customer believes to receive" (TH, 110). Trivialization inevitably follows when cultural works only appear under the generally accepted expectations. As such, culture is part of a manufacture of beliefs, needs, and their satisfaction. The consequence for works of art, literature, and music is *fetishism*, in which their meaning and value is determined by this "cultural industry," as Adorno and Max Horkheimer called it. On this view, it is not a contradiction that masterpieces of classical music are prominently featured in commercials or function as ringer melodies for cell phones.

The fetishistic character of cultural products is, according to Adorno, accompanied by the *reification of the mind*. Instead of a vivid and free engagement of the

10. Günther Buck, *Hermeneutik und Bildung. Elemente einer verstehenden Bildungslehre* [Hermeneutics and *Bildung*: Elements of a Hermeneutical Theory of *Bildung*] (München: Fink, 1981), 189ff.

ego with the world — as Humboldt envisioned it — cultural works merely serve the purpose of self-affirmation. Engagement with them is instrumentalized in order to establish a social hierarchy: “The society of status sucks up the rest of *Bildung* and changes it into an emblem of status” (TH, 108). *Bildung* decays into *Halbbildung* — the fetish of goods passes over to the mind. The engagement with cultural works does not change the ego anymore; it does not bring about new perspectives on the world. Rather, the ego remains unaltered. To summarize, the notion of *Halbbildung* denotes the ongoing decline of *Bildung* as Humboldt and others originally conceived of it.

It might be helpful to substantiate Adorno’s criticism of *Bildung* and culture and to outline why it is still valuable for analyzing our contemporary situation in a postmodern and globalizing world.¹¹ I do not want to take up those notions that are most often chosen in order to discuss the possibilities and limitations of Adorno’s (and Horkheimer’s) criticism of culture — for instance, the question of whether Adorno’s description underestimates the potential of mass or pop culture to express the difficulties and contradictions that we live in today.¹² Rather, I would like to explicate Adorno’s critique by briefly relating it to the structures and ideas that currently determine our higher educational system. The development that has — in contrast to the United States — only recently struck the German educational system is its reform toward becoming a *service institution*. On this view, the university has to offer programs to its prospective students who, in turn, have to consider whether these programs are a promising investment for their future employment prospects. The students come to regard themselves as individual companies that have taken over full responsibility with respect to their marketability, that is, they find themselves in direct competition with others. University *Bildung*, or university education, in Germany now finds itself situated within this framework and is struggling to come to terms with it.¹³ What is now required are quality management and proper marketing strategies. Within this framework, the significance of *Bildung* or education changes for the individual. According to Adorno’s critique, the experience of *Bildung* or learning does not predominantly *change* the students and their points of view anymore. Rather, the prospective experiences are intended to enhance the students’ spectrum of assets. In other words, students take up the function of making themselves stand out from others, a process

11. This question immediately comes up on recognizing that Adorno’s analyses were to be read in relation to his observations of American and German culture between the 1940s and 1960s.

12. This questions and others along the same lines have been raised from the perspective of cultural studies. See, for example, the work of John Fiske, including *Reading the Popular* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

13. For the German context, Andrea Liesner has shown how the neoliberally motivated reforms reshape the learning and teaching cultures at the university. Andrea Liesner, “Die Bildung einer Ich-AG. Lehren und Lernen im Dienstleistungsbetrieb Universität” [Education or Service? Remarks on Teaching and Learning in the Entrepreneurial University], in *Bildung der Universität. Beiträge zum Reformdiskurs*, eds. Andrea Liesner and Olaf Sanders (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2005), 43–64. An English version of this article will soon be published in “The Learning Society from the Perspective of Governmentality,” special issue, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, eds. Ulrich Bröckling, Jan Masschelein, Ludwig Pongratz, and Maarten Simons.

decisive in the competition for socially desirable and highly regarded jobs. The objects of *Bildung* that students encounter are from the very beginning integrated into a system of beliefs that is determined by instrumental rationality. This is what Adorno meant in saying that a socially unrestricted and free engagement with the world (or *Bildung*) has become increasingly difficult. The problem is compounded by globalization (without going into detail regarding this complex and also vague concept), where culturally and individually specific perspectives on the world are increasingly reshaped by global viewpoints while the economy becomes more and more significant within the cultural and public sphere. Michael Wimmer has summarized the shifts in the meaning of *Bildung* in a global world as follows:

With reference to the theory of globalisation, *Bildung* is thereby seen as a social and economy-political local criterion, and the colonisation of the discourse on *Bildung* through an economic mode of thought is aimed at by describing the productivity of *Bildung* preferably as enabling individuals to adapt — with the required flexibility and assimilation — to unpredictable societal changes and new expectations at the workplace.¹⁴

Understood in this way, *Bildung* has been transformed into a measure of the individual's capacity for adaptation.

However, Adorno's critique is not limited to the social functionality of contemporary education and *Bildung*, a motif that can already be found in Rousseau's criticism of society. When speaking of a fetishism of cultural works and of the mind, Adorno brought into focus the changing relation of thinking subjects to their knowledge. In late-capitalist societies, the rules of the marketplace determine knowledge by its usability and actuality: what is taken as knowledge today might be useless tomorrow. Individuals need to be flexible in order to meet the demands placed upon them. In this situation (a situation that has become more precarious in postmodern contexts, where the foundations of knowledge have come to be seen as problematic), knowledge becomes increasingly *exterior* to the development and education of individuals. What is learned is "no longer *significant for one's life* but forms a knowledge that is *helpful for our survival*."¹⁵ It is here that Adorno located the deterioration of *Bildung* into *Halbbildung*.

However, it might be misleading to pose the question of how Adorno's critique is *still relevant* for our present situation, for this implies its limitation as a mere critical *description* of contemporary culture. This would roughly amount to a conservative culture criticism of late-capitalist societies in which one refers to unaffected origins or uncompromised ideas in order to judge the contemporary conditions of society. I count it among the most challenging insights of critical theory that such a point of view is no longer tenable: that, according to *dialectical materialism*, there is no longer a place where one is free from social power structures. The critic can never be sure of the extent to which he or she falls within his

14. Michael Wimmer, "Ruins of *Bildung* in a Knowledge Society: Commenting on the Debate about the Future of *Bildung*," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 2 (2003): 168.

15. Michael Wimmer, "Die überlebte Universität. Zeitgemäße Betrachtungen einer 'unzeitgemäßen' Institution" [The Outlived University. Timely Meditations on an "Untimely" Institution], in *Bildung der Universität*, eds. Liesner and Sanders, 35.

or her own criticism.¹⁶ The idea that we cannot describe our situation with concepts that are independent from the social conditions in which we live makes critical theory itself a precarious endeavor. It hints toward the dialectical character of critical theory — where the concepts with which we work (society, Enlightenment, culture, and the like) are contradictory in character.

Adorno thematized the contradictions within culture and *Bildung* in his "Theory of *Halbbildung*"; more precisely, he spoke of the *double character* of culture and *Bildung*. On the one hand, culture and *Bildung* have become servants and supporters of the existing social conditions; on the other, they have always constituted a realm that has been detached from economic pressures and requirements. This contradictory character is not limited to the present-day appearance of culture and *Bildung*, but already lies within their very *idea*. According to Adorno, culture forms a part of the society into which it is integrated — therefore, it cannot relate itself to society as a whole. Specifically, it cannot deal with the contradictions of our everyday life in that society. At the same time, however, it forms the place where these contradictions become manifest: "The double character of culture...originates in the incommensurate societal antagonism that culture wants to cure but as mere culture simply cannot cure" (TH, 96).

The double character of the idea of *Bildung* was introduced at the outset of this essay, where Adorno expressed in various ways that the decline of *Bildung* into *Halbbildung* is inevitable: "What *Bildung* has become [that is, *Halbbildung*]...is to be deduced from the concept of *Bildung* itself" (TH, 93). Adorno attempted to show that the idea of *Bildung* is necessarily disproportionate in relation to existing social structures and categories; individuals, for instance, always differ in their point of departure for *Bildung*. The fact that, historically, the generalization and idealization of *Bildung* served to reaffirm the social structures of domination instead of surmounting them is, according to Adorno, strong support for the double character of *Bildung*. In the context of the conflict that surrounds the allocation of social chances and the distribution of resources, the political emancipation of the bourgeois class via *Bildung* shows features of *Halbbildung*:

It goes without saying that the idea of *Bildung* necessarily postulates an idea of humanity devoid of status and privilege. As soon as *Bildung* bargains away this idea and gets tangled up in the practice of particular purposes that are valuable from the point of view of society, it has already betrayed itself. However, it becomes equally guilty as "pure" *Bildung*; the supposed purity being ideological. (TH, 97)

Adorno's analysis culminates in the previously quoted "timely anachronism" of *Bildung*. The development of the idea of *Bildung* was the originating moment of

16. Adorno observed that "The nerve of dialectic as method is definite negation. It is based on the experience of powerlessness as long as it remains in the realm of the general, e.g., as long as it treats the criticized object as handled by subsuming it to a concept as its mere representative from above." Theodor W. Adorno, "Drei Studien zu Hegel" [Hegel: Three Studies], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 318. Alfred Schäfer has reflected on this problem regarding critical pedagogy; see Alfred Schäfer, "Kritische Pädagogik — Vom paradigmatischen Scheitern eines Paradigmas" [Critical Pedagogy: The Paradigmatic Failure of a Paradigm], in *Bilanz der Paradigmen Diskussion in der Erziehungswissenschaft: Leistungen, Defizite, Grenzen*, ed. Dietrich Hoffmann (Weinheim: Deutscher Studienverlag, 1991), 111–125.

Halbbildung, which put *Bildung* in the service of social self-assertion. Therefore, on Adorno's view, *Bildung* must fail.

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to take up this "failure." This is to say that I do not want to interpret this failure as the end of discussion regarding *Bildung*, but rather as its beginning. What is the systematic outcome of the "double character" of culture and *Bildung*? What consequences do these critical theoretical constructions entail for the philosophy of education? Will they allow for a different conception of *Bildung*? To be sure, Adorno's essay "Theory of *Halbbildung*" itself implies these questions. One could argue that the text is an example of a critical self-reflection and therefore a resistance against integration into the *totality of delusion*.¹⁷ The question then is what kind of experience a cultural work like the "Theory of *Halbbildung*" offers us for reflecting on *Bildung*. In order to address this question, I would like to engage Adorno's understanding of culture more extensively. From a critical theoretical perspective, Adorno's thoughts on the aesthetic realm offer valuable insights regarding our engagement with the cultural world. This discussion will help to unfold the systematic value of the "double character" of *Bildung*.

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND ITS LOGIC OF FAILURE

The posthumously published draft of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is a complex work that traces along multiple lines the role of art and the possibility of its existence in contemporary societies. Adorno worked out different layers of the relation between art and society through different relations of tensions, such as "semblance" and "expression," "truth" and "untruth," and so on. In the following, I will focus on Adorno's concept of "aesthetic experience" with reference to the chapter entitled "Enigmaticalness, Truth Content, Metaphysics."

Here, Adorno spoke of the connection of enigmaticalness and art; to be more precise, he claimed that "all artworks — and art altogether — are enigmas."¹⁸ By this he meant that aesthetic experience is pervaded by something that it cannot manage. According to Adorno, engagement with a work of art bears a twofold structure in that its openness is accompanied by withdrawal and concealment. Adorno held this twofold structure to be *constitutive* for aesthetic experience. This is to say that the enigmaticalness within aesthetic experience only deserves to be called such because it re-opens time and time again — this *enigmaticalness* is what makes possible the aesthetic status of an experience (AT, 162/184). Before explicating what Adorno had in mind when speaking of "aesthetic experience," we need to bring into view the traits that Adorno deemed central to "experience," one of the most basic terms of modern philosophy.

17. This is Adorno's term for the fact of *social mediation* and for the insight that our whole life is organized according to the abstract exchange of goods.

18. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum, 1997), 160 (English version)/182 (German original). This work will be cited as AT in the text for all subsequent references, with page numbers for the English (first) and German (second) provided.

According to Adorno, experience is conceptual. For background clarification, one can point to the analysis of human Reason in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: without the categories of human Understanding, experience would be impossible.¹⁹ Experience is processed experience, not an immediate pulse against the wall of receptivity. To be sure, it is with this cornerstone that the philosophical problems begin. In the present context, however, it is sufficient to point to the fact that our experience comes into being within a categorical network: our experience is a process of (automatic) identification, with the categories being shaped by our social and historical existence. Adorno interpreted identification as the inner logic of experience. Experience is, so to speak, directed toward and fulfilled in identification. Even though there might be vagueness, dispute, or insufficiency in the process of experience (for example, whether this thing over there is a human being or a mannequin), it remains structured in view of its fulfillment: the identification of what is experienced.

Aesthetic experience is, from this point of view, Adorno's criticism of and counterapproach to conceptual experience. The enigmaticalness of aesthetic experience derives from the fact that in aesthetic experience, our attempts at understanding and classification inevitably fail. However, the collapse or disruption of experience in the aesthetic realm does not suggest that this process defies a conceptual approach. Adorno did not give up aesthetic experience in favor of intuition or events of flow. For him, the term "experience" retains meaning in the realm of aesthetics. According to Adorno, we try to capture the "content" or "object" of experience conceptually: we attempt to understand works of art, literature, and the like, and to decipher their meaning. The problem we are confronted with is that our constructions of understanding and meaning fail because of an *excess* that precisely characterizes the aesthetic experience. In semiotic terms, while attempting to make out the signifying elements and to determine the content of the aesthetic experience, we become aware that we lack rules to interpret the signifying elements of our experience.²⁰ It is precisely this indeterminacy of meaning that characterizes our encounter with artworks. It is not clear from an aesthetic point of view what counts as a signifier and what this signifier (in relation to other signs) means. We are faced with a materiality that holds much more than we can decipher, a materiality that radically calls into question our attempts at signification.

The suspenseful relation of "rationality" and "mimesis" substantiates the structure of aesthetic experience (AT, 168/192). Rationality represents, for Adorno, the meaningful elements of identification within an overall horizon of understanding. Referring again to Gadamer's hermeneutics, we can speak of a prejudgment or preunderstanding, that is, a horizon shaped by historical and social factors that configures our experience. Thus, we recognize or experience colors, shapes,

19. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [Critique of Pure Reason] (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), B129–B169.

20. Christoph Menke, *Die Souveränität der Kunst. Ästhetische Erfahrung nach Adorno und Derrida* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 52ff. An English translation of this book is also available: *The Sovereignty of Art: Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. Neil Solomon (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

words, feelings, tones, and the like. In other words, nonaesthetic elements of understanding prefigure the process of aesthetic experience. This means that aesthetic experience is not free from social mediation.

Yet, Adorno countered the socially mediated "meaning" carried into aesthetic experience with "mimesis." "Mimesis" means to take up similarity or resemblance and counteracts the determinately implemented contents of meaning: "If artworks do not make themselves like something else but only like themselves, then only those who imitate them understand them" (AT, 166/190). Put differently, we cannot merely project meaning onto the artwork; rather, we have to approach it from its inner coherence. Here, however, it is decisive that within this "inner realm," *the artwork does not give anything but itself*. We have no possibility of posing or finalizing the meaning of the artwork.²¹ This is what Adorno meant when he said that the spirit of artwork "ignites on what is opposed to it, on materiality" (AT, 157/180). The paradoxical expression "experience of inhibited experience" provides an apt description.²² Aesthetic experience resists its "conceptual dissolution"; it preserves or remains faithful to the material aspects of experience and, therefore, undermines the teleological expansion of understanding. In conclusion, it is characteristic of aesthetic experience that it does not come to an end, that it remains always confronted with its own failure. Christoph Menke's characterization of aesthetic experience as "subversive" and stumbling "over its own feet" is enlightening.²³

With this elaboration of the structure of aesthetic experience, it is time to concentrate on the "subjective side" of this experience. It is the subjective side that was once called *Bildung*: "*Bildung* is nothing other than culture in view of its subjective adjudication" (TH, 94). On this view, the question of *Bildung* is nothing other than the question of what the outcome of aesthetic experience is for me. Clearly, a conception of *Bildung* related to the structure of aesthetic experience struggles with its own possibility. In order to describe the moment of *Bildung*, it is necessary to investigate the relation of the subject to the object within aesthetic experience.

ADORNO AND THE REALM OF METAPHYSICS

Aesthetic experience undermines the authority of the spiritual and the knowing subject because it remains faithful to that which does not dissolve in approaches of understanding. The idea that our conceptual representation of the world imposes violent restraints on both the world and ourselves marks a central moment in Adorno's work. It is an idea that can already be found in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,

21. In *Die Souveränität der Kunst*, Menke asserts, "The signifier trembles aesthetically between the two poles that it holds together as automatically formed: between the material and the meaning," 55 (translation by author). Menke states that, as a consequence, in aesthetic experience the realm of materiality does not allow a selection and identification of signifiers. It therefore contradicts hermeneutical approaches of understanding.

22. Hans-Hartmut Kappner, *Die Bildungstheorie Adornos als Theorie der Erfahrung von Kunst und Kultur* [Adorno's Theory of *Bildung* as a Theory of the Experience of Art and Culture] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984).

23. Menke, *Die Souveränität der Kunst*, 129.

which he wrote with Max Horkheimer in 1944.²⁴ Adorno transformed this idea into a strong criticism of idealism, which reached its highpoint in *Negative Dialectics*, published in 1966. In his reconstruction of the history of subjectivity, Adorno carved out how the subject had to apply a kind of violence to itself in order to become a knowing subject, a subject capable of resisting the threats of and bondage to nature.²⁵ The subject, in Kantian terms, had to subject itself to its forms of thought (categories) and intuition (forms of intuition); in Cartesian terms, it had to apply ruling methods to itself in order to meet the preconditions for the manufacture of knowledge. Subjectivation never comes without subjugation or objectification, so Adorno stated. Instead of dwelling in a realm of immanence or pure spirit, the subject can be realized only as mediated through objecthood. Adorno captured this subject-object dialectic also as a dialectic of nature and reason:

The prehistory of reason, that it is a moment of nature and yet something else, has become the immanent definition of reason. It is natural as the psychological force split off for purposes of self-preservation; once split off and contrasted with nature, it also becomes nature's otherness. But if that dialectic irrepressibly turns reason into the absolute antithesis of nature, if the nature in reason itself is forgotten, reason will be self-preservation running wild and will regress to nature. It is only as reflection upon self-preservation that reason would be above nature. (ND, 289/285)

Reason is, according to Adorno, bound to nature because it underlies the conditions of self-preservation. In other words, it is not independent of the context of nature. However, overemphasis on reason leads to reason's regress to nature: *while getting lost in itself, reason loses itself*.²⁶ Adorno opposed this blindness to nature with a demand to transcend nature by reflecting on the self-preservation in reason. In other words, he held that the subject must become reminiscent of the nature within itself. Here, the nature of the subject should not be conceived as a romantic or innocent origin. Adorno by no means suggested a return to unspoiled sources. He used the term "transcendence" in this context, indicating a movement of transgression instead of a "return." He envisioned an overcoming of the subject within the subject, a movement of nature beyond nature within the subject.

It is interesting and significant that Adorno ascribed the responsibility for this transcendence to art and metaphysics (ND, 397/389).²⁷ The transcendence of the subject within nature is precisely what the two domains have in common. From

24. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972).

25. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1973), 172 (English version)/174 (German original). This work will be cited as ND in the text for all subsequent references, with page numbers for the English (first) and German (second) provided.

26. Axel Hutter, "Adornos Meditationen zur Metaphysik" [Adorno's Meditations on Metaphysics] in *Vom Ersten und Letzten: Positionen der Metaphysik in der Gegenwartsphilosophie*, ed. Uwe J. Wenzel (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999), 239.

27. See also Stephen E. Bronner, "Dialectics at a Standstill: A Methodological Inquiry into the Philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno," in *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 149, in which Bronner refers to the relation of art and metaphysics. Although he points out the constitutive function of negativity for the aesthetic and metaphysical realm, he does not explicate its systematic consequences, and he doubts the usefulness of Adorno's theory for analyzing our present situation in late-capitalist societies (151).

what has been discussed previously, a relation between transcendence and aesthetic experience seems evident. Aesthetic experience indeed shows similarities to transcendence in that it resists intellectual appropriation and, thus, preserves its otherness or enigmaticalness. In Adorno's own words, the experience of art is more than a mere subjective event: "it is irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness" (AT, 319/363). Is this the transcendence that Adorno talked about in *Negative Dialectics*? Does aesthetic experience offer an overcoming of the subject within the subject, and does this overcoming have something to do with *Bildung*? Certainly, the terms "overcoming" and "transcendence" are problematic if they suggest a determinacy that is absent from enigmatic aesthetic experience. But here again, Adorno rejected any such determinacy: "Any man who would *nail down transcendence* can rightly be charged — as by Karl Kraus, for instance — with lack of imagination, anti-intellectualism, and thus a betrayal of transcendence" (ND, 400/392).

Just as it is impossible to bring the enigmaticalness of aesthetic experience under an intellectual construction, it is, according to Adorno, equally impossible to define and locate transcendence. In order to appreciate the significance of aesthetic experience for the subject's self-reflection (and its *Bildung*), it seems necessary to take a closer look at Adorno's idea of "transcendence." This leads us to the final chapter of *Negative Dialectics*: "Meditations on Metaphysics."

The problem of transcendence rests at the heart of Adorno's attempts to locate his philosophical reflections between Kant and G.W.F. Hegel. In the eighth metaphysical meditation, Adorno asserted that what remains venerable about Kant is that in his theory of the intelligible, he registered the constellation of the human and the transcendent as no other philosopher has (ND, 397/390). To be sure, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was motivated by the critical distinction of science from metaphysics. In this work, the possibilities and borders of human Reason are (finally) delineated. In his reading of Kant, Adorno focused on the antinomy of freedom (in the "Transcendental Dialectic") and, correspondingly, on Kant's willingness to assume the *realm of the intelligible*. From this standpoint, Adorno was able to express his agreement with Kant and simultaneously launch the criticism against him:

The pathos of Kantian intelligibility complements the difficulty of ascertaining it in any way, and if it were only in the medium of the self-sufficient thought designated by the word "intelligible." The word must not refer to anything real. But the motion of "Critique of Practical Reason" proceeds to a *positive mundus intelligibilis* that could not be envisioned in Kant's intention. What ought to be — emphatically distinguished from what is — can no sooner be established as a realm of its own and equipped with absolute authority than the procedure will, albeit involuntarily, make it assume the character of a second existence. (ND, 391/383, emphasis added)

Adorno saw the Kantian intelligible as an expression of transcendence because it is opposed to empirical reality — he emphasized Kant's statement that the intelligible will always remain a "bold pretension."²⁸ However, by bringing the intelligible into the economy of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, transcendence is,

28. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B479.

according to Adorno, abandoned — for the enigma of the intelligible (that is, that it does not denote anything *real*) is dissolved.²⁹ By defining an *intelligible world* that is parallel to the *empirical world*, the peculiar status of transcendence is overlooked: “The concept of the intelligible is not one of reality, nor is it a concept of something imaginary. It is aporetic, rather” (ND, 391/384). This is why Adorno came to the conclusion that Kant’s instigation of the intelligible already marked the decline or reification of transcendence. The idealistic tradition absorbs transcendence into consciousness; the romantics declare it to be something imaginary; and neo-Kantianism posits transcendence with reference to a science of culture. In contrast to these *affirmative* approaches, Adorno understood transcendence as a critical and even an aporetic category: “The concept of the intelligible realm would be the concept of something which is not, and yet it is not a pure nonbeing” (ND, 393/385). The problem is, on the one hand, how to think about transcendence without establishing a position from it or attributing a definite location to it, while, on the other hand, avoiding the view that transcendence is simply non-existent.³⁰ Adorno attempted to generate an understanding of transcendence as a realm of objectivity (for Kant, the intelligible) *that is neither cut off from subjectivity, nor simply given up to it*. Is it possible that this meaning of transcendence can be found in the realm of aesthetic experience?

I started my reflection with the insight that there is indeed a strong relation between aesthetic experience and transcendence. The enigmatic status of aesthetic experience — that is, the impossibility of fulfilling aesthetic experience — hints at an order in experience that cannot be incorporated by the experiencing subject. Transcendence imposes itself through my being unable to be merely the subject of experience.³¹ However, this does not imply a subjective abstinence of transcendence, or the installation of an independent *mundus intelligibilis*. Instead of suggesting a rigorous destruction of the ego, Adorno’s intricate statement reads: “The I is seized by the...consciousness: that it itself is not ultimate, but semblance. For the subject, this transforms art into what it is in-itself, the historical voice of repressed nature, ultimately critical of the principle of the I, that inner agent of repression” (AT, 320/364).³²

In statements such as these, it is interesting to consider Adorno’s choice of words, for instance, his use of passive and active verbal constructions. The first sentence of this quote posits an ego that is not the center of action, as his use of

29. Hutter, “Adornos Meditationen zur Metaphysik,” 247. See also Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* [Critique of Practical Reason] (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), introduction and book 1.

30. According to Adorno, the former tendency, to try to “nail down” or posit transcendence, is the mistake of theology. In so doing, transcendence as counterworld actually affirms and assures the existing society and its relations of domination (ND, 398/390).

31. Adorno’s references to shock and confusion within aesthetic experience may serve to illustrate this thought.

32. A more literal translation would be “The ego is captured by the...consciousness that it is itself not the last, that it is a semblance. This is what transforms art within the subject [*dem Subjekt*] to what art is in itself: the historical speaker of suppressed nature, critical against the principle of the ego, the inner agent of suppression.”

the passive "is seized" (the German reads "*ergriffen wird*") indicates. To be sure, this sense of "being seized" emerges from the aesthetic confrontation. Yet, Adorno's use of the term "itself" ("*selber*") also reveals that self-reflection is taking place: there exists a consciousness in which the ego *itself* is a semblance. This consciousness transforms art into the voice of repressed nature. However, this is not the whole story. The transformation, or "*Verwandlung*," has a reference point: the subject. The consciousness that the ego is a semblance itself transforms art *within the subject* into the voice of repressed nature. The German dative ("*dem Subjekt*") is difficult to translate into English — it usually expresses the recipient of an action. According to my interpretation, Adorno did not simply mean "for the subject" as an arbitrary perspective, that is, a perspective that could just as well be any other perspective. Rather, Adorno attempted — in a very dense fashion — to move the action between the subject and the object (art). This activity wanders, so to speak, from one to the other and back again. It is not possible to trace the movement back to just one of them. Equally, neither the subject nor the object disappears in the movement. The subject-object dialectic is a *negative dialectic* that cannot be solved.

In this way, Adorno's concept of transcendence allows for the supplementation of aesthetic experience. It not only remains faithful in view of a pure objective materiality; in the moment that consciousness transforms art into the fullest sense of objectivity ("what art is in itself"), it becomes the voice of repressed nature within the subject. The subject is confronted with the nature within itself and is unable to identify it subjectively. Thus, Adorno was suggesting that, in a movement of transcendence, there is a self-reflection of nature within the subject. This self-reflection breaks through the economy of self-preservation and immanence, that is, the semblance of the ego. In aesthetic experience, self-reflection reaches its fulfillment by not being a reflection of the subject, but rather a reflection of art within the subject. This is the place of transcendence, the order of the intelligible within the subject.

REVISITED: THE FATE OF *BILDUNG*

Having explicated Adorno's notion of aesthetic experience with respect to his reflections on transcendence in *Negative Dialectics*, I would like to focus again on the question of *Bildung*, specifically exploring what are the consequences of the "double character" of *Bildung* from the perspective of philosophy of education.

One could assume that the movement of transcendence outlined in the preceding section precisely corresponds to what Adorno had in mind when he defined *Bildung* as the living relation of subjects to culture and to themselves (*TH*, 103). The development of the subject-object dialectic within aesthetic experience seems to describe a genuine *Bildung*, in contrast to *Halbbildung* where mind and culture deteriorate into exchangeable goods ("*Waren*"). This would certainly be in line with the view of thinkers like Humboldt, who did not regard the subject as sufficient in and of itself but as propelled into a world that always offers other perspectives. Consequently, every engagement is already directed toward its own overcoming. *Bildung* is an unceasing and open-ended process of determining who we are — a *living* process because it is based on an anthropology of indeterminacy.

My analysis of Adorno's conception of aesthetic experience and its relevance for the subject has revealed a *border* within our experience, a rift that cannot be closed. This rift or transcendence infuses the idea of *Bildung* so that it can no longer be regarded as a promise of change, an endless future of self-determination. Classical *Bildung* suggests that I can enrich myself through my engagement with the world. I have to put myself at risk in the world in order to return to myself as an individual (in a fuller sense than before). The transcendence that Adorno's metaphysical meditations suggest transforms *Bildung* into a *history of self-withdrawal*. Whereas in the classical interpretation *Bildung* resides in the permanent change of its horizon of experience, and thus means an endless extension of the self, in Adorno's view the horizon of aesthetic and metaphysical experience breaks up. Infected by the negativity of aesthetic experience, the experiencing subject is confronted with the impossibility of relating to its *own experience*. It is confronted with a difference in itself, that is, the *nonidentical* that it cannot surmount. As observed previously, transcendence cannot be incorporated by the subject.

Considering the pedagogical consequences of such a point of view is complex. Clearly, it is not sufficient to rely on pedagogical settings that focus on confrontations with art or literary works, even if such a focus is accompanied by critical commentary. Such an approach would still belong to a discourse in which the concept of *Bildung* forms a *category of appropriation*, a description for a future enrichment of personality. However, the realm of pedagogy and of education is directed toward the *future*, and this gives a special salience to the question of whether the concept of *Bildung* presented here is still a *pedagogical concept*. Does one, in other words, leave the pedagogical realm when entering the aesthetic realm? In the following, I will argue that we can indeed still speak of *Bildung* as a pedagogical term.

First, the statement that pedagogy is future-oriented does not rule out the concept of *Bildung* presented here as a pedagogical category or mean that it can make no reference to the future. The fact that *Bildung* can no longer be conceived as a category of appropriation does not make it a category of expropriation either. If it were otherwise, it would turn the history of self-withdrawal into a destiny of self-withdrawal. But in Adorno's own words, transcendence is not purely nonexistent: in aesthetic experience, the subject does not *dissolve*. Therefore, I would like to counter the statement that *Bildung* loses its pedagogical structure with the statement that it is precisely *by becoming obsolete* that *Bildung* takes on pedagogical significance.³³ We can understand this significance both from the perspective of the individual (that is, the subject of *Bildung*) and from the perspective of possible knowledge (that is, the objects of *Bildung*).

With respect to the individual, Adorno's work allows for a criticism of transparency and rationality, on the one hand, and of determinism and fatalism, on the other. The place of *Bildung* presents itself as a place where the tension between

33. I hold this view in contrast to Jan Masschelein and Norbert Ricken who have recently posed the question as to whether the concept of *Bildung* is still needed today. See Masschelein and Ricken, "Do We Still Need the Concept of *Bildung*?" *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 2 (2003): 139–154.

self-determination and social determination is not decided in favor of one over the other, but rather remains unsettled due to the *nonidentical*. Adorno held the non-identical to be preponderant with respect to the individual's identity. What or who we are is never fully identifiable — we can neither give a comprehensive account of who we are and how we approach the world, nor can we reduce someone else to his or her social identity (as wife, construction worker, and so on).³⁴ *Bildung* in the context of transcendence supplies us with the means of uncovering the dominant structures of individuality that are constantly demanded from us. It can illuminate how social imperatives are at work in our representations of education and of ourselves. Adorno's provocative statement that we cannot fully determine our existing relations to the world and to ourselves, and that we cannot be determined by them, makes critical reflection on our present situation possible.

As an example, I would like to analyze a statement that one of my students uttered recently. In reference to her academic progress, she remarked, "It is just necessary that I come to grips with all these different educational concepts." Her statement reflects the currently dominant concept of learning, where the learner is conceived of as an active force, a rational being who needs to be able to structure and arrange the learning process. On the basis of the learner's activity and autonomy, learning is understood as a self-sufficient process that is directed toward extension, correction, and overcoming — predominantly in the realm of knowledge and understanding. These ideas have become more entrenched and prominent in the context of constructivist theories of learning. The logical complement of this concept of learning is the idea of *evaluation*, that is, the constant need to oversee the progress and development of the learning individual. In reference to this context, Jan Masschelein has applied the term of the "learning society."³⁵ It is probably not an exaggeration to say that this widely proclaimed idea of learning is in many ways a discourse of mastery, a discourse of empowerment and independence. How do we conceive of ourselves in the context of these learning ideals? What kinds of practices toward ourselves derive from them?

Critical theory assumes that our thoughts and our views of ourselves are not independent of the relations and conditions in society. Adorno's concept of the nonidentical allows for critical reflection on these contexts, and he showed that an aesthetic or metaphysical approach is most effective in allowing us to glimpse the nonidentical. This is exactly what the confrontation with the artwork described previously reveals. The ego is not able to establish itself as the meaning-

34. Judith Butler explored this notion in her Adorno lectures, delivered in Frankfurt, Germany, in 2002. Her intent was to show that the inability to give an all-encompassing account of oneself is ethically significant and how this inability grants the possibility of responsibility. Judith Butler, *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt* [Criticism of Ethical Violence] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).

35. Jan Masschelein's analyses are very much inspired by a Foucauldian point of view. On his view, the other theoretical reference point for calling into question the present developments is the political thinking of Hannah Arendt. See, for example, Jan Masschelein, "The Discourse of the Learning Society and the Loss of Childhood," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35, no. 1 (2001): 1–20; and Jan Masschelein, "How to Conceive of Critical Educational Theory Today?" *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 3 (2004): 351–367.

constituting entity, as the subject who fully grasps the object. Rather, the ego is confronted with the dialectic of truth and semblance in its encounter with the artwork. We are confronted with the borders of rationality, the borders of our ideas of self and world. To be sure, these borders cannot simply be overcome, which would imply a powerful and autonomous subject; rather, the benefit of such encounters lies in the critical insight that these borders exist. Therein rests the pedagogical value of a *different theory of Bildung*. The precarious state of transcendence amounts to the possibility of partially revealing the "borders" of ourselves and our views on the world. These borders or inabilities, however, inevitably shift our own perspective of ourselves. The history of self-withdrawal will always mark a hiatus in our relation to the future, a future that is not at our disposal. *Bildung* would then be *the always different and unsuccessful revealing of the history of self-withdrawal* and thus would form a critical and aporetic category in our relation to ourselves and to the world. This idea is similar to Roland Reichenbach's characterization of a "subversive" *Bildung*. Reichenbach attempts to construe a *Bildung* "in terms of non-sovereignty," emphasizing that we are entangled in our engagement with the world and that this eventually makes us "non-sovereign" actors.³⁶

Before I focus more thoroughly on the objects of *Bildung*, I would like to examine intercultural encounters as another example illustrating the constitutive function served by the borders of our experiences in formulating a "different" concept of *Bildung*. Intercultural *Bildung* or learning is predominantly understood as an extension or enrichment of ourselves after engaging with a culturally different perspective, which implies an appropriation of the alien's views. In contrast to such a process of incorporation, mastery, and accomplishment, one could instead focus on our *inability* to experience and understand the alien. Since our perspective remains inextricably bound to the structures and categories of our own cultural and social background, we will never be able to grasp the alien as alien.³⁷ By resisting the impulse to level out cultural difference, however, we might be able to bring into view the borders of our experience, for example, the imaginary constructions we have of the other and the ethnocentric constructions that are at work. We can, in other words, relate to the inevitable entanglement of self and alien.

This illustration is also helpful for reflecting on the objects of *Bildung* and the construction of knowledge in processes of *Bildung*. It reveals that aesthetic experience is not bound to an artwork as an object of a specific quality. In fact, it would be inappropriate to base the possibilities of aesthetic experience on a rigid distinction between art and nonart, for that would imply that we could actually identify what qualifies an artwork as such. As previously argued, it is precisely the

36. Roland Reichenbach, "Beyond Sovereignty: The Twofold Subversion of *Bildung*," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 2 (2003): 206.

37. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Der Stachel des Fremden* [The Sting of the Alien] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

enigmaticalness — the impossibility of identification — that characterizes the artwork. Menke has shown how Adorno's concept of aesthetic experience calls for a broadening of the aesthetic realm: "For an object to gain an aesthetic status, it does not require a definite process of production nor can the aesthetic status be enforced by such a process; in contrast, the aesthetic status and the aesthetic process of experience mutually imply each other."³⁸ Aesthetic experience is not bound to a specific aesthetic production process but derives from a specific relation we have to culture and, more generally, to the world. This is important with respect to the possible "objects of *Bildung*." In contrast to currently dominant learning conceptions that hold that objects are clarified with respect to their usefulness and actuality for our understanding of the world, Adorno's concept of the nonidentical remains faithful to the difference between concept and thing. In every attempt at conceptual identification, there are material aspects, singular elements that are significant and that cannot be dissolved into the generality of concepts.³⁹ *Bildung*, then, has something to do with our insight into the *limits* of grasping or identifying the world and others.⁴⁰ We are confronted with questions of validity regarding our knowledge and with the problem of representing our knowledge.

This train of thought clearly has consequences for the area of education. In the context of the contemporary understanding of *Bildung* or education at German (and other) universities, as discussed at the outset of this essay, it provokes critical reflection on the notion of instrumental rationality regarding our acquisition of knowledge. Adorno's work on transcendence grants insight into the status of knowledge as socially mediated — in Foucauldian terms, the connection of knowledge and power. To be sure, the nonidentical cannot be fully grasped by this critical reflection; it remains ungraspable after every attempt of identification. Knowledge remains bound to a representational process, and so it is inescapably part of the conceptual and social order. Critical theory remains conscious of this inability to find a location that is free from social mediation. However, the aporetic concept of the nonidentical still keeps the "future" open. It might be the case that the analysis of the borders of experience allows for a shift in perspective regarding ourselves and the world. In such a context, *Bildung* is not an identifiable set of knowledge or the acquisition of particular competences. It is, rather, an uncontrollable event that enables us to investigate views of ourselves and the world that are imposed on us and that could be otherwise. By revealing these limits, *Bildung* keeps open the possibility that "what is, is not everything there is" (ND, 398/391).⁴¹

38. Menke, *Die Souveränität der Kunst*, 265.

39. The German term for concept is "*Begriff*," which is the correlating noun for "*begreifen*," meaning "to understand" or "to grasp."

40. From here, it is only a short step to the *ethical dimensions* of *Bildung*, dimensions that cannot be explicated further in this essay.

41. It is here that one understands why, for Adorno, the concept of "definite negation" is so important. According to him, resistance is only possible against concrete constellations where we start to form *counteridentifications*. These counteridentifications offer us a different view, but they are still incapable of doing justice to the nonidentical.

Coming to an understanding of transcendence and the realm of the nonidentical remains the central difficulty and challenge for a different philosophy of *Bildung*. It seems inevitable that *Bildung* must remain a negative and aporetic project. One could say that the existence of *Bildung* is as precarious as that of "transcendence." The concept of *Bildung* resists identification and position; it is a metaphysical or aporetic category that we can use as a strategy to gain insight into the connection of education and power, a connection that is dominant in our culture. However, the semantics of *Bildung* become more difficult to handle in pedagogical settings. How can we, from our current position, think of learning situations and learning cultures that would foster the suggested aesthetic experiences? How would such a view fit at all within our educational system, which is so strongly oriented toward accomplishment and qualification? I believe that questions of this sort arise directly from the philosophical reflections presented here. They not only present a challenge to how we approach our pedagogical activities but also to how we think about the *concepts* of education, *Bildung*, and learning.

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