

Chapter 2

MUSICAL GENRE AS ARTWORK

Theodor W. Adorno

- work of art** (n.) 1. A product of the fine arts, especially a painting or sculpture.
2. Something likened to a fine artistic work, as by reason of beauty or craft

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Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969): Musician and Marxist

Born on September 11th, 1903 in Frankfurt am Main, Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund (Adorno), was son to a wealthy Jewish wine merchant and an accomplished musician of Italian Catholic descent. He studied philosophy with the neo-Kantian thinker Hans Cornelius and musical composition with Alban Berg. Following the conclusion of his studies he spent two years as a university instructor before being expelled by the Nazis along with other professors and intellectuals either of Jewish heritage or on the political left. Like many others who found themselves in his position during the rise of the Third Reich he turned his father's Jewish surname, 'Wiesengrund', into an unelaborated middle initial and adopted his Italian mother's surname.

He left Germany in the spring of 1934, residing in Oxford, New York City, and southern California until well after the end of the war. He returned to Frankfurt in 1949 to take up a position in the philosophy department, and quickly established himself as a leading German

intellectual, central figure in and eventually Director (1958-1969) of the Institute of Social Research. The Institute had been founded in 1923 as a centre for Marxist scholarship, and had been led by Max Horkheimer since 1930: today it is principally remembered as home to a number of 20th century philosophers including Horkheimer, Adorno, Walter Benjamin and later, Jürgen Habermas, now identified with the “The Frankfurt School.” Adorno became a leading figure in the “positivism dispute” in German sociology, and a key player in debates about restructuring German universities, and as such found himself regularly attacked by both student activists and their right-wing critics. Matters worsened through the 1960s, and came to a head in April 1969, when three women activists interrupted Adorno’s lecture by surrounding him at the podium, bearing their breasts, simulating caresses, and “attacking” him with flowers. As biographer Martin Jay described it, “Adorno, unnerved and humiliated, left the lecture hall with students mockingly proclaiming that “as an institution, Adorno is dead.” His physical death from a heart attack came four months later on August 6.²⁷”

Richard Leppert, in his commentary to Adorno’s 1956 essay *Music, Language and Composition* reaches to the core of the latter’s musical project, for which he remains universally acknowledged: music not simply as autonomous entity, but as cultural practice and medium of human communication.

Adorno is at pains to insist that music is socially meaningful, that it is more than merely a self-referential abstract acoustic phenomenon. Indeed, he assigns profound significance to musical sounds: “They say something, often something humane.” Adorno insists, in a notably Benjaminian phrase, that music has a “theological aspect”; its meanings are “at once distinct and concealed.” Music, in other words, is not the

²⁷ account extracted principally from Leppert, Richard. Introduction to *Adorno, Theodor. Essays on Music*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002.

aesthetic transliteration of speech. It is something distinctly mystical; at the same time, it is concrete material practice. “It is demythologized prayer, freed from the magic of making anything happen, the human attempt, futile, as always to name itself, not to communicate meanings”.²⁸

When Richard Middleton devoted an entire chapter of *Studying Popular Music* to a respectful, detailed and even generally admiring review of one of that music’s most notorious enemies he began:

T.W. Adorno’s polemic against popular music is scathing. It possesses, nevertheless, a striking richness and complexity, demanding to be examined from a variety of viewpoints, notably that of musical production (in relation to general production in capitalist societies), that of musical form (discussed by Adorno in terms of ‘standardization’), and that of musical reception and function (which he sees as nearly totally instrumentalised, in the services of the ruling social interests). At the same time, Adorno argues, rightly, that these aspects are actually indivisible, and that it is essential, therefore, to retain some sense of wholeness of the musical process.²⁹

In addressing the challenges Adorno’s project has posed to scholars of popular music, Middleton later quotes Simon Frith in his *Sociology of Rock* to express the former’s severity, and then continues by underlining its crucial nature to serious study.

Adorno’s is the most systematic and the most searing analysis of mass culture, and the most challenging for anyone claiming even a scrap of value for the products that come churning out of the music industry.” The flaws, if they are such, are in the physiognomy of a giant. Anyone wanting to argue the importance of studying popular music has to absorb Adorno in order to go beyond him.³⁰

²⁸Leppert, Richard. Commentary to “Locating Music: Society, Modernity and the New” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Leppert, R. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002, pp.85-86

²⁹Middleton, Richard. “‘It’s all over now’. Popular music and mass culture – Adorno’s Theory” in *Studying Popular Music*. (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), p. 34

³⁰Ibid. p.35

Adorno's Genre: A Continuum between the Universal and the Particular

Though among the three thinkers of interest to this project Adorno was by far the most interested in music, and also the one who has left a large and highly individual body of commentary on the subject, the phenomenon of musical genre is addressed sparingly. In *Aesthetic Theory* he locates genre in familiar Adornian negative dialectical territory foreshadowing postmodern contexts: "Universals such as genres... are true to the extent that they are subject to a countervailing dynamic."³¹ University of Illinois essayist and author Curtis White expands on Adorno's view of genre as 'the universal' at the end of a form of continuum, the other end of which is 'the particular.'

Theodor Adorno's notorious *Dialectic of Enlightenment* consists substantially of the movement between the universal and the particular. In art, the universal is the Law of Genre, a "collective bindingness." On the other side, the particular (or the individual and subjective) represents the theoretically boundless world of human possibility and play (which Adorno attempts to capture through the word "spontaneity"). Art's fundamental concept from the perspective of the particular is autonomy. Art realizes its own concept when it makes itself not through the conventions of the universal (genre: the rules for the proper construction of sonata or sonnet, etc.) but "by virtue of its own elaborations, through its own immanent process." To be sure, these elaborations can only deploy themselves in a context made available by the world of convention; nonetheless, when an artwork is successful, it is in spite of the presence of convention and not because of it. This is why, ultimately, craft has little to do with whether or not a work is a successful piece of art.³²

As White points out, Adorno believes that a 'successful piece of art' is such because of its embellishments of and departures from a genre or other universal, rather than because of its

³¹ Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Christian Lenhardt (London, 1984), p.214 (cited in Hamm)

³² White, Curtis. *Kid Adorno* in Context No.6 (Dalkey Archive Press, Illinois State University, Normal: 2005). online document (accessed [21 October 2005]) <http://www.centerforbookculture.org/context/no6/white.html>

conformity to the same. In this way he positions his critique of popular music, which (to simplify considerably) accuses it of being in a sense “all genre and no piece” in contrast to true works which are only incidentally connected to their genre, and whose value lies within creative departures therefrom. In *On Popular Music*, Adorno identifies standardisation as fundamental to popular music (and by implication, not to ‘serious’ music).

A clear judgment concerning the relation of serious music to popular music can be arrived at only by strict attention to the fundamental characteristic of popular music: standardisation. The whole structure of popular music is standardised, even where the attempt is made to circumvent standardisation. Standardisation extends from the most general features to the most specific ones. Best known is the rule that the chorus consists of thirty-two bars and that the range is limited to one octave and a note... The details themselves are standardised no less than the form, and a whole terminology exists for them such as break, blue chords, dirty notes. Their standardisation, however, is somewhat different from that of the framework. It is not overt like the latter, but hidden behind a veneer of individual ‘effects’ whose prescriptions are handled as the experts’ secret, however open this secret may be to musicians generally. This contrasting character of the standardisation of the whole and part provides a rough, preliminary setting for the effect on the listener.³³

That effect, Adorno claimed, was a fundamental shift from the way one listened to serious music, and eventually affected not just how the listener received popular music, but all music.

The primary effect of this relation between the framework and the detail is that the listener becomes prone to evince stronger reactions to the part than to the whole. His grasp of the whole does not lie in the living experience of this one concrete piece of music he has followed. The whole is pre-given and pre-accepted, even before the actual experience of the music starts; therefore it is not likely to influence, to any great extent, the reaction to the details, except to give them varying degrees of emphasis.³⁴

³³ Adorno, Theodor W. with the assistance of Simpson, George, “On Popular Music” (1941), translated by Susan H. Gillespie in *Essays on Music*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002, pp.437-438

³⁴ *Ibid.* p.439

Also crucial to Adorno are two notions developed in the 1938 essay *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening*. Firstly, the idea that popular music as standardised commodity was consumed not so much for music's sake, but for a form of fetish that developed in listeners. First likening the public taste for popular music to the fetish of celebrity, and then tying in the inevitable economic dimension in the capitalist society, Adorno writes:

The world of ... musical life, is one of fetishes. The star principle has become totalitarian... Famous people are not the only stars. Works begin to take on the same role.³⁵

Music, with all the attributes of the ethereal and sublime generously accorded it, serves in America today as an advertisement for commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music... The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert.³⁶

Secondly, Adorno suggests that this fetish character has engendered a “regression of listening”, a dulling of the audio-receptive and cognitive faculties of the listener with implications not just to his or her reception of popular music, but also to ‘serious’ music.

The counterpart to the fetishism of music is a regression of listening... Not only do the listening subjects lose, along with freedom of choice and responsibility, the capacity for conscious perception of music... but they stubbornly reject the possibility of such perception... They are not childlike... they are childish; their primitivism is not that of the undeveloped, but that of the forcibly retarded.³⁷

³⁵ Adorno, Theodor W. “On the Fetish-Character of Music and the Regression of Listening” (1938), translated by Susan H. Gillespie in *Essays on Music*. Berkely/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. p.293

³⁶ Ibid. p.295

³⁷ Ibid. p.303

Tia DeNora has summarised Adorno's posited effects on listeners in terms of mental and intellectual conditioning towards reflexive response and against engaged response, and suggested that it reaches not only beyond popular music to other forms, but indeed beyond into the reception of other audio content.

According to Adorno, [so-called 'false music'] abetted 'darkness and in clarity' in so far as they inculcate reflex responses; they encourage the listener to give into familiar pleasures and patterns. In this gratification is, simultaneously, pacification and, more insidiously yet, the reinforcement of standardization. Through replication (through re-hearing old favourites and generically similar music over time) there is, in other words, an autodidactic reinforcement of honed patterns of response, and thus, a draining away of the capacity for the listener's discernment of difference, in music and elsewhere.³⁸

Despite that its resemblance to historical objections to dance, drugs, gambling, etc. (and of course the musical genres of jazz, rock 'n roll, heavy metal, and most recently rap and hip-hop) tends to jaundice our reception of it, Adorno's view is a sophisticated and intriguing one which resonates with recent credible theories of "McDonaldisation" and "Disneyfication" which argue how mega-corporations have affected society's sense of taste and general perception of art – this has occasioned an unexpected and vigorous arousal of new interest in Adorno's work.

Having established Adorno's theoretical conception of genre and his views on the standardization of music, we turn to a specific case probably outside of Adorno's experience where they might be applied.

³⁸ DeNora, Tia. *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.153

Anglican Chant, Standardised Church Musical Genre

An exact point for origin Anglican chant, defined by Paul Westermeyer as “harmonized psalm tones with the intonation omitted and semirhythmic cadence formulas added”³⁹ is unclear, although its lineage can easily be traced, as Mayo suggests, from Gregorian psalm tone singing through early precursors in fauxbourdon (a number of harmonising practices descended from *organum* in which a *cantus firmus* is placed in an inner voice with other parts added below and above, literally creating a ‘false melody’, and in other early sources such as Thomas Morley’s *A Plain and Easy Introduction to Practicall Musick* (1597).⁴⁰ It entered general use as a form of choir-led congregational psalm-singing in the early 17th century, just in time to be outlawed along with all other church music under the Puritans and Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell in 1649. Though the monarchy was restored in 1660, and monophonic chanting reinstated, the full retrieval of harmonised Anglican chant was not until years later, when the complete lack of able boy sopranos brought on by two generations having had no musical training was redressed.

Anglican chant must also be understood as a product of the Anglican Reformation, which like its sister movements on the continent indicated to Christians the need to read, know, and sing scripture in their own language, not Latin. It serves principally as a medium for choirs and congregations to chant the words to the 150 Psalms of the Bible and also those of various

³⁹ Westermeyer, Paul. *Te Deum: The Church and Music*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998.

⁴⁰ Westermeyer, Paul. *Te Deum: The Church and Music*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998). p.170: The citation of Morley’s work is Westermeyer’s, who also refers to one of the fauxbourdon practices of harmonising in parallel motion adding only a ‘false bass’ while neglecting to refer to the more common (and now, nearly exclusive) form of *c.f.* in the tenor and added soprano, alto and bass parts in mixed (parallel/contrary) motion.

Canticles associated particularly with the Divine Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer (when sung, known colloquially as Matins and Evensong).

British writer and critic John Mayo identifies Anglican chant as a descendant of Gregorian psalm-tone chanting, both in its structure and derivation from same, and in the continuing need it addresses (like Gregorian psalm tone singing before it) for the flexible accommodation of varying line-lengths:

The very flexible nature of the psalm texts is both part of their beauty and at the same time a problem when it comes to providing musical settings. In the medieval church the psalm verses were sung to a musical formula – an opening little flourish (the ‘intonation’) – a long recitation capable any number of words on a single note and then a closing flourish (the ‘ending’, a cadential formula). Anglican chant is fundamentally an elaboration of this method in four-part harmony.⁴¹

While the harmonic and textual languages have kept pace with the times, little else has changed about Anglican chant in its four-century history. Formally, most Anglican chants consist of fourteen (or more rarely, seven or *very* rarely, twenty-one) measures, with the majority of the recitation occurring in mm. 1, 4, 8 and 11 with mm. 2-3, 5-7, 9-10 and 12-14 serving as Westermeyer’s “semirhythmic endings.” Double-bar lines printed in both the text and chant separate the *quarters*: typically the 2nd quarter will end in the dominant key and the 4th return to the tonic, creating a tonally closed period of two Psalm verses for each iteration of the chant⁴².

⁴¹ Mayo, John. Liner notes to *Psalms for the Soul*. Naxos Records 8.554823, 1999. Parenthetical terms are my addition: it should be said that both Gregorian and Anglican psalm chanting are usually based on a slightly more complex structure involving intonation and ending and not one but two recitations separated by another (usually half-close) cadential formula called the ‘mediation’. This makes the text covered by the chant two verses, not one.

⁴² The seven-measure chants mirroring the earlier Gregorian tones which comprise the entire early repertory cover a single psalm verse per iteration; the rare triple chants cover three verses, resulting in an asymmetrical structure. With the more common double chants, in the case of odd numbers of verses and sectional points where it seems awkward to end on the dominant, the 3rd and 4th quarters are repeated to keep the chant ‘in phase’ with the text.

Example 2 - Early and Modern Psalm texts and Anglican Chants to Psalm 62:1-4.

Version based on King James (1611) English (Coverdale translation):⁴³

1. My soul truly waiteth in silence | up-on | God; | | for of him | com-eth | my sal- | va-tion; | |
2. He verily is my strength and | my sal- | va-tion; | | he is my defence, so that I | shall not | great-ly | fall.
3. How long will ye set upon a man, battering him, | all of | you | | like a tottering wall, and | like a | bro-ken fence? | |
4. Their device is only how to put him out whom | God will ^ ex- | alt ; | | their delight is in lies; they give good words with their mouth, but | curse | with their heart.

Version in a more recent translation:⁴⁴

1. For God alone my | soul in | si-lence | waits; | | from | him | comes | my | sal- | vation. | |
2. He alone is my rock and | my sal- | vation, | | my stronghold, so that I shall | not be | great-ly | shaken. | |
3. How long will you assail me to crush me all of | you to- | gether, | | as if you were a leaning | fence, a | top-pling | wall?
4. They seek only to bring me down from my | place of | honour; | | lies | are their | chief de- | light. | |

Henry Smart (1813-1879)



Christopher Dawes (1967-)



- Single and double bar-lines in the text correspond to the same markings in the music. This arrangement of text syllables to the chords and notes of the chant is called 'pointing', and is sometimes published with the chant. Often choirmasters must 'point' chants themselves, and they frequently ask choirs to depart from the given pointing to improve or alter the declamation of the text.
- Theoretically, any Anglican chant tune may be used with any suitably pointed text... in practice Choirmasters select chants they prefer, and/or that are well-known to the choir or congregation which will sing the psalm. Treatments of secular texts such as weather reports and the Sears catalogue occur in lighter contexts. Chant tunes given here are from the usage of St. James' Cathedral, Toronto, 2002.

⁴³ General Synod Anglican Church of Canada. *The Book of Common Prayer*. Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1959.

⁴⁴ General Synod Anglican Church of Canada. *Book of Alternative Services*. Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985.

Anglican chant is a musical form without notated rhythm, relying ultimately upon the text to dictate note length and accent: for this reason it enables a great deal of scope for musical expression, but creates an ensemble nightmare when sung by a choir unskilled in this style of chanting or unprepared for a given text-pointing-and-tune combination, and a still greater one when sung by a congregation. Writing in 1967, Erik Routley outlined the challenge presented by this ideal of text rhythm in a world of musical rhythm, and makes clear the preference for choral use which seems to dominate among professional church musicians:

The amount of music one can get into an Anglican chant usually lends itself to the chant's presenting itself to the ear as a composition with an internal rhythm of its own. Since virtually all such chants come from the musical era when the bar line was an accepted convention and regular dance rhythm governed composition, it follows that the ear simply cannot help hearing most chants as rhythmical compositions in minims and semibreves. This contradicts the stress rhythm of the traditional English versions of the psalms, and in order to minimise the conflict between the musical nature of the chant and the free rhythm of the words the discipline of "speech rhythm" has been evolved by choirmasters. This is a discipline so strict and delicate as to be impossible for a generalised congregation to achieve; it involves elasticity of rhythm not only in the allocation of syllables within the recitation but also in the moving part of the melody corresponding to the speech length of the syllables sung... Therefore the Anglican chant is truest to its nature when it is sung by a choir and listened to by the congregation. If there is congregational participation, a certain degree of rhythmical thump is unavoidable.⁴⁵

Anglican chant has been used consistently since the time of the Restoration: chants continue to be written and used in Anglican churches throughout the world. Just as Routley advocated in 1967, despite its origins in the time and ideology of the Reformation it is now sung principally by choirs, rather than congregations. But while the genre's shift from the second

⁴⁵ Routley, Erik. "The Psalms in the Church's Worship" in *Musical Leadership in the Church*. Abingdon Press, 1967, pp.80-81

stream (congregational) form it seems to have been intended to be to the first stream (non-congregational) form it has been for much of its history⁴⁶ marked for Routley it becoming “truest to its nature”, it surely also signalled the final departure from a foundational axiom, the provision of a system for English reformed congregations to sing the psalms in their own language.

An Adornian Reading of Anglican Chant as ‘Artwork’

Adorno’s critique of 20th century popular music was made in clear apposition to classical music, both of his time (2nd Viennese School) and of the Canon (in particular Beethoven). At no time did he address church music as a general category, much less a sub-genre of psalm singing in the Church of England, but it is interesting to compare some of Anglican chant’s common properties with the products of a ‘culture industry’ to which Adorno objected so vehemently.

Even if he might have been a bit warmer towards it idiomatically, Adorno would probably have considered the standardisation of Anglican chant to exceed that of the popular music of his day. Among what must be thousands of published chants, and many more that exist only in the manuscripts of choirmasters, there is virtually no formal variation; and while melody and harmony are open within the customs of whatever era in which a chant is written, very little variation in overall tonal scheme (which is periodic and closed tonally) is evident. The biblical texts are, of course, finite in number (150 Psalms and a perhaps a dozen other assorted Canticles), and nearly any one of them can be used with nearly every chant. The absence of any musically-determined rhythm removes not just from reality, but indeed from conceivability, a primary

⁴⁶ For a discussion of Patrick Kavanaugh’s three “streams” of church music, see Kavanaugh, pp.217-220

musical parameter for variation, and while choirs and choirmasters may have different customs and interpretations which may set one performance apart from another, the usage and sonic signature of the form is unmistakable. To Adorno, the fact that one recognises Anglican chant instantly, before, or indeed in place of recognising a given performance's specific chant or text, betrays the musical fetish character in listening to it. "Familiarity of the piece is a surrogate for the quality ascribed to it. To like it is almost the same thing as to recognize it."⁴⁷

Because the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (as adopted only by the Roman Catholic Church in 1969, but widely influential throughout mainline Christianity) have cast a cloud of doubt over sung church musical forms which are not inherently congregational; because chant's elegance of expression is tied inseparably to the elegance of the text, a property somewhat impoverished by newer translations of scripture; because a revived Catholicism within Anglican worship has prioritised Eucharistic worship over the offices of Matins and Evensong to their near-extinction, and because many newer forms of psalm singing don't have these issues which have assailed chant for the past 50 years to contend with, Anglican chant is now on the margins of church musical usage. While alive and well wherever liturgically conservative congregations retain the sung offices, King James English and nostalgic sentiment, the two generations of pre-Restoration boys who had not sung it are today echoed by (at least) two generations of Anglicans who have never heard it. Anglican chant dwells today in the annals of history, the musical sophisticate, and the CD recording.

⁴⁷ Adorno, Theodor W. "On the Fetish-Character of Music and the Regression of Listening" (1938), translated by Susan H. Gillespie in *Essays on Music*. Berkely/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. p.288

It is here that again we see a curious echo of the fetishism Adorno ascribed to popular genres in the 1930s: an almost totally standardised musical form whose following is minted on general grounds, rather than that of the individual work. The nostalgia and affection for Anglican chant among choristers and choirmasters is palpable⁴⁸; yet worldwide the services which showcase them draw only handfuls of worshippers. But as an early casualty of liturgical reforms of the last decades of the 20th century, the genre symbolises much more than itself... in it is encoded all of the beauty of language, music, dignity and the transcendent some feel have left Anglican worship. England's major Cathedral and University Collegiate Choirs all issue Psalm recordings, and in the 1990s Priory Records ("Britain's Premiere Church Music Label"⁴⁹) created the 12-volume "Psalms of David" Series featuring the choirs of every major Cathedral in Britain. Co-founder and now sole owner of Bedfordshire-based Priory, Neil Collier, in a 1995 interview with the *International Herald Tribune* said of the market for his company's CDs rather frankly, "I make money out of nut cases."⁵⁰

At the heart of Adorno's critique appears to be a sort of 'death of the work of art' or at least a blurring of the line between the individual work and its genre in the realm of popular music. Standardisation both in form and content within a genre obviates the need for listeners to know or even hear individual pieces in order to 'understand' them, like them, and judge them.

⁴⁸ See a website <http://home.golden.net/~malton/Choir/potw.htm>, from Kitchener Ontario, where a choirmaster has made synthesized recordings of Anglican Chant tunes that allow surfers to learn the Soprano, Alto, Tenor or Bass parts online.

⁴⁹ This title is, as far as I have been able to determine, self-conferred.

⁵⁰ Ipsen, Erik, "Church Music Label draws a Quirky Following" in *International Herald Tribune*, 6 February 1995 (London)

In his reasoning I suggest that sameness in music also made genre and its 'fetish' content, rather than the composition itself, into the "work of art."

Returning finally to Adorno's conception of musical genre as dialectic between things universal to all pieces of a given 'type', and those particular to a given composition, Anglican chant, while it provides abundant opportunities for musical expression of a text in performance, provides the composer very little scope for the kind of departures from general norms which for Adorno defined a successful piece of art. Adorno's notion of "truth-content" purports that artworks have their own inherent meaning or significance (*Gehalt*) by virtue of an internal dialectic between content and form: "Art has truth as the semblance of the illusionless."⁵¹ The latter decades of the 20th century have not looked kindly upon Adorno's critique of popular music, nor the implied value judgment represented by the "truth-content" of serious music and the deception inherent to the genres of popular music: but as the example of Anglican chant may suggest, his notion of the locational upgrade of 'artwork' from the level of the particular piece to that of the genre seems feasible, and perhaps more broadly applicable.

⁵¹ Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. , ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Christian Lenhardt (London, 1984) p.132.