



# The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited

By Peter Uwe Hohendahl

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A discussion of Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is bound to look significantly different today than it would have looked when the book was first published in 1970, or when it first appeared in English translation in the 1980s. In *The Fleeting Promise of Art*, Peter Uwe Hohendahl reexamines *Aesthetic Theory* along with Adorno's other writings on aesthetics in light of the unexpected return of the aesthetic to today's cultural debates.

Is Adorno's aesthetic theory still relevant today? Hohendahl answers this question with an emphatic yes. As he shows, a careful reading of the work exposes different questions and arguments today than it did in the past. Over the years Adorno's concern over the fate of art in a late capitalist society has met with everything from suspicion to indifference. In part this could be explained by relative unfamiliarity with the German dialectical tradition in North America. Today's debate is better informed, more multifaceted, and further removed from the immediate aftermath of the Cold War and of the shadow of postmodernism.

Adorno's insistence on the radical autonomy of the artwork has much to offer contemporary discussions of art and the aesthetic in search of new responses to the pervasive effects of a neoliberal art market and culture industry. Focusing specifically on Adorno's engagement with literary works, Hohendahl shows how radically transformative Adorno's ideas have been and how thoroughly they have shaped current discussions in aesthetics. Among the topics he considers are the role of art in modernism and postmodernism, the truth claims of artworks, the function of the ugly in modern artworks, the precarious value of the literary tradition, and the surprising significance of realism for Adorno.

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

"[*The Fleeting Promise*] registers the profound shift in perspectives between [*Aesthetic Theory's*] initial reception in the context of the left radicalism of 1968 and the present moment. It is a shift which not only invites a return to but also paradoxically entails a historicization of Adorno which reveals an underground history of Critical Theory that can no longer be understood simply in terms of its 'progressive' recovery in the 1960s as part of the student revolt against the silence after 1945 regarding the crimes of the Third Reich. . . . *The Fleeting Promise of Art* is an invitation to reread Adorno. The challenge of defending Adorno today may not have become easier, but it has become more interesting."?Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Thesis Eleven* (2015)

"*The Fleeting Promise of Art* is superb. Peter Uwe Hohendahl's scholarship is impeccable, and his prose is pellucid and elegant. Hohendahl has the philosophical acumen to make sense of Adorno's notoriously difficult interpretations of the philosophy of German Idealism, the critical skills to analyze and interpret Adorno's arguments for their overlooked strengths and weaknesses, and the historical sense to look for?but not dwell on?relevant underexplored explanations from the complex and rich intellectual history of Adorno's life and times."?Max Pensky, University of Binghamton, author of *The Ends of Solidarity: Discourse Theory in Ethics and Politics*

"This masterful reassessment explores Adorno's standing within philosophical aesthetics (especially Kant), his engagement with visual art (especially primitivist modernism), and his intense, essayistic engagement with literature. Peter Uwe Hohendahl illuminates these divergent components of Adorno's thinking and explains why Adorno is indispensable for thinking about art, literature, and aesthetics today."?Russell A. Berman, Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities, Stanford University, author of *Fiction Sets You Free*

"Long admired on both sides of the Atlantic as one of the most incisive contributors to the ongoing development of critical theory, Peter Uwe Hohendahl focuses his attention in these essays on Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, whose abiding relevance he abundantly demonstrates. With the formidable erudition, analytic acumen, and exemplary lucidity his readers have come to expect, Hohendahl not only illuminates Adorno's debts to predecessors such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud but also shows the power of his readings of artists like Goethe and Balzac. *The Fleeting Promise of Art* is certain to be recognized as a lasting contribution to twenty-first-century aesthetics."?Martin Jay, University of California, Berkeley, author of *Essays from the Edge*

### About the Author

Peter Uwe Hohendahl is Jacob Gould Schurman Professor Emeritus of German and Comparative Literature at Cornell University. He is the author of many books, including *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignments in Postwar Critical Theory*; *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited*; *Building a National Literature: The Case of Germany, 1830–1870*; and *The Institution of Criticism*, all from Cornell.

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