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## **Adorno on jazz and society**

**Abstract** In this essay I offer a philosophical-political reconstruction of Theodor Adorno's engagements with jazz. Rather than consider whether or not Adorno got jazz 'right', I give an account of how and why Adorno develops the criticisms that he does. I argue that in Adorno's analysis of jazz three interpenetrating claims emerge: (1) a rejection of jazz's sense of improvisation and spontaneity; (2) a demonstration of jazz's entwinement with the modern technologization of everyday life; and (3) a critique of jazz's pseudo-individualizing tendencies. I conclude with a brief consideration of the place and critical possibilities of music in Adorno's critique of modernity.

**Key words** capitalism · democracy · modernity · pseudo-individualization · rescuing critique

Jazz ist die falsche Liquidation der Kunst: anstatt dass die Utopie sich verkwirklichte, verschwindet sie aus dem Bilde. [Jazz is the false liquidation of art – instead of utopia becoming reality it disappears from the picture.] (Theodor Adorno)<sup>1</sup>

There are millions of people who don't like or do not yet understand American jazz music; in fact, I know they seem to hate it. They do not seem to see the difference between trashy, popular jazz and fine swing music. . . . I do know that a musician who plays in 'sweet' orchestras must be like a writer who writes stories for some popular magazines. He has to follow along the same kind of line all the time, and to write what he thinks the readers want just because they're used to it. That keeps him writing the same kind of thing year after year. But a real swing musician never does that. He just plays, feels as he goes, and swings as he feels. (Louis Armstrong)<sup>2</sup>

When jazz emerged from those dark, smoke-filled and overcrowded rooms of New Orleans in the early part of this century as a new and distinct form of musical expression, it carried with it a host of peculiarly modern, even Utopian, expectations about individual freedom and expression amid collectivity. Ornette Coleman, for example, said that in jazz 'the essential quality is the right to be an individual'.<sup>3</sup> And Armstrong himself often remarked that jazz is what you are. This privileging of free individual expression was coupled with a deep commitment to community and collectivity. One's 'right to be an individual' jazz subject was always bound up with one's loose involvement with a collective. Even today – despite the soloist strain in contemporary jazz – jazz musicians do violence to their music and their own individual expression when they ignore what the other members of the band are doing. The right to individual expression in jazz was simultaneously the *obligation* to adapt oneself to the whole. In the seemingly democratic light of this coupling of individual expression with respect for and recognition of social collectivity, jazz was heralded as the very actualization of the pluralizing and democratizing tendencies for which American society had become known; jazz, we might say, was America's theme song.

Thus it is in some ways surprising and telling that the German philosopher, sociologist, musicologist and composer Theodor Adorno's encounter with jazz strikes such a venomous chord. Surprising, because of Adorno's eagerness to criticize jazz, despite its apparent democratizing features in contradistinction to, say, the strictures and authoritarianism of symphonic and orchestral performances (a kind of classical structure within which Adorno composed his own work). Telling, because, in two important ways, it demonstrates both the reductive aspects in Adorno's account of jazz and the social aporias *in* jazz music. On the one hand, Adorno's critique of jazz reveals his nationalist and elitist strains and tendency to level all forms of popular culture. Such tendencies obscure the fact that jazz may never – even in Adorno's day – have attained the hegemonic status it would require to gain full admittance to the culture industry. Jazz cannot be lumped together, undifferentiated, with 'pop' music (indeed, such differentiations persist, even today) or other popular cultural forms. And even within the music that is labeled jazz, there are considerable differences – differences between, as Louis Armstrong suggests in the above epigraph, 'sweet orchestras', which must meet the demands of popular culture in much the same way that pop fiction writers do, and a 'real swing musician'.<sup>4</sup> The latter lays claim to an authenticity, improvisation and individuality that the former may not. Thus Adorno's undifferentiated account of jazz misses what

Armstrong (and other jazz musicians) already knew, namely, that some forms of jazz are *not reducible* to the leveling category of '*leichte Musik*', that much of what is considered jazz never emerged as a 'mass phenomenon', and that such forms of jazz were always, and continue to be, the province of the few.

On the other hand, Adorno's critique of jazz retains a certain validity precisely because 'real' jazz is about *just playing*, swinging as one feels, and feeling as one swings. 'Real' jazz is about affirming one's right to autonomous, individual expression – to affirm who one is – within a social collectivity; 'real' jazz affirms democratization in its actuality. But in jazz's affirmative character, Adorno senses an over-reliance on and elevation of technique, superficial show and individual style that is supposed to stand as an antidote to a congealed modernity wherein such a free relation between autonomous individuals and social compositions of capitalism is threatened. Adorno refuses to concede that the modern imperatives of routinized work and utility that threaten individuals can be overcome with mere innovation and the introduction of syncopated technical maneuvers. The superficiality of syncopated 'style' cannot express what is threatened, even denied, in modernity, namely, *individual suffering* (understood here, as we shall see below, in a very corporeal, material sense, as the bodily integrity of a subject). To paraphrase a line from Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, jazz's articulation of the 'good life' is impossible in the midst of the wrong life.<sup>5</sup> In Adorno's reading of jazz, '*die zeitlose Mode*' is inevitably caught in its own aporetic web. What jazz does is to express a kind of false happiness or positive Utopia – a claim about the possibilities for individual autonomy and happiness in the form of the 'good life' of the democratic collective. Instead of registering the damaged life and depth of individual suffering, jazz's superficial privileging of style *produces* 'pseudo-individuals' who are deprived of such a negative moment by virtue of the logic of jazz's technical syncopation: the 'real' jazz subject, according to Adorno, is the one who 'navigates the pattern, cigarette in mouth, as nonchalantly as if he had invented himself'.<sup>6</sup> But such a self-invention is pseudo, at best, for in jazz improvisation itself is planned. The infinitely reusable syncopated techniques by which one 'navigates the pattern' of jazz punch out pseudo-individuals, in much the same way that the fashion industry does, only to affirm as 'autonomous' and 'new' and 'authentic' that pseudo-individuation. Like the fashion industry, jazz promises 'newness' and uniqueness, yet undermines the kind of depth genuine individuation requires. Hence what bothers Adorno about jazz is not simply the musicians or the music as such (in its 'good' or 'bad', easy listening forms), but the fact that jazz does not express a Utopian

possibility negatively in the form of registering suffering in a reified world – jazz forgets this critical possibility; it dulls sharp and deep social antinomies and antagonisms, smoothes and flattens them out falsely.

It is important to note here, at the outset, that Adorno's interest in jazz does not lie in the phenomenon as such – he does not proffer any sort of phenomenological account of jazz as art, and he resists defining jazz; indeed, Adorno claims that the critical question jazz poses 'is not what it "is". . . . Rather, it is what it is used for.'<sup>7</sup> Further, Adorno's glance at jazz peers through Eurocentric glasses, and tends to mythologize jazz, as if its roots suggest the possibility of an originary and 'pure' improvisation and spontaneity.<sup>8</sup> Finally, it should not be forgotten that Adorno's critique remains peculiarly modern in its dependence upon such categories as truth and untruth, individual and social totality, 'high' and 'low' culture, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

Hence the question to be pursued here cannot be merely whether Adorno gets jazz 'right', that is, whether Adorno understands jazz correctly; he is, as we shall see, both right *and* wrong about jazz and its entwinement with the culture industry of capitalist modernity. So what is needed is to give an account of how and why Adorno can be both right and wrong about the place and critical possibilities of music in modernity. For when Adorno writes about jazz he always has in his sights a much larger target. Indeed, Adorno's social interpretation of artworks seeks to discern the ways in which a specific social phenomenon – e.g. jazz – is bound up with the social structure and ensemble of relations in which it emerges and from which it never completely disentangles itself. Artworks for Adorno are shot through with social antagonisms; they do not reflect such antagonisms so much as they embody and actualize them.<sup>10</sup> Thus, when Adorno poses the question of 'art', it must be understood, to paraphrase a line from his essay 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', as a consideration of the question: How is a *society* – in all its tensions and antagonisms – manifest *in* an artwork?<sup>11</sup> And, how does the enigmatic character of artworks resist such a manifestation? Here social criticism and aesthetic inquiry coalesce. What Adorno on jazz amounts to, then, is an immanent social critique (and not simply an elaborate aesthetic and Eurocentric quibble about the 'inferiority') of the social phenomenon of jazz. Such a critique emerges, I shall argue, in a constellation of three intertwined claims: (1) a criticism of jazz's claim to improvisation and fashionability – what Adorno calls jazz's 'manneristic interpretation' ('*Manier der Interpretation*') (122, 125); (2) a demonstration of jazz's entwinement with the technologization of everyday life – what Adorno calls jazz's collaboration

in the 'technological veil' ('*technologischen Schleier*') of the modern world (125, 128); and (3) an attempt to link the affirmative gesture of the 'jazz subject' to the dissolution of the individual and the possibility of individual expression of suffering in modern capitalist society – what Adorno calls the emergence of 'pseudo-individualization' ('*Pseudoindividualisierung*') (126, 129).

## I Improvisation and fashion

According to Adorno, jazz is ineluctably bound up with a certain modern sense of 'fashion' ('*Mode*') and timelessness or seasonlessness ('*Zeitlose*'). Like fashionable clothing, jazz manifests a powerful contradiction. On the one hand, jazz has 'remained as ephemeral as seasonal styles . . . As with fashion what is important is show, not the thing itself' (122, 125). Jazz's improvisational, ever-changing seasonal styles – its tendencies to convey an impression of sheer spontaneity – promise an ever new fashion 'show'.<sup>12</sup> In such a 'manneristic' show, jazz devotees believe they have located an emancipatory *Weltanschauung*. Adorno says that these people, especially in Europe, regard jazz as 'a break-through of original, untrammled [*ungebandigter*] nature, as a triumph over the musty museum culture' (122, 124). Thus the emergence of the 'new' fashion of jazz represents disruption and the overcoming of the banal, routinized world of established ('museum') culture. The improvisational world-view of jazz frees 'nature' of its collection and commodification in musty museums. In jazz's improvisational 'manneristic interpretation', nature has not been tamed, fully temporalized, but persists, 'untrammled' and '*Zeitlose*'.

On the other hand, Adorno sees the contradiction in a manneristic interpretation grounded in an improvisation that 'enthrones fashion'. For in jazz

. . . what appears as spontaneity is in fact carefully planned out in advance with machine-like precision. . . . Even the improvisations conform largely to norms and recur constantly. The range of the permissible in jazz is as narrowly circumscribed as in any particular cut of clothes. (123, 125)

What Adorno means here is that jazz's involvement with the always 'new' is in fact an involvement with the always the same. Jazz's improvisations are 'mere frills [*Flausen*]' (123, 125) which are mapped out '*in advance* with machine-like precision'. Like a particularly fashionable line of clothing, jazz cannot step outside of that stamped-out

'frilly' pattern deemed 'fashionable' (the phrase 'slave to fashion' must be understood in all its paradoxical richness). The free, 'timeless' and 'untrammelled nature' that jazz supposedly embodies is false insofar as it lays claim to a newness that is always already an authoritative sameness:

... jazz represents, somewhat like the evening clothes of the gentlemen, the inexorability of the social authority which it itself is, but which is transfigured in jazz into something original and primitive, into 'nature'. ('On Jazz', p. 49)

In other words, jazz, despite its apparent transfiguration of improvisational fashion into untrammelled nature, succumbs to the same kind of inexorable temporalization that the modern 'evening clothes of the gentlemen' do. Jazz does not represent a radically new, original, gesture beyond temporalized nature, but *another form of it* under the guise of fashion:

... the perennial sameness of jazz consists not in a basic organization of the material within which the imagination can roam freely and without inhibition, as within an articulate language, but rather in the utilization of certain well-defined tricks, formulas and clichés to the exclusion of everything else. It is as though one were to cling convulsively to the 'latest thing' and deny the image of a particular year by refusing to tear off the page of the calendar. Fashion enthrones itself as something lasting and thus sacrifices the dignity of fashion, its transience. (123, 126)

Thus while jazz is ostensibly about 'untrammelled' nature, uninhibited innovation and timelessness, *perennial sameness* – in the form of an 'improvisation' that is dependent upon a limited number of pre-established formulae, combinations and so on – becomes the hallmark of jazz. Jazz fails to realize that it cannot last, untrammelled; it is always in and *out of fashion*, ineluctably part of a frozen and 'musty museum culture'. Indeed, Adorno suggests that while jazz may harbor some element of excess, in America it 'is taken for granted as an institution, house-broken and scrubbed behind the ears [*gut gewaschen*]' (128, 132). The unruly elements in jazz are from jazz's beginnings integrated into a strict scheme (122, 124).<sup>13</sup> Or again, Adorno says:

Contrariness has changed into second-degree 'smoothness' and the jazz-form of reaction has become so entrenched that an entire generation of youth hears only syncopations without being aware of the original conflict between it and the basic metre. (121, 123–4)

Inevitably, jazz's entwinement with fashion precludes any deviation from the beaten path and requires a certain measure of housebreaking and the smoothing out of conflict and contrariness: jazz must be always new and always the same (126, 129). Hence 'timeless' and 'untrammelled nature' becomes temporalized, standardized and institutionalized under the contradictory imperatives of a fashion that wants to be both timely and infinitely new.

To be sure, Adorno succeeds in linking jazz to fashion because he sees jazz from its inception, perhaps questionably, as a 'mass phenomenon' (*Massenphanomen*). Indeed, Adorno says that 'since 1914 when the contagious enthusiasm for it broke out in America, jazz has maintained its place as a mass phenomenon' (121, 123). Yet in Adorno's thinking jazz is coupled with fashion for another, perhaps more fundamental, reason, namely, its privileging of and reliance upon style or technique. For Adorno, jazz's technical maneuver of syncopation is not the sign of vitality and timelessness but rather the mark of jazz's collaborative engagement with an increasingly technologized world. It is to such an account and coupling of jazz's technique and modern technological and productive imperatives that we must now turn.

## II Syncopated technique and the technological veil

The primary technical maneuver peculiar to jazz is syncopation. Syncopation was a *requirement* for early jazz arrangements – it distinguished jazz music from other, 'straight' forms of music, and persists as a chief feature of today's jazz. Syncopation is the common thread that runs throughout all forms of jazz, and its import should not be underestimated, for, as Peter Gammond points out in a standard work on jazz music:

... [j]azz is perpetually syncopated, the melodic line always finding points of emphasis away from the main beats of the bar. In ragtime, syncopation was of a mathematical kind that could be notated; in blues-based jazz it was more instinctive and occurred in a way that could never be accurately put down on paper. The early definitions of jazz as a syncopated music are, therefore, still valid.<sup>14</sup>

In syncopation, individual players are allowed the 'freedom' to move away from the governing beats of the bar. Such a movement, in Armstrong's idiomatic characterization, is a 'swinging around': 'the boys are "swinging around", and away from, the regular beat and melody



you are used to, following the scoring very loosely and improvising as they go, by ear and free musical feeling' (31).

Given the privileged role assigned to syncopation, both by jazz musicologists and, within jazz, by musicians such as Armstrong, it is not surprising that Adorno directs much of his critical energies towards this technical maneuver – in both its 'ragtime' (mathematical) and 'blues' (spontaneous) forms. According to Adorno, both forms of perpetual syncopation are not simply aesthetic techniques or innovative styles that express 'free musical feeling', but rather the embodiment of an emergent network of arbitrary social controls. Syncopation is not about 'swinging around' freely and improvising as one goes, but of recapitulating the congealed nature of an unfree and planned society.

To demonstrate how the technique of syncopation may be understood in this way, Adorno develops a connection between jazz's use of syncopation and modern production imperatives of routinized labor schedules and repetitive, assembly-line tasks. Adorno sees jazz syncopation as a kind of gimmick or trick, whereby the purposive-rational orientation of modern production is dressed up in the guise of purposelessness, of free, non-utilitarian improvisation. Such a guise of 'vitality' is actually designed, according to Adorno, to improve jazz's marketability and cloak or veil its commodity character. This technical veil of 'vitality', says Adorno,

... is difficult to take seriously in the face of an assembly-line procedure that is standardized down to its most minute deviations. The jazz ideologists, especially in Europe, mistakenly regard the sum of psycho-technically calculated and tested effects as the expression of an emotional state. ... What enthusiastically stunted innocence sees as the jungle is actually factory-made through and through, even when, on special occasions, spontaneity is publicized as a featured attraction. (123–4, 126)

So the improvisational, vital and free emotional deviation that the technique of syncopation ostensibly offers is in fact a manifestation of a *disenchanted* world under the imperatives of production: the enchanted world of the 'vital' jungle, of unruly, untrammelled nature, turns into a factory-made commodity, '*through and through*'. Adorno will even go so far as to say that jazz is a commodity in 'the strict sense' insofar as its 'suitability for use permeates its production in terms none other than its marketability' ('On Jazz', p. 48). First nature becomes a veiled, second (constructed) nature, and syncopation cannot re-enchant a disenchanted capitalist modernity; instead, it partakes in the rigidified, commodity character of modern capitalist culture.

But the problematic nature of the technique of syncopation runs deeper than its commodity character. Adorno thinks that jazz's 'arbitrary' nature is itself an expression of a 'rationalized', even totalitarian, society.<sup>15</sup> And in this 'planned purposelessness' one sees the arbitrary nature of modern social controls:

The fact that of all the tricks available, syncopation should have been the one to achieve musical dictatorship over the masses recalls the usurpation that characterizes techniques, however rational they may be in themselves, when they are placed at the service of irrational totalitarian control. Mechanisms which in reality are part and parcel of the entire present-day ideology, of the culture industry, are left easily visible in jazz. (125–6, 129)

In other words, jazz's syncopated technique shares the same features of technological mechanisms of mass control that resist opposition and change that are the hallmarks of irrational dictatorships: syncopation amounts to nothing more than the musical version of political totalitarianism – control. So-called 'rational' techniques – e.g. ragtime syncopation – become forms of irrational control, and unruly, 'irrational' techniques – e.g., 'blues-based jazz' – are themselves planned arbitrariness that *perpetuate* modern forms of social control. Indeed, for Adorno:

... syncopation is not ... the expression of an accumulated subjective force which directed itself against authority until it had produced a new law out of itself. It is purposeless; it leads nowhere and is arbitrarily withdrawn by an undialectical, mathematical incorporation into the beat. ('On Jazz', p. 66)

Adorno's point here amounts to this: syncopation is an undialectical technique that wants to step away from modern forms of authority – markets, capital, and so on – but doesn't step far enough: its purposelessness leads nowhere; it 'swings around' only and always to return, tamed, to the repetitive beat that is in time with the grand march of totalized societies. Jazz's reliance on syncopated technique ends in a kind of performative contradiction: syncopation does not produce a new law or untrammled nature out of itself but rather collaborates with the arbitrary nature of the society in which it is entangled. In short, Adorno claims that technically syncopated jazz and technologically syncopated life grow indistinguishable under the imperatives of capitalist society – in the defining technique of jazz, the perennial fashion becomes the likeness of a society in which chance itself is planned.<sup>16</sup>

### III Individualization and suffering

Though Adorno's difficult conceptualization of the individual cannot be fully explicated here, its chief features and pertinence to his critique of jazz's 'pseudo-individualizing' tendencies must not be overlooked. Adorno thinks that the very question of individual, in a modernity that has both invented the individual and liquidated her, must be entirely recast.<sup>17</sup> In perhaps the most reductive of formulations, it could be said that in Adorno's view any 'theory' of the individual must be a critique of a world in which 'individuality' is increasingly threatened and seemingly *impossible*. Adorno's sense of the individual is not cognitive but *corporeal* – something like bodily integrity is meant here by the term 'individual'. Such an integrity is badly damaged in and by rationalizing and modernizing processes (two processes which belong to capitalist modes of production – the modern individual finds herself weak and suffering under the modern imperatives of purposive-rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and capitalist production.

In contradistinction, jazz claims to have emancipated itself from such imperatives. Jazz is ostensibly an assertion of individuality over and against a rigidified world and 'musty museum culture': via syncopated technique, the 'timeless' fashion, after all, wants to say I am distinct; I am different; I am an individual, capable of both individual feeling and expression beyond purposive-rationality, and yet I remain within a loosely organized social collective. The implicit political function of jazz says, Democracy works, capitalism has not undermined it but somehow enabled it. Jazz putatively preserves and actualizes the possibility of individual autonomy and happiness in modern capitalism. Yet for Adorno, jazz punches out 'pseudo-individuals' only to 'sacrifice' them to a constricting collective. That is, 'jazz sacrifices an individuality which it does not really possess' ('On Jazz', p. 66) to a 'free' collective that cannot be escaped. And in such sacrifice jazz fails to register the corporeality of suffering, delivering instead a Utopianized sense of collective freedom and happiness for autonomous individuals who persist only as pseudo-individuals.

Adorno develops this line of critique by linking it to the other two criticisms – (1) fashion and (2) syncopated technique – elaborated above. First, Adorno says the fashionability of jazz that lends it its spontaneous quality and apparent individual element

... has become rigid, formulaic, spent – the individual elements are now in just the same position as social convention was previously. ...

The individually modern element in jazz is as illusory as the collective archaic element. ('On Jazz', p. 60)

That is, when individualization aligns itself too closely with fashion – the perennially new, the modern – it inevitably becomes the locus of a transposed set of social conventions; it becomes rigidified, codified, determinative, a kind of 'pseudo-individualization' that can only affirm, convulsively, the very constraining social order it wants to reject. Fashion, then, is not the mother of individualization, but rather its *illusion*.

Secondly, Adorno says that blues-based jazz's syncopated, 'archaic element' – its unruly stance as 'untrammelled nature' – is in fact a commodity in which the pseudo-individual is inextricably snared. Adorno argues that:

He who wants to flee from a music which has become incomprehensible or from an alienating everyday situation into jazz happens upon a musical commodity system which for him is superior to the others only in that it is not so immediately transparent, but which, with its decisive, non-improvisational elements, suppresses precisely those human claims which he laid to it. With jazz, a disenfranchized subjectivity plunges from the commodity world to the commodity world; the system does not allow for a way out. ('On Jazz', pp. 53–4).

The commodity world of syncopated technique is here again linked with the commodity world of technology; and careening from world to world is a 'disenfranchized subject' who has no way out. Adorno says that in jazz the individual is

... contrasted as a Self against the abstract superimposed authority and yet can be exchanged arbitrarily ... this subject is not a 'free,' lyrical subject which is then elevated into the collective, but rather one which is not originally free – a victim of the collective. ('On Jazz', p. 64).

Claims to individualized suffering or the desire to flee 'an alienating everyday situation' are undermined by a syncopated technique that is part of the technologized world of mechanized production and routinized control: an unfree pseudo-individual becomes the *victim of* – and not the happily emancipated individual participant in – a collective where 'individuality' can be exchanged *arbitrarily*, in precisely the same manner as indistinct commodities (or performers, who are, at the end of the day, simply those individuals who have managed to turn themselves into both producing subjects and objects of consumption). And once individuality becomes exchangeable – one of many not

dissimilar objects to be commodified – distinctly individual suffering turns into a negligible quantity.

Yet the problematic logic of syncopation extends beyond its commodity character. According to Adorno, jazz's technique forces 'pseudo-individuals' to affirm an oppressive social status quo, 'the wrong life'. Adorno reflects on the 'social meaning of the jazz subject' and says:

... it does not want to be engulfed in the prescribed majority, which existed before the subject and is independent of it, whether out of protest or ineptitude or both at once – until it finally is received into, or, better, subordinated to the collective as it was predestined to do; until the music indicates, in a subsequently ironic manner as the measures grow rounder, that it was a part of it from the very beginning; that, itself a part of this society, it can never really break away from it. ('On Jazz', pp. 64–5)

Thus the jazz subject's contradictory status lies in its ability to 'stumble' out of a basic rhythm, 'swing around' it and proclaim individuality, yet never resist the leveling and damaging effects of an unfree social collectivity: syncopated individualization is always already trammled by the beat of society. The 'social meaning' of such a status is that

... however much jazz-subjects ... may play the nonconformist, in truth they are less and less themselves. Individual features which do not conform to the norm are nevertheless shaped by it, and become marks of mutilation. Terrified, jazz fans identify with the society they dread for having made them what they are. This gives the jazz ritual its affirmative character, that of being accepted into a community of unfree equals. (126, 129)

Adorno's point here is not merely that syncopated jazz partakes in, or is shot through with, social antagonisms, but something much stronger: the social meaning of jazz lies in the way it depends upon and compels pseudo-individuals (here both performers and listeners) to *identify* with and affirm the very social mechanisms that have robbed them of their individual features and to gladly join a collective of 'unfree equals'.<sup>18</sup> The 'real' jazz subject (the pseudo-individual) *must* 'navigate the pattern'. Yet navigating the pattern *hurts*, causes suffering and 'mutilation': the individual jazz subject is a *damaged* – and not a happily emancipated, 'freely swinging' – one, yet it is never allowed more than a fleeting glimpse of such a painful self-recognition.

And therein lies the root of Adorno's critique of jazz's pseudo-individualizing tendencies. Jazz affirms for a pseudo-individual only

what is *tolerated* in society: a kind of (false) Utopian promise of happy, free individual expression within a collectivity and dressed up in the fashionable guise of a syncopated style that is the defining rhythmic feature of modern forms of production. Instead of suffering, jazz makes the pseudo-individual take pleasure ‘precisely in its own weakness, almost as if it should be rewarded for this, for adapting itself into a collective that made it so weak’ (‘On Jazz’, p. 66). Such a weak and damaged individual, rather than sing out against the falsity of the reified world that de-individualized her and made her suffer, can merely murmur affirmatively to herself: ‘I am nothing. I am filth [*Dreck*], no matter what they do to me, it serves me right’ (132, 136).

#### **IV Postlude: Armstrong, Adorno, and music in capitalist modernity**

In his autobiography, Armstrong uses the term ‘hot music’ to suggest that musical moment ‘when a swing player gets warmed up and “feels” the music taking hold of him so strong that he can break through the set rhythms and the melody and toss them around as he wants without losing his way’ (31). Yet this emancipatory sense of ‘breaking through’ established rhythms is tempered, in the ultimate chapter of his text, with an awareness of the difficulty inhering in *any* attempt to ‘break up these worn-out patterns’ (123) in a society where nothing seems to escape the long, commodifying reach of the culture industry. To be sure, Armstrong shares little with Adorno on the question of jazz and society, and it is not to the point to compare their distinct and quite disparate perspectives here. Nevertheless, Armstrong’s sense of a form of music that wants the individual both to ‘break through’ set rhythms and worn-out patterns and not to ‘lose his way’ perhaps crystallizes the social aporias of jazz in a peculiarly Adornian way: the always new, caught in the always the same, in a world where to ‘lose one’s way’ may in fact be the only way to register individual suffering and mutilation.

Adorno always had a special relation to music.<sup>19</sup> The emergence of recording devices and radio, the proliferation of mass-produced records and popular music listening, the diminished regard for ‘serious’ music, and so on – Adorno confronted all of these, not with Armstrong’s resolve to move jazz forward as a new form of ‘worthwhile American music’ (122), or, say, his friend Walter Benjamin’s faith in the destructive aesthetic pleasure of technically reproducible artworks, but rather with a profound sense of *moral loss*.<sup>20</sup> While the

question of music and ethics in Adorno is beyond the limited scope of the present inquiry, it is important to remember that Adorno viewed music as a

... form of the divine name. It is demythologized prayer, freed from the sorcery of influencing. It is the always already futile moral attempt to name the name itself, rather than convey meaning.<sup>21</sup>

In a secularized modernity, music was the most paradoxical of aesthetic forms – a ‘demythologized prayer’, a kernel of myth in a disenchanted world, an echo of the sacred in the realm of the profane. Somehow music’s peculiar status allowed it, at times and in an attenuated way, to rehearse something like the ‘right life’, to name something good by registering something painful without completely destroying and forgetting it in the process. Such a ‘divine naming’ – the term, of course, is borrowed from the young Walter Benjamin – would actualize, I think, something like a negative Utopian possibility. Rather than ‘convey meaning’ in a world of anomie, the enigma of music is that it gives aesthetic form to an impossibly enigmatic moral endeavor – it is an impossible rescuing critique.<sup>22</sup> Music is precisely for that reason a ‘futile moral attempt to name the name itself’. It rescues the non-identical – the singular pain and suffering of the corporeal – but in so doing it cannot help but betray it.<sup>23</sup>

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno makes precisely this point about the enigmatic character of artworks. Adorno says that what constitutes a work of art is an enigmatic quality that is both preserved and dissolved in our ‘understanding’ of it.<sup>24</sup> Such an enigmatic feature is not simply ambiguous, but a riddle or puzzle that reveals and hides itself (*AT*, p. 178) and for which we have no answer or solution. This kind of revealing and concealing, however, is not linked to anything such as an untrammelled nature or, say, a Heideggerian *Seinsfrage*; rather, it is linked to happiness: the enigma of a work of art is that it is a ‘promise of happiness, a promise that is constantly being broken’ (*AT*, p. 196).

Music, perhaps not unlike modernity itself, is thus about broken promises, about the enigma of suffering and happiness and *failure*. But jazz is not – or at least, in Adorno’s time, was not – this kind of music; it splits off, and tries to make good on its Utopian promissory note of the right to free individual expression and happiness amid social collectivity via syncopated technique.<sup>25</sup> *Jazz is a promise of happiness that refuses to be broken*. Such an affirmation of the good life, in a world where the artwork’s Utopia is, as Adorno says, ‘draped in black’ (*AT*, p. 196), necessarily falls short. Little wonder, then, that Adorno objected to jazz. For Adorno thought that if music were to

express the enigmatically inexpressible in an affirmative world, it must do so *negatively*: 'Art is able to utter the unutterable, which is Utopia, through the medium of the absolute negativity of the world' (AT, p. 48). But, as I have tried to show here, jazz surrenders this negative work of art to the false possibility of the good life through (1) its involvement with fashion, (2) its collaboration with the technologized world of production, where a 'pseudo-individual' is *played by* syn-copation, and (3) its delivering up of this pseudo-individual to a society that forbids her to suffer and from which she cannot escape. If we recall here, in closing, what Adorno says in *Negative Dialectics* – that 'the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth'<sup>26</sup> – then perhaps we can begin to understand why Adorno argues, against prevailing perceptions of jazz as a kind of Utopian realization of individual expression that acknowledges its interdependence upon a social whole, that 'Jazz is the false liquidation of art – instead of utopia becoming a reality it disappears from the picture'. In jazz, Utopia is not realized, but disappears, because jazz forgets music's futile and enigmatic moral attempt to 'lend a voice to suffering' and thereby express the truth of the dissolution of the individual in and the untruth of modern capitalist society. Jazz is not demythologized prayer but rather secularized social composition.

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## Notes

For Jim, a mentor and friend.

- 1 Theodor Adorno, 'Zeitlose Mode. Zum Jazz', *Gesammelte Schriften* 10(1) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 137; 'Perennial Fashion – Jazz', in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 132. This authorized English translation is hereafter cited parenthetically, with page numbers from the *Gesammelte Schriften* also given.
- 2 Louis Armstrong, *Swing That Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1936), p. 29. Though Armstrong speaks of 'swing' in his autobiography as distinct from some forms of jazz, for the purposes of this essay, and in Armstrong's usage (and for Adorno as well, as we shall see), swing and jazz are the same insofar as both are grounded in the musical principle of syncopation.



- 3 As cited in James Lincoln Collier's *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 44.
- 4 Though in fairness to Adorno such a distinction becomes in the end moot. Indeed, Adorno responds to the charge that he inadequately distinguishes between types of jazz in a short response to Joachim-Ernst Berendt: 'Denn das Prinzip, die rhythmische Verfahrungsweise ist im raffinierteren Jazz und in der ordinären popular music dasselbe. Über einer unveränderlich durchgehaltenen Zahlzeit werden, dort mehr, hier weniger, Synkopierungen ausgeführt und dann wieder "zurückgenommen", in dem gleichsam kollektiven Grundmetron aufgehoben' ('Replik zu einer Kritik der "Zeitlosen Mode"', *Gesammelte Schriften* 10(2)) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 805.
- 5 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), p. 39: 'Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.'
- 6 Theodor Adorno, 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), p. 294.
- 7 Theodor Adorno, 'On Jazz', trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, *Discourse* 12(1) (1989–90): 47. This English translation of Adorno's 'Über Jazz' (1936), published under the pseudonym 'Hektor Rottweiler' in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1937), is hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as 'On Jazz'.
- 8 In his 'Adorno's Critique of Popular Culture: The Case of Jazz Music', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 26(1) (1992): 17–31, Lee B. Brown makes precisely this latter point. He argues that Adorno 'will settle for nothing less than a form of pure improvisation that comes, literally, from *nowhere*. Such an ideal is an empty dream. Obviously, it could not be borrowed from a model of what an improviser such as Beethoven might have done. By comparison with the "actual" improvisation Adorno assumes "untrammelled" jazz would exhibit, Beethoven's would be rule governed, "regimented". It would be Apollonian rather than the Dionysian thing Hodeir tries to imagine' (pp. 28–9).
- 9 Indeed, Adorno's clinging to the very notion of 'individuality' and refusal to embrace the 'end of man' mark him as peculiarly modern. So too, do his distinctions between high and low, art and culture, truth and untruth, and so on. Jim Collins, among others, has pointed out how Adorno's distinctions are ill-suited to contemporary (post-modern) cultural forms and practices. Such binaries inadequately account for the pluralizing and heteronomous tendencies latent in today's culture. On this account, Adorno's critique is of limited contemporary relevance insofar as it is incapable of doing justice to the

complexities of today's culture. See especially Collins's *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989). And for a review of several 'post'-modern readings of Adorno, see Shierry Weber NicholSEN's recent 'Adorno in Postmodern Perspective', *Thesis Eleven* 34 (1994): 178–85.

Yet, as Peter Hohendahl has recently and to my mind convincingly argued in his 'The Frozen Imagination: Adorno's Theory of Mass Culture Revisited', *Thesis Eleven* 34 (1994): 17–41, many 'post'-modern critiques of Adorno miss the mark. Hohendahl says: 'Whether Adorno was a cultural elitist or not is less relevant than the grounding of his theory. Certainly, for Adorno mass culture is not merely a sign system that has to be decoded – which does not mean that he does not pay attention to matters of style; rather, Adorno's approach is guided by the larger question of the dialectic of enlightenment and, more specifically, by the process of modernization under capitalism. . . . It is not, as Collins and others claim, the high/low opposition that defines Adorno's approach but the temporal distinction between liberal and organized capitalism. In fact, under the conditions of organized capitalism, the traditional division of high and popular culture *breaks down*; instead, we find a streamlined version of culture for which Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term culture industry' (pp. 21–2). I find this response not merely congenial to my argument here, but also a strikingly apt definition of the term 'culture industry'.

- 10 For the kind of thoroughgoing analysis of Adorno's aesthetic theory that is beyond the limited scope of the present inquiry, see Lambert Zuidervaar's *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). And for a 'post'-modern reading of Adorno on art and society, see Jameson's *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990).
- 11 Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Vol. I, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 38–9.
- 12 Indeed, Adorno links impressionism directly to jazz: 'In Parisian nightclubs, one can hear Debussy and Ravel in between the rumbas and charlestons. The influence of impressionism is most striking in the harmonies. Nine-note chords, sixte ajoutee, and other mixtures, such as the stereotypical blue chords, and whatever jazz has to offer in the way of vertical stimulation has been taken from Debussy. And even the treatment of melody, especially in the more serious pieces, is based on the impressionist model' ('On Jazz', p. 59).
- 13 But for the counterpoint to this criticism, see Brown's insightful piece, cited above.
- 14 Peter Gammond, *Guinness Jazz: A–Z* (London: Guinness Superlatives, 1986) p. 233.

- 15 Adorno will even go so far as to say, misleadingly, that 'jazz can be easily adapted for use by fascism' ('On Jazz', p. 61). I say 'misleadingly', for, indeed, an explicitly *fascist* use for jazz, despite its affirmative tendencies, cannot be so quickly imputed. That is to say: while jazz may collaborate in capitalist forms of production – indeed, grow indistinguishable from them – and actualize certain pseudo-democratizing tendencies, it does not necessarily follow that any form of music may be 'readily adapted' for totalitarian forms of politics. Jazz may not make good on its democratic promise, but it does not follow that it is therefore 'easily adapted for use by fascism'. In place of argument here Adorno merely says that 'in Italy it [marching jazz music] is especially well-liked' ('On Jazz', p. 61).
- 16 The landscape of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is immediately apparent here. In many ways Adorno's critique of jazz must be read through the prism of the dialectical account of rationalization processes, historical progressivism and the culture industry articulated in Adorno's collaborative work with Horkheimer. Jazz for Adorno seems very much caught on the dialectical horns of myth and enlightenment. See especially the introduction and chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1991).
- 17 Indeed, in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno argues that 'in the age of the individual's liquidation, the question of individuality must be raised anew' (p. 129). The raising anew of this question is linked to music in the section of *Minima Moralia* entitled 'Monad', where Adorno says: 'That setting free of the individual by the undermining of the *polis* did not strengthen his resistance, but eliminated him and individuality itself . . . Beethoven's music, which works within the forms transmitted by society and is ascetic towards the expression of private feelings, resounds with the guided echo of social conflict, drawing precisely from this asceticism the whole fullness and power of individuality. That of Richard Strauss, wholly at the service of individual claims and dedicated to the glorification of the self-sufficient individual, thereby reduces the latter to a mere receptive organ of the market. . . . Within repressive society the individual's emancipation not only benefits but damages him. . . . For however real he may be in his relations to others, he is, considered absolutely, a mere abstraction' (pp. 149–50).
- 18 Adorno characterizes this movement in 'On Jazz' as 'pseudo-democratization'. See especially pages 49–51.
- 19 For a comprehensive account of Adorno and music, see Max Paddison's *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

- 20 For Adorno's reaction to the technologization of music in modernity, see Thomas Levin's 'For the Record: Adorno on Music in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility', *October* 55 (1990): 23–47.
- 21 Theodor Adorno, 'Fragment über Musik und Sprache', *Gesammelte Schriften* 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1953), p. 252. Translation borrowed from Levin, cited above. See also Adorno's *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992) p. 2.
- 22 On the question of Benjamin's 'rescuing critique', see Habermas's insightful 1972 piece, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique', *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).
- 23 See also Adorno's opening observation in his essay on the fetish character of music listening: 'music represents at once the immediate manifestation of impulse and the locus of its taming' (p. 270).
- 24 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 178. Hereafter cited in the text as *AT*.
- 25 The point here is that to express such a negative Utopian moment in the form of suffering and failure, jazz music would in Adorno's view need to reject precisely the listening public, syncopated technique and cultural forms of production upon which it relies. In *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, Lambert Zuidervaart alludes to Adorno's *Philosophy of Modern Music* and suggests a similar notion: 'In resisting the social control exercised by the culture industry, modern music rejects the public hearing it needs. The more it insists on autonomy, the more it hardens itself against the social context from which music's autonomy stems' (p. 170).
- 26 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973) pp. 17–18.