

Black as an Ideal

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Translated by C. Lenhardt

If works of art are to survive in the context of extremity and darkness, which is social reality, and if they are to avoid being sold as mere comfort, they have to assimilate themselves to that reality. Radical art today is the same as dark art: its background colour is black. Much of contemporary art is irrelevant because it does not take note of this fact, continuing instead to take a childish delight in bright colours. The ideal of blackness is, in substantive terms, one of the most profound impulses of abstract art. It may well be that the naive tinkering with sound and colours that is current now is a response to the impoverishment wrought by the ideal of blackness. It may also be that one day art will be able to invalidate that ideal without committing an act of treachery. Brecht may have had an inkling of this when he put down these verses: 'What an age is this anyway where/A conversation about trees is almost a crime/Because it entails being silent about so many misdeeds?'¹ By being voluntarily poor itself, art indicts the unnecessary poverty of society. By the same token, art indicts asceticism, which is not a suitable norm for art. Along with the impoverishment of means brought on by the ideal of the black, if not by functionalist matter-of-factness, we also notice an impoverishment of the creations of poetry, painting and music themselves. On the verge of silence, the most advanced forms of art have sensed the force of this tendency.

One has to be downright naive to think that art can restore to the world the fragrance it has lost, according to a line by Baudelaire.² Baudelaire's insight is apt to fuel the scepticism as to whether or not art is still possible even though it does not send art crashing down. Already during the early romantic period, an artist like Schubert, who later was to become the darling of affirmative ideologues of culture, had his doubts about whether or not there is such a thing as cheerful art. The injustice inherent in all cheerful art, especially in the form of entertainment, is an injustice against the stored-up and speechless suffering of the dead. All the same, black art has certain features which, if hypostatized, would perpetuate our historical despair. Therefore, as long as there is hope for change, these features may be regarded as ephemeral, too.

The old but battle-scarred hedonism in aesthetics has recently zeroed in on what it claims to be a perverse implication of the ideal of blackness, namely the notion that the dark aspects of art ought to yield something approximating pleasure, as is the case with black humour in the context of surrealism. Actually, the ideal of darkness does no more and no less than postulate that art properly understood finds happiness in nothing except its ability to stand its ground. This happiness illuminates the sensuous phenomenon from the inside. Just as in internally consistent works of art spirit penetrates even the most impermeable phenomena, redeeming them sensuously, as it were, so blackness too—the antithesis of the fraudulent sensuality of culture's façade—has a sensual appeal. There is more pleasure in dissonance than in consonance—a thought that metes out justice to hedonism, measure for measure.³ The discordant moment, dynamically honed to a point and clearly set off from the homogeneous mass of affirmative elements, becomes a stimulus of pleasure in itself. And it is this stimulus together with the disgust with feeble-minded affirmation that ushers modern art into a no-man's land, which is a plenipotentiary of a world made habitable. This aspect of modernism has been realized for the first time in Arnold Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, where the imaginary essence of details and a dissonant totality are combined into one. Negation can pass over into pleasure but not into positivity.

1. Bertolt Brecht, 'An die Nachgeborenen', in *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt 1967) vol. 9, p. 723.
2. Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris 1961), p. 72: 'Le printemps adorab a perdu son odeur', and, one might add, its colour too.

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†Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) 430.