

Unity in Suffering

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“One should be united with the suffering of people: the smallest step toward their pleasures is one toward the hardening of suffering” (§ 5). Thus concludes the fifth aphorism of *Minima Moralia*, Part One (1944), where Theodor W. Adorno reflects on the role of the intellectual in a world of ongoing horror. Prefiguring Leo Löwenthal’s identification of *Nichtmitmachen* (nonparticipation) as an essential feature of critical theory, Adorno characterizes *Mitmachen* (participation) as a screen for the tacit acceptance of inhumanity: the pleasantries of everyday sociability perpetuate silence on injustice, and affability masks brute domination under the guise of egalitarianism. In place of a disingenuous self-alignment with the oppressed and their sources of pleasure, steadfast isolation serves as the intellectual’s sole form of solidarity, with suffering as the true basis of unity.

Adorno’s statement marks a rebuke to Hegelian philosophy, which had rationalized individual suffering as part of a grand metaphysical plan of history. This theodicean, idealist philosophy had ascribed a higher truth or meaning to material suffering, thereby affirming the existing social order and justifying abuses of power in the name of divine right or progress. Joining a lineage of Hegel’s critics (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche), Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School sought to lend voice to the senseless, irreparable suffering of history. In *Negative Dialectics* (1966), Adorno wrote that if Hegel “transfigured the totality of historic suffering into the positivity of the self-realizing absolute,” the world spirit that moves forth—like the ruinous storm that drives Walter Benjamin’s angel of history into the future—“would teleologically be the absolute of suffering” (2004, 320; see also Noble–Olson 2020).

Yet suffering was not only a historical-philosophical issue for Adorno, but also an aesthetic one. While Adorno was critical of a culture industry that offered a sinister palliative for mass suffering, re-consigning consumers to misery through false promises of pleasure and escape, he also maintained that art was unique in its ability to give expression to suffering without betrayal. Famously asserting and later nuancing the claim that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1983, 34; see also 2004, 362), Adorno postulated that the abundance of suffering paradoxically both prohibits and demands the existence of art, which necessitates an aesthetic autonomy from the real suffering that it nonetheless serves to remember. At the close of his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), he asked “what would art be, as the writing of history, if it shook off the memory of accumulated suffering” (2002, 261).

When revisiting *Minima Moralia* today, Adorno’s resolute isolation from the pleasures of the oppressed may sound ascetic and elitist, and his call for suffering as a point of unity rings hollow in a geopolitical landscape where even the most coercive entities mobilize the rhetoric of victimhood (see Geuss 2005, 17–18). Yet, however undifferentiated and undialectical Adorno’s account of suffering, it remains a vital antidote to the often-cynical, reified politics of *Leiden* (suffering, pain) and *Mitleid* (compassion, sympathy) in our own time. Adorno’s work helps to establish suffering as a key concern of philosophy, opening a series of questions that have lost none of their actuality: Which art gives unbetraysed expression to suffering? How can we avoid forms

of complicity, desensitization, and false comfort? And what is the role of the intellectual in a world of violent domination and unremitting horror?

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Biography

Nicholas Baer is Assistant Professor of Film Studies in the Department of Arts, Culture, and Media at the University of Groningen and Junior Fellow at the Alfried Krupp Institute for Advanced Study in Greifswald. He has co-edited two volumes of film and media theory: the award-winning *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933* (University of California Press, 2016) and *Unwatchable* (Rutgers University Press, 2019). Baer has published on film and media, critical theory, and intellectual history in journals such as *Film Quarterly*, *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Public Seminar*, and *October*, and his writings have been translated into six languages. At present, he is completing a monograph, *Historical Turns: Weimar Cinema and the Crisis of Historicism*, which examines films of the Weimar Republic in relation to the "crisis of historicism" that was widely diagnosed by German intellectuals in the interwar period.