BJCT

Berlin Journal of Critical Theory

www.bjct.de

xenomoi

Contents

Introduction

Fabian Freyenhagen[1]

*D*ialectic of Enlightenment as a book – and as the transformative experience that it can afford to readers – has long been eclipsed by a certain picture of it. That picture portrayed it as consisting of a beautiful rhetorical shell that is totally detachable from the content and that should be disregarded since it blinds readers to the (purportedly) problematic content. Specifically, the rhetoric is said to hide the performative contradiction at the heart of the book, where the presence of such contradiction is understood to be damning and require sounding the retreat. Lest we be taken in – indeed overwhelmed – by the rhetorical shell, we need to put it aside, trying to focus on the propositional content alone, before adopting a more positive alternative in viewing and enacting the project of modernity.

Initially slowly but in recent years at an accelerated pace, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is finally re-emerging from this distorted and distorting picture of it, as we pass the 80th anniversary of its initial publication in 1944 (still called 'Philosophical Fragments' at the time, which then becomes its sub-title in the enlarged 1947 edition). No longer eclipsed, new readings have become possible.

It was at the occasion of this anniversary that the papers now contained in this special issue first saw the light of day, as talks in the online seminar series jointly hosted by the Critical Theory Colloquium at the University of Essex and the Centre for Investigating Contemporary Social Ills (CICSI). Our thanks to all the participants, including for the thoughtful comments and questions that were of great help to the authors in revising the papers – as well as to the reviewers and editors of

---

1 Fabian Freyenhagen is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Essex. His publications include *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, an article on the linguistic turn in the early Frankfurt School, and a recent polemic entitled 'Why Professor Habermas would fail a class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'. He currently works on a Foucault-inspired critique of our psychiatric present.

this journal for taking this issue on and improving the papers further.

This special issue gives a sense of the great variety of the new readings after the eclipse – and of the diverse ways of writing about this book. Amidst this variety and diversity, there is perhaps one common theme to the new readings contained in this issue: that form and content cannot be, indeed should not be detached from each other when it comes to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the transformative experience it offers.

Leading the way is a paper by Lydia Goehr that does not just talk about the performative critique that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contains, but enacts such critique, juxtaposing – surprising to some, as it may be – Zappa and Adorno. Philosophy started off as an oral tradition; and reading this paper aloud, entering in a dialogue with it, can unlock some of that performativity. For the paper is centrally about how we take up critical content, and the dangers of taking it up in a way that drains or negates that critical content by taking it up as adoring fans – staring romantically, rather than thinking critically. That was a problem already for *Dialectic of Enlightenment* when the culture industry was just emerging as a social phenomenon; it was even more of a problem by the time Zappa performed; and now the problem is heightened still, when a sarcastic 'Are you not entertained?' that is being cheered is part of the expected entertainment; when we have gone even more meta. While the book already had to be daring in its form, Zappa had to be even more daring, given how further de-sensitivised people had become. He dances so close to outright humiliation in seeking to expose our problematic attachment to, and practices of humiliation that it is uncomfortable to watch, and yet even then, the danger of being merely entertained by it remains. How can we avoid this danger? We need to become actively involved in a critical reception, not be passive consumers. And that is why, I propose, Goehr's paper invites us to decide on how to perform a reading of it, and why that might be helpful for thinking about the performative critique it enacts, rather than just attending to the propositional content. If we get the text's rhythm, when reading it aloud, then the content might start speaking to us in all of its registers. Merely talking about the intertwine-

ment of form and content is not enough; even writing about it in a way that reflects this intertwinement is not enough – what is needed, is a particular act of reading. Can a text invite, provoke, or perhaps even force us into such an active stance?

Henry Pickford engages critically with the picture that has eclipsed *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for so long, revealing a narrow notion of reason (as a logical calculator of finite propositions) that had gotten in the way of appreciating the rich content of the actual book. He also helpfully deploys Aristotle's notion of *energeia* to make good on the idea of disclosive critique at the core of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. While Axel Honneth had suggested to read the book as a disclosive critique, he also had left this idea hanging as something that could not stand on its own, but Pickford's intervention here shows matters to be otherwise.

Surti Singh peels away another layer of how a certain rationalized understanding of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* obscures Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis, specifically their analysis of how sexuality pertains to gender relations. Mobilising insights from psychoanalysis, she focuses on the culture industry chapter to decode sexuality as the subterranean nerve centre of society that functions in contradiction to how things appear. This new reading, she shows, makes the book fruitful in thinking about debates in feminist theory.

Gender relations – specifically gendered domination – are also the theme of Nathan DuFord's contribution. Focusing both on two central characters of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Odysseus and Juliette) and its account of antisemitism, DuFord discusses domination of the sexed/gendered human being, and reveals Adorno and Horkheimer to understand sex/gender as a social relation, rather than an essential identity. In this way as well, the book is shown to be of clear contemporary relevance.

Arvi Särkelä presents *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a particular kind of montage: a philosophical one. His paper, itself a kind of montage of remarks, shows how this methodological approach reflects both philosophical worries about a transhistorical way of doing philosophy and social-existential concerns about the catastrophic state of the world it was

written in. A key passage from 'Notes and Sketches' (the final part of the book) anchors the reading. Among the important issues to highlight, let me pick out this one: performative contradictions emerge as not simply something to avoid, but as sometimes necessary or apt to show us what may not be sayable (or at least not experienced in the right way when said without contradiction). While we live in different times than when the book was written, our times are taking on ever more catastrophic forms in their own right, raising the question of what role, if any, philosophical montage can play today.

The theme that showing something requires special communicative measures due to the very nature of what is talked about, is explored further in Plamen Andreev's contribution to this volume. Fastening onto the famous line from *Dialectics of Enlightenment* that only exaggeration is true, he explores how the text's hyperbolic language is aimed at enabling an intellectual experience of a social totality that is both all-too-painfully real and yet also a false, even, in a sense, illusionary. For a second time, the discussion of Homer's *Odyssey* in the book is in focus here, with this character's cunning providing a concrete model for thinking as exaggeration, as developed in this paper.

Form and content are also at issue in Matteo Falomi's discussion of the essay as form. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be productively understood as a collection – one is tempted to say 'constellation' – of essays. This raises the question of what makes that form suitable for the task of Enlightenment's critical (self-)reflection. Falomi draws on Adorno's later text, 'The Essay as Form' (1958), to expose first our resistance to the essay form, then its roots in Enlightenment thinking, and, finally, how Adorno mobilizing the readers' resistance against that very resistance, with transformative potential. This paper implicitly suggests a way for approaching the book afresh: as generating certain resistance(s) in us, which require working through, rather than letting us be repelled by them and retreating to more familiar philosophical approaches.

William Ross explores the fragmented composition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It is, he shows, no mere stylistic ornament, but instead

a way to stage a crisis in philosophical presentation that arises due to experiences of alienation and repression and their effects on subjectivity. Horkheimer and Adorno's engagement with Odysseus comes a third time into focus. And the paper closes the circle in understanding the book once more as a performative critique: one that not merely diagnoses reason's self-undoing, but performs it.

Indeed, the book emerges from the new readings contained in this issue as a performative critique that generates the fragile conditions of itself as critique and as enabling transformative experiences – if, as it were, we listen carefully and actively enough to its music.

Invitation to the Dance:
On Dialectical Beats of Humiliation A-Z,
from Adorno to Zappa

Lydia Goehr[1]

Abstract: The thought-image is of an audience being invited to a dance. It is regular neither as an invitation nor as a dance. It brings out the sadly many ways that people are brought to their humiliation. Humiliation enacts domination and submission: its put-down is a beating, a pulping, a grinding to the ground. The beats of its rhythm plays to the fun that comes with too much enthusiasm: the false fun of fans and fanaticism. Theodor W. Adorno analyzed the invitation to draw out the contradictory pulses and impulses in a dance of enlightenment. By words, he aimed to unroot, unseat, and disarm a body politic. His invitation became a dis-invitation thereby. Frank Zappa played out a comparable scenario as part of a concert on the stage.

I'm doing what I always do. I am using a thought-image to engage philosophy as a critique of its own tendency to harden concepts. The thought-image is of an audience being invited to a dance. It is regular neither as an invitation nor as a dance. Its aim is to bring out the sadly many ways that people are brought to a condition of humiliation. Humiliation enacts domination and submission: its put-down is a beating, a pulping, a grinding to the ground. The beats of its rhythm drive the fun that comes with too much enthusiasm: the false fun of fans and fanaticism. Theodor W. Adorno analyzed the invitation to draw out the contradictory pulses and impulses in a dance of enlightenment. By words, he aimed to unroot, unseat, and disarm a body politic. His invitation

---

1   Lydia Goehr is Fred and Fannie Mack Professor of Humanities, Department of Philosophy, Columbia University. She is the author of *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (1992); *The Quest for Voice: Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy* (1998); *Elective Affinities: Musical Essays on the History of Aesthetic Theory* (2008); *Red Sea-Red Square-Red Thread. A Philosophical Detective Story* (2021), *David Lean Filmmaker and Philosopher* (2025); co-editor with Daniel Herwitz of *The Don Giovanni Moment. Essays on the legacy of an Opera* (2006) and with Jonathan Gilmore, *A Companion to Arthur C. Danto* (2022).

became a dis-invitation thereby, an invitation that proved anything but inviting to those invited to dance. Frank Zappa played out a comparable scenario within one of his concerts on the stage.

I came to my topic given an invitation to bring Adorno into conversation with Zappa. The conversation is anything but new. The already-existing literature on this pairing focuses mostly on showing how Zappa drew from a serious avant-gardism to cut through the culture industry of *pop* more or less with an Adornian knife. In "The Mother of All Interviews," Florindo Volpacchio describes the influence of Varèse, Stravinsky, and Satie to bring out particularly the wit of satire and parody by which Zappa pushed "the boundaries of what is musically acceptable," while expressing deep "disdain" for contemporary culture's too easy accommodations of a music that was not worth dancing to.[2] Having worked on wit (satire and parody) for many years, I bring the great divide of serious versus popular cultural production into a broader picture that shows how, in common with the wit of Adorno, Zappa aimed to unfoot his audience, this way leaving them dancing, as the idiom puts it, in the dark. For there is one sort of darkness that strips from the dance its promise of enlightenment; and another that strips away the certainty that we ever know in advance the right steps to be taken. To use wit well is, and has long been, to disconcert and to discompose an audience through the mismatches and unfittingness of incongruity.

I actually dug up Zappa's invitation to dance from my own memory. In 1978, I attended a Zappa concert in London at Hammersmith Odeon. Hammersmith itself was probably named for the smithies who, like Wagner's Hans Sachs, once hammered out shoe soles and human souls for a fitting dance of rhyme and rhythm. Before Hammersmith Odeon was so named, it was called Hammersmith Apollo—which, along Nietzschean lines, would have reminded dancers with contrary Dionysian impulses to keep their steps well measured. I spent my childhood next

---

2   Florindo Volpacchio, "The Mother of All Interviews: Zappa on Music and Society," *Telos* 87 (1991): pp. 124-136, here p.125. https://www.afka.net/Articles/1991-00_Telos.htm.

to Hammersmith as a serious musician, a violinist, but also as a rather wild London girl of the 1970s. So one evening, I went with my friends to the Zappa concert. For over forty years, I've kept in memory the moment when Zappa invited members of the audience to come up on stage to dance. I remember the dancers not being able to keep in step with the rhythm. I remember thinking or feeling their humiliation—or was it my own? I left the concert profoundly unnerved: that's why the memory stuck. Looking back almost a half-century gets us to Zappa; with eighty years we get to investigate what so moved Adorno to analyze the invitation to the dance as part of his dialectical critique of enlightenment.

Let's begin with the concluding lines of the culture industry chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Readers are asked to tiptoe through a critical analysis of what happens to words under conditions of their misuse or outright abuse. In Edmund Jephcott's translation we read that, in the worst of times, "German words" became "petrified and alien" through "disfigurement of the fascist "folk" community.[3] In the German original, the "words" are not qualified as "German," but, with strategic exaggeration, as "every word"—*"An jedem Wort"*—to capture the spill of slogans dominating a public discourse at any time and place and in any country. The term "disfigurement" corresponds to *verschandelt* in the sentence *"An jedem Wort läßt sich unterscheiden, wie weit es von der faschistischen Volksgemeinschaft verschandelt ist."* I prefer the words "spoil" and "blotting" to capture the smudging of truth as ink spreads across the papers and press of public opinion. Following this, we read of how *slogans* become *"allumfassend"* and *"totalitär."* Here I would suggest "all-embracing" and "totalizing" more than Jephcott's "universal" and "totalitarian." Then comes the violence—*"die Gewalt"*—that is done to words to render persons doubly *deaf* when they become immune to a violence being done to words and then forgetful of what the words once meant—*"Man vermag den Worten nicht mehr anzuhören, die ihnen widerfährt."* Were we to ask

---

3   Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, tr. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 135-36.

whether there was a time when violence was not done to words, it would be only to feel the urgency with which Max Horkheimer and Adorno raised the issue in their own catastrophic times.

The crisis, as they saw it, was a problem for the modeling of minds and objects equally. Given the technological administration of cultural and social patterns, listeners were identifying with the transmission of news by radio and soon enough by television. The language of a nation was becoming the public voice that entered the living room of every private home. The smoothness of the identification between speaker and listener depended upon the smoothness of the voice transmitted—the radio announcer—who, with a neutralized accent, conveyed no individuality. While the technological apparatus promised an unlimited range of choices, listeners were really only being given one choice, a a step-by-step coercive encouragement for them, like words, to become all one and the same. From the spill of words of the mouth, the authors then looked to the feet of the body in a once Hegelian sentence that began "All are free to dance and enjoy themselves—*Alle sind frei, zu tanzen und sich zu vergnügen … .*"[4] Evermore cultish, the dance was becoming evermore deadly, and all the more so as the compulsive (*die zwanghafte*) mimesis or imitation of capitalist consumer satisfaction was being made to move in exact step with the administered production of every conceivable good. No less than anything else, "the true, the good, the beautiful" were becoming hardened administered products of stone-walling cultural establishments.

And yet—and here is the twist in the chapter's last sentence: for all the triumph of culture's public face and the body politic, there was (and had to be) a dissatisfaction: a repressed trace of something not right, a *seeing through* from *durchschauen*: "*Das its der Triumph der Reklame in der Kulturindustrie, die zwanghafte Mimesis der Konsumenten an die zugleich durchschauten Kulturwaren.*"[5] To *see through* gestured toward a more critical *looking through*—from *durchsehen*—according to a critical analysis

---

4   *Ibid*, p. 135.

5   *Ibid*, p. 136.

that would become a *working through*—from *durcharbeiten*. Behind the lie of the promise of the *all* who are *free to dance*, there had to be *another* dance, a more *untimely* dance withdrawn from the *limelight* and the *footlights*—*waiting in the dark* for a future different from the present. To preface *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors had written: "Critical thought, which does not call a halt before progress itself, requires us to take up the cause of the remnants of freedom [*die Residuen von Freiheit*], of tendencies toward real humanity, even though they seem powerless in face of the great historical trend."[6]

Zappa's *200 Motels* of 1971 is a mock surrealist film chock full of craziness and modernist musical motifs. One piece stands out: the "Dance of the Rock & Roll Interviewers." It was performed by England's prestigious Royal Philharmonic Orchestra playing the part of the "bewildered orchestra." Playing a part does not always mean fully understanding the part one is playing. Was the orchestra really bewildered or was the orchestra bewildering its audience, or better yet, the interviewers? Carried within the term "bewilderment" is the beat of the wild. Was the beat bringing a great orchestra of civilization to its knees by being made to dance to Rock & Roll? Where wit is involved, we know that a calling card may not result in one's playing by the rules of the game. We know steps will be taken that do not fit carefully manipulated expectations. We know also that wit is often used to expose a counterfeit, an imposture, or a false news that leaves everyone reeling in a frenzy of insecurity. As the coin spins, untamed impulses are met by demands for strict discipline.

Before Zappa and before Adorno and Horkheimer, Siegfried Kracauer captured the point in a short feuilleton piece titled "Travel and Dance": "If in the earliest eras dance was a cult practice, today it has become a cult of movement; if rhythm used to be a manifestation of eros and spirit, today it is a self-sufficient phenomenon that wants to rid itself of meaning."[7] And then: "The contemporary practice that makes jazz [i.e. popu-

---

6   *Ibid*., p. xi.

7   Siegfried Kracauer, "Travel and Dance", in: *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*, tr. Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 65-

lar] dance into a sport testifies to its lack of substantive meaning over and above that of disciplined movement."[8] In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we read comparably of the discipline, as when the once local spirits of living or embodied rituals became replaced by a "heaven and its hierarchy" that top-down commanded [from *Befehl*] the sacrifice and labor [*Arbeit*] of enslaved men [*von Unfreien*]. Through the promotion of allegory and symbol, the gods were abstracted from their embodied meanings so that a disembodied Zeus could control "the daytime sky" and Apollo "the sun" from above.[9]

Adorno unpacked his "invitation to the dance" in a passage from *Minima Moralia*.[10] He used not "*Einladung*" for the invitation, but "*Aufforderung*," to capture a formality of convention, a time perhaps when one went to a dance with a dance card and followed the rules of etiquette to the exact step. Such rules were laid down most usually by Apollo as a regulation against the Dionysian intoxication or, in equally antiquated terms, to beat out Marsyas in a contest over the musical art. Here was a beating where Apollo could prove himself victorious because the beat of the rhythm or melody struck him as irregular, and Apollo *oversaw* the beat *overall*. From the early dance clubs and from the music-hall vaudeville came the expression *the same old song and dance* which then, in a whole slew of early films exposed, through skin, dress, and masks, the barbarisms of an emerging exclusivity. The more civilized the dance club, the more disciplined the delivery of the spirits, and with this the intoxication. One could consider the executioner's role in New York's Apollo Club in Harlem, or *Princess TamTam*, a 1930s film made in France where Josephine Baker dances to release herself from her patron and patronizing audience. Another example is Charlie Chaplin's redress of the dance in *The Great Dictator* of 1940.

74, here p. 66.

8　*Ibid.*, p. 67.

9　Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 5-6.

10　Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life* [1951], tr. Edmund F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), Pt 1: #38.

When it came to checking my memory of the Hammersmith concert, I did what one nowadays does: I searched the Internet and found the entire event on YouTube[11]—and, after this, a whole slew of reviews. Listening to the concert, I felt the songs coming back with a surprising vividness. The songs variously spoof Bob Dylan, Punk, with plenty of jabs at Disco music and Rock & Roll. Forty-eight minutes in, Zappa issued his invitation to the dance. First, we learn that this invitation was not a one-off, and, second, that Zappa had something to prove. He calls out to the crowd: it's "audience participation time … This is it folks, the big one. I can see that you are overwhelmed with ecstasy—just calm yourselves." With a strategically misleading beat, Zappa continues with a prelude of suspect explanation: "Each time, we try to do something a little bit different. … But somehow it always winds up the same thing. Two people with no natural rhythm fidget around on the stage while we play a song that they can't dance to. Maybe it's a trend." He calls up two girls, Lucy and Caroline: "Do you have natural rhythm? … This is the supreme test." And then to the audience: "Do these people have natural rhythm?" Interestingly, the many concert reviewer address the dance but less the question of natural rhythm and less my own takeaway, that Zappa seemed to want to humiliate the dancers if not also, the entire audience: his fan-base.

Zappa seemed to want to expose a false belief: if rhythm comes so naturally to human beings then, whatever the musical offering, anyone can, without pause, dance in time to the first beat. This gives us one link to the "musical offering" that in, the "steps" of the dialectic of enlightenment, becomes "the carefully graduated sacrifice [*das wohl abgestufte Opfer*] and the labor of enslaved men mediated by command"[12]: the command to dance. Invitations to dance once captured the humiliation first of those placed into camps of concentrated labor—so many Jews made to dance—but then extended to the capital that structures culture top-down. Adorno and Horkheimer were always unraveling the *claims* of

---

11 https://youtu.be/gJSR_uvDGok?si=Tvw9ly5wgbSaGkvD

12 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 5.

natural rhythm as a rhythm naturalized by ever-hardening conventions. Finding ourselves easily adapting to conventions or norms, we rational-ize or naturalize them as though nature handed them down to us. Were we to see them as made by us, we could unmake them, but this is what, precisely, we discipline ourselves *not* to do. Through the wrong sort of self-discipline, one associated with the production of iron or metal back to the Golden Calf, we become identical to the social discipline (almost) without remainder. We must keep the metaphor of metal in mind. What happens in the modern discipline of the self happens to the minds that follow academic disciplines to the iron of the machine-carved letter.

For Zappa, natural rhythm is a repeated motif: His "Dancing Fool," is sung as a first person confessional prayer by the proverbial fool who, challenged in the disco, wants not to give up.

> I don't know much about dancing / That's why I got this song / One of my legs is shorter than the other and both my feet's too long / 'Cause now right along with 'em I got no natural rhythm / But I go dancing every night / Hoping one day I might get it right …. I hear that beat, I jump outta my seat / But I can't compete … The disco folks all dressed up … They has a fit while I commit my social suicide /…/ The beat goes on and I'm so wrong / 'Cause I'm a dancing fool.[13]

At a disco, satisfaction is as immediate as the joy of feeling inseparable from the music. Any resistance to the ease of the ecstasy finds no place. From A to Z, this is disco fever, the Saturday-night fever that, before the 1960s or 70s, was already defining the terms of "popular" culture with a cutting edge. Gershwin's "I got rhythm," sung by Ethel Waters in the 1930s, celebrates the satisfaction of getting her man: "I got rhythm, I got music, I got my man". Who could ask for anything more? At first, I thought that getting one's man beat out the rhythm, the music, and the green pastures. But then I realized, the song was squaring all four parts nicely way. The song is about being satisfied with your "lot" in life. But when the song is over, "old man trouble" returns to remind you that for

---

13 https://genius.com/Frank-zappa-dancin-fool-lyrics

all you've "got," you haven't got basic civil rights or the civility owed you, as the song suggestively says, "round my door."

Consider the measure that dictates the behavior of church-goers, political ralliers, sports crowds, and audiences of artistic events. Collective participation, as diagnosed for the dialectic of enlightenment, assumes ordered and disordered steps variously to produce large and small differences between, say, Catholic rituals of Communion, Protestant restraints for the singing of hymns, or the more ecstatic dance in American Black Baptist churches or among Hassidic Jews. And then consider the concert hall where audiences move in both a desirable and undesirable stasis, as collected individual bodies, to what they are given to see and to hear. In the concert hall of serous music, with a prohibition on too much or any bodily movement, concentrated listening emerges as a norm. With the prohibition lifted, an audience is encouraged to get up out of their seats! Standing up is meant to turn passivity to activity, assuming concentrated listening to have become seated through constipation. But what music jibes most with the new steps of the standing individual—one produced in or out of time?

Behind Adorno's *invitation* was Carl Maria von Weber's 1819 "Aufforderung zum Tanze," opus 65, a concert rondo for piano, a piece designed for exemplary listening *but not* for dancing. Weber's dance, extending a hand of marriage or harmony, was already a *disinvitation* to dance. Adorno focused less on the piece itself, but on how it had been picked up by "Hungarian" operetta, and then on cultural and social settings, where, true to the etymology of the term "humiliation," persons got beaten down to pulp, as chickpeas to hummus, to prove them no better than the dirtiest soil on the ground. From operetta emerged a popularity of music that pitted one music, jazzed up. against a serious music. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, quoting from an untimely observation of Nietzsche, Horkheimer and Adorno noted the "stylized barbarism" of the jazz musician who, playing a "simple minuet" by Beethoven, condescends to begin on the beat [*mit dem Taktteil*] only to bring out the natural-

ness of the syncopation that contradicts the classical measure.[14] Here, the *condescension* mattered to any theorist interested in the cultural posturing of one individual or group asserting superiority over another.

Today, when moral and political philosophers theorize humiliation, they tell of the undressing of a person, the stripping away of someone's dignity.[15] Dignity and self-respect make for a *decent society*, where decency, laden with theological connotations, often comes with the hand luggage of justice for a *just society*. The investigation often focuses on war where prisoners are brutalized beyond the admissible codes as laid down by, say, the Geneva Convention. Rules for *just war* come with an etiquette or gentleman's agreement. To flout the rules of the game is to strip humans of their humanity. The dehumanization is humiliation at its worst, where reduction to an ignoble animal or dysfunctional machine renders a subject a statistical number or body-bag for a social virus. When nation-states assume no responsibility for their defeats in war or failures of revolution, they tend to channel their humiliation with claims of victimization and the need for evermore security. They seek identification with a savior who promises to turn their weakness back to strength. The OED defines "humiliation" as a making "humble," but humility sometimes becomes the making of *humble pie*, which, in the 1970s, happened to name a not-very famous rock band. Being made to eat humble pie is how persons are put back in their place, how they are made to see their humiliation as a *just dessert*. One German term for humiliation is *Demütigung,* connoting shame and disgrace. Another is *Erniedrigung*. The entire spectrum of raising and lowering, of strengthening and weakening, comes with many terms, and covers of forgetfulness, repression, self-censure, and prohibition.

In his *Aufforderung zum Tanz*, Adorno analyzed humiliation as an administered action against a modern war-ridden mass-consciousness. The

---

14 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 101.

15 Cf. Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löfflmann, "Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives," *Global Studies Quarterly* 1(1) (March 2021). DOI:10.1093/isagsq/ksab002.

Aufforderung drew from Freud's analysis offered in 1918 of a beaten child. The analysis captured the neurotic sickness and shame that, through paternal discipline, was re-channeled through a technology or form of regressive music into promises of an infantile happiness. Before arriving at my theme of the disinviting dance, I considered bringing Zappa's "mothers of invention" to a feminist critique that would turn the *mother-fuckers* back to the first waters of their invention: to Mother Earth or to the oceanic rhythms that, claimed natural, were meant to more disturb than cater to teenage fantasies of masturbation. But I got distracted by all that beating boys could mean, when, in the contrapasso, battered boys became almost in a heartbeat over-willing combatants in wars of conquest and domination. In *Dialectic of* Enlightenment, we read of the rapture and ecstasy as a "pacified form the beating and biting." And then of the "recurring, never-changing natural processes" that are "drummed" into the subjects through the ritualized "rhythm of work" to the "monotonous beat of the barbaric club and the rod [*Keule und Prügelstock*]." The emerging "symbols" become abstract "expressions of the fetish," a repetitive mirroring of a "nature" that is really a constructed nature that keeps the "social compulsion" in place.[16]

Adorno described the invitation to the dance as an *entertainment* decreed or prescribed, sustained by an advertisement of happiness to be delivered. But not being delivered in truth, the happiness is denied twice, once by the false promise and then by the substitute satisfaction. He analyzed the broken promise as a false gift or offering, where the unexchangeable commodity is marked by an economics of pure exchange. In his *History and Freedom* lectures, he described the gift twice denied as the "humiliation of the one who is joyless as a joy that is refused for a second time."[17] It was like the Ode to Joy reduced to a sound-bite, prepackaged again and again to cover over all or any suffering. In *Invitation to the Dance*, he wrote likewise: "Decreed happiness [*Das verordnete Glück*]

---

16 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 85-6.

17 Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (London: Polity, 2006), p. 146.

looks exactly like what its name suggests: to partake of it, the fortunate neurotic must also sacrifice the last bit of reason left remaining by repression and regression, and for the sake of the psychoanalyst, has no choice but to find inspiration in the trashy film, the expensive but bad meal at the French restaurant, the serious 'drink' and sexuality reduced to doses of ''sex.'"[18] "Drink" and "sex" were imported into his German sentences as American terms. The diagnosis was of a collective catharsis, an uninhibited series of steps whereby "the hideous social order perpetuates itself" as a mirror-image of the collective audience. The pleasure must be in surfeit, in excess; frantic and fanatic but also full of rage in recall of the discipline and whip of the angry father. Domination reproduced, domination desired, became a slaughterhouse to silence the screams of pain. It was a diagnosis of the Oedipal complex, from which also came the analysis of ear-covering Odysseus. In one footnote of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we thus read of Odysseus beating his breast [*die Brust schlagen*] to bring out the violent split between his body and his will.[19] Beating his breast, he denies immediate satisfaction to wait instead for a distant and different future. When, however, the self-incurred punishment becomes too self-praising, the triumph of a self-preserving reason turns again into a false promotion of the self.

With an oppressor's superiority, one person humiliates another person. But then comes the humiliation born from the weakness of will, where persons willingly put themselves down. In every pull of the master-slave dialectic, the dependency between the I and the Other withdraws from an individual the upright sense of the ego being intact. In the invitation to the dance, a dancer is thus *summoned* to enact the invitation's terms. Being a command or summons, its force comes with a rhythm to beat the dancer down, to humiliate the dancer with an impossible pulse. Does the dancer then do what the dancer is invited to do? No one need do what one is commanded to do. But what does it mean and how much can it mean to resist a summons? And is the resistance even possible?

---

18 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, #38.

19 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 258-59.

Adorno often alluded to the humiliating dance. In his essays for *Prisms*, we find Proust's discomfort or Kafka's panic invoked to capture the space and experience "of the déjà vu," a space populated "by doubles, revenants, buffoons, Hasidic dancers, boys who ape their teachers and then suddenly appear ancient, archaic; at one point, the surveyor wonders whether his assistants are fully alive."[20] Here, one is reminded of Offenbach's use of Hoffmann's mechanized dolls or of Charlie Chaplin's dance for *Modern Times* especially when Adorno supplemented his line-up with persons "manufactured on the assembly-line" as "mechanically reproduced copies" of what human beings once were.[21] Adorno would explicitly mention the "epsilons" or menial laborers from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, to write: "The social origin of the individual ultimately reveals itself as the power to annihilate the individual altogether."[22] The power of annihilating individuals was linked with the sort of memories that disconcert us or disturb us as "uncanny," as Freud used that term.

Consider Zappa performing a thought experiment. If his invitation was to a non- danceable dance, perhaps he was seeking a music that the culture industry could neither entertain nor absorb, a music that showed that there is more to life than disco. Perhaps he was offering one of those twisted mirrors to catch the conscience of overly devoted fans mechanically wound up by the promise of satisfaction. In his invitation to the dance, Zappa offered *The Black Page*—a black page covered with as many notes as possible. At first sight, it was meant to seem impossible to play. From Alphonse Allais's empty score for a deaf man or from John Cage's scoring of a silence that wasn't silent, we learn about necessary incongruities or mismatches between score and realization. So think of a performer like Zappa delivering an invitation where, with too many words and too many notes, something like a boomerang effect affirms the wit

---

20 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, tr. Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge MA: MIT, 1967), pp. 252-53.

21 *loc. cit.*

22 *loc. cit.*

of a perfect mismatch of dancer to dance to bring attention mostly to an audience craving an excess of meaning from their idol.

Zappa told of scoring the music song for instruments to obscure both pitch and beat: percussive synthesizer, vibes, dubbing machines, and an osmotic harp. Then he offered a twist.

> All right … Let me tell you 'bout this song. This song was originally constructed as a drum solo. That's right. Now, after Terry learned how to play "The Black Page" on the drum set, I figured, well, maybe it would be good for other instruments. So I wrote a melody that went along with the drum solo, and that turned into "The Black Page, Part 1, The Hard Version." Then I said, well, what about the other people in the world who might enjoy the melody of "The Black Page" but couldn't really approach its statistical density in its basic form? So, I went to work and constructed a little ditty which is now being set up for you with this little disco-type vamp. This is "The Black Page, Part 2, The Easy of 11 18 Teen-age New York Version." Get down with your bad selves so to speak to "The Black Page, Part 2".[23]

When Zappa turned the *difficult* version into an *easy* one, he played to disco's demand for a vamp, where *vamp* today is a jazz term for a prelude that prepares what is to come. Originally, a vamp was a fabrication, a part of shoe-making where one put a piece of covering fabric on a boot. Linked also to improvisation as invention, it soon became a song-style associated with those who, in kitschy excess, liked to *vamp* or *ham* it up. Inviting dancers to dance to an easy version of *The Black Page*, Zappa removed the safety of the shoe-cover for an audience arriving at his concerts pre-footed to revel.

In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno described the "boomerang" effect, where, through humiliation, one harms another while yet putting a meaningless world on display for those who are desperately craving meaning.[24] In "Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis," he found the most telling irony in claims of civilization to lie with humanity's deepest humiliation—*tief-*

---

23 https://genius.com/Frank-zappa-black-page-2-zappa-in-new-york-lyrics

24 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Pt 1: #66.

sten Erniedrigung—and precisely when the medium, as he quoted Marshall McCluhan's most famous line, just became the message.[25] Through reduction or demotion, all media transmissions became, like artificial persons, devoided of qualities. Persons became empty vessels as pages became empty regardless of all the words or notes blackening the white pages. Sometimes boomerangs produced only empty effects, pointless points or targets. But sometimes they worked like the exaggerations (*Übertreibungen*) without which the wit of a properly critical analysis cannot do. "In psychoanalysis nothing is true except its exaggerations."[26] Adorno wrote this most quotable line in *Minima Moralia* to remind readers of how meaningless slogans could assume a new meaning only if carried by a wit sourced back to the burlesque, to the *burla* or ridicule of hyperbole. To send out an invitation to a dance only had a point if one got the *wit*, the twists and turns of the key words that granted insight into the disabling dances so characteristic of the most degraded forms of modern life. Wit became the underdetermined measure of exaggeration, the drives of exaggeration that supported modernism's gestures of a dance that was no longer a dance of traditional steps.

Zappa invited not a mass or collective audience to dance but self-selecting or hand-picked individuals. Still, the mass phenomenon and the mass deception were seemingly his target. His dancers were meant to perform before an audience that by all accounts responded with great enthusiasm and applause. But already in 1970, Zappa was complaining that his audience had become his fans "for the wrong reasons."[27] "People," he said, "would come to the concerts and wait for me to do something outrageous—they wouldn't care whether we played or not, they were waiting to be shocked out of their minds."[28] To come to a concert

---

25 Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords*. tr. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), #8, pp. 269-70.

26 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Pt 1: #29.

27 In Steve Peacock, "The Sounds Talk-In. Frank Zappa" *Sounds* (5 Dec. 1970), https://www.afka.net/Articles/1970-12_Sounds.htm

28 loc. cit.

wanting to be outraged or shocked guaranteed that you wouldn't be—or that if you were, the shock would inspire only rapturous satisfaction. Zappa prepackaged the shock into the dance to expose the wrong re-action. If rhythm could be (de)naturalized, so too shock. Starting out as mothers-fuckers of *invention*, were the mothers really out to expose the *currents* of the modern *convention*?

In a key passage from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,[29] Horkheimer and Adorno described the fallen creature, the one humiliated as attracting or courting spectators. So long as the spectacle of suffering did nothing to hamper the joy and laughter, then the one inflicting the humiliation felt justified. With justification came the rationalization for the discipline in a punishment that was administered less to those who refused to march in step than to those who were excluded from the dance from the get go. We read of the one who "leads the dance" performing the barbaric *mimesis of mimesis* through exaggerated gestures and high-pitched words: the shrieks and bellowing of the great dictator. With the biblical deluge in the background, the storm-trooper, so named, enacts the violence of the one who *thrusts* into battle. Not *Sturm und Drang* but *Sturm und Stoss*. Flooding a battlefield in blood was a dialectical image drawn already from France, as also the political spectacle where a mass crowd was drowned out by the foulest of words. The more foul, the greater the ecstasy of spectators. Horkheimer and Adorno quoted from Victor Hugo's chapter in the *L'homme qui rit.* "Les Tempêtes d'hommes pires que les tempêtes d'océans—Storms of men are worse than storms of oceans."[30] And then "Of all the lava spewed forth from the crater of the human mouth, the most calamitous is merriment."[31] Merriment means to have fun but also to make fun of. In a chapter, "Magister Elegantiarum," Hugo had described the many clubs of London, The Fun Club or the Romp Club where:

> One picked up a woman in the street, a passer-by, a bourgeois, as old and as ugly as possible; she was pushed into the club, by

29 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 152-3 and 88-9.

30 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 86.

31 *Ibid*, p. 88.

force, and made to walk on her hands, feet in the air, her face veiled by her falling skirts. If she showed bad grace, the part of her no longer veiled would be lashed or singed [*cinglait*] with a whip. The riders of this type of merry-go-round were called "jumpers." [*Les écuyers de ce genre de manège s'appelaient «les sauteurs»*].[32]

In a contagious pandemic of pandemonium, the crack of the whip, of women or of animals, was what hurt the ears most of all. Schopenhauer hated the noise of the whip, while it sent Nietzsche into a tailspin. What hurt more, the whip or the noise? Horkheimer and Adorno wrote by reference to Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, with a pinch of Voltaire:

When captains of industry and fascist leaders have animals around them, they are not domestic poodles but great danes and lion cubs. They are there to add spice to power through the terror they inspire. So blind is the murderous fascist colossus in face of nature that he conceives of animals only as means of humiliating humans.[33]

In German, the "domestic poodles" were the "Pinscher" known for their love of children but also for their aggressive bite. (Had they been poodles, they would have reminded us of Goethe's Faust scene "mit dem Pudel.") The translated animal got taken up by Ben Watson for *Dialectic of Poodle Play*.[34] It's a well-informed book, and not least when it comes to describing the "bravura display of originality" in *The Black Page*.[35] Watson described a "complex chart," a "dense score … to drive young musicians into a frenzy."[36] He quoted from Cornelius Cardew's "Wiggly Lines and Wobbly Music." Cardew had written: "I've heard that people who select educational music take care to select pieces that are largely in crotchets and quavers, rather than semiquavers and demisemiquavers … to avoid

---

32 https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Hugo_-_Œuvres_complètes,_Impr._nat.,_Roman,_tome_VIII.djvu/199

33 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 210.

34 Ben Watson, *Frank Zappa. The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

35 *Ibid.*, p. 334.

36 *loc. cit.*

the hysteria produced in young learners by a 'black page'."[37] Taking up the hysteria of a fan base, given the "jam" of so much "musical material," Watson also quoted from Edwin Pouncey's review of the concert of 1978, to show that from the confusion came only rapturous applause:

> Zappa invited two members of the audience who couldn't dance a step to dance to the next number. "Yes, for two minutes the stage is yours. He ended up with two wonderful loonies, one who announced himself as Eric Dolphy and had the slogan "Out To Lunch" painted on the back of his flasher's mac. They proceeded to jerk, frog, stomp and bump to an intricate jazz type number. They were great and rapturous applause followed as they left the stage.[38]

Edwin Pouncey's review actually said much more. He described a "fun-filled spectacular" that was yet akin to a "soft core porn movie at 300 miles per hour, interspersed with jazz elements, all sandwiched between the unique Zappa sense of the absurd."[39] He listed the songs—"Titties 'n' Beer," "Punky's Whips," and "Broken Hearts Are For Assholes"— all lascivious by titular suggestion to cater to teenage fantasies. Zappa was entertaining such fantasies not to satisfy the youth but to expose the infantilism in adults who couldn't move beyond their first broken hearts. Shadowing the infantilism was Zappa's own agedness, a sense of Zappa performing his own now golden "oldies" with boredom. Nevertheless, Pouncey's conclusion was upbeat in every lascivious sense. Having heard "The Torture Never Stops," he claimed to have found no competitor around to beat Zappa off the stage. Zappa remained "unexcelled"—and that if his readers couldn't see this, they could "ram it up [their] poopshoot[s]."[40]

From shit back to the lava spewing from the mouth came, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the "ringing laughter that had "always de-

---

37 Cornelius Cardew, "Wiggly Lines and Wobbly Music," *Studio International* 192/984 (1976): pp. 247–55, here p. 252.

38 Watson, *Frank Zappa*, pp. 334-35.

39 Edwin Pouncey, "Zappa's Fun-filled Spectacular," *Sounds* (Feb. 4 1978): p. 44.

40 *loc. cit.*

nounced civilization [*hat zu jeder Zeit die Zivilisation denunziert*]."[41] Notice the always "at all times" that allowed the authors again to exaggerate the doubleness of a civilization that denounces persons while, given its barbaric tendency, finds the words backfiring onto itself. Civilization undoes itself. The denunciation overall carried the names of the perpetrators of injustice who demanded the names of those to be put down. In the exchange, Lady justice sat with the dust of the dead in one hand and the abstract power of capital in the other. From this then came De Sade's observation put into Juliette's mouth regarding the nervous thrill of the spectacle that left the wretched in tears. The battle of blood was a battle of the sexes, but also a bloodbath where individuals were magnanimously spared their humiliation on condition alone that they played along, accepting their degradation (*ihre Erniedrigung*) as fair game.

Seeking synonyms for "danceable," we get a list of familiar terms: *rhythmic, hummable, tuneful, catchy, rooted, and soulful*. If a song is not catchy or does not catch on, it is because it lacks the rhythm that beats naturally and smoothly to the pulse of advertisements. Catchy songs work like advertising jingles: the immediacy or popularity of their appeal affirms their smooth reproduction that makes for the perfect fit of subject to object: the dancer to the dance. When we speak of a song as a "hit," we see it as coming with a punch or as making a punch hole in the culture—were we only to strip it of its easy satisfaction or familiarity. One catches a hit-song as a virus as part of a cultural pandemic. Or one catches the song out an act of truth or conscience. Adorno many times described the primacy of adjustment as a demand made on musicians or dancers who strive to imitate the music. He noted a substitution of aesthetic technique for a cheap display of tricks. The counterfeit was how one got away with something, how one coped with an obstacle as though impervious to anything that the obstacle might mean. He associated the bad tricks played out with an unwillingness to take risks, so that, in the name of humility, different modes of humiliation became an easy life-style. The will to resist humiliation was paralyzed. Disability became the modern condition.

---

41 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, p. 88.

The dialectic of enlightenment seeks a music that won't fit. Unfitting-ness is the counter-demand that cuts through the social arrangements of any and all musics that seem so easily to capitulate to an administration of culture premised on easy exchange. And wit (*Witz*) has always meant, at best, a way of bringing out the unfitting, the incongruous, or the mis-match. But only very rarely is a resistant music or wit found either in domains designated as *popular*—as in film or jazz—or as *serious* as in con-cert music. Sometimes, we hear Adorno, with and without Horkheimer, writing undialectically, as though the popular prohibited resistance *tout court* or by definition. But usually he complicates the matter by warning serious musicians not to self-isolate or self-censor so as to void their mu-sical practice of any social truth-content or target. And then of course, we find him describing some forms of popular music as evidently seeping into a seriousness as serious music becomes popular either by choice or by a media marketing that is determined to sell only one bill of goods. One cannot trust the social category of either the popular or the seri-ous per se, which is why, in his *Philosophy of New Music,* Adorno had to argue that "the violence that mass music inflicts" on people's lives finds its antithesis only in a "music that withdraws." Here is the dance that must dance in the dark. Only with the suspension of beautiful sem-blance or with the refusal of direct satisfaction or pleasure can music take on the "darkness and guilt of the world." Such music alone withdrew into silence. As most mass music drowned out the silence—the space for thought—only a music that refused to speak—and there were very few examples—would float, like a small piece of wit, as the "true message in the bottle."[42] But if there was a true message, there had also to be a false one, and the false in the moment of catastrophe 80 years ago from today seemed almost entirely to have taken over the whole.

In 1978, the critics wrote about an aging Zappa. For *Melody Maker*, Karl Dallas likened Zappa's return to the stage to Varèse's return after a hiatus from "composing for a quarter of a century because the New York

---

42 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music,* tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Min-nesota MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), pp. 55 and 102.

musical establishment was giving him a hard time."[43] But when Zappa returned, he only offered noisy songs carrying "politically charged titles" like "I Promise Not To Come In Your Mouth."[44] Behind the charge, Dallas found less an electricity or eccentricity than something so very normal: Zappa's desire just to stay home and make music. Was this defeatism or a more subtle way of disinviting an audience to his dance?

For *New Musical Express*, Charles Shaar Murray sensed the ironic coldness of a selling out. He noted how rarely Zappa was now appearing with the Mothers, seemingly to avoid upsetting "impressionable young minds who might not be prepared to cope with him."[45] Murray thought Zappa was no longer on "the outside edge of weird," but now only assuming the pretense of being weird: "Here's a guy with shoulder-length hair … falling around a meatcleaver nose resting on a Groucho 'tache in a face that's a living definition of 'sallow'. … He's such a misfit that you'd rather take Sid Vicious home to have tea with your mum."[46] Murray stressed the gratuitous entertainment factor as Frank Zappa became another Frank Sinatra, so that, with an "avuncular jollity," a good time could be had by all."[47] Zappa had become a rebel-entertainer without cause, a singer who caused no trouble.

For *The Guardian*, Robin Denselow concurred: Zappa's "comeback" was filled with "over-cynicism, bad jokes, and boredom."[48] Far from inviting his audience to the dance, he seemed only to be pointing his finger to the empty fanaticism of a fan-base of poodles already domesticated.

When Max Paddison took up Zappa in 1982, saw a once young Zappa approaching an Adornian mode of concentration and compulsive

---

43 Karl Dallas, "Carry on Composing," *Melody Maker* (Jan. 28 1978). https://www.afka.net/Articles/1978-01_Melody_Maker.htm.

44 *loc. cit.*

45 Charles Shaar Murray, "I just wanna be an all-round entertainer. Frank Zappa. Hammersmith Odeon", *New Musical Express* (4 Feb. 1978)*.* https://afka.net/Articles/1978-02_NME.htm.

46 *loc. cit.*

47 *loc. cit.*

48 Robin Denselow, "Frank Zappa," *The Guardian* (Jan 25 1978), p. 18.

self-examination, whereby music could be brought to its own "in-built" conflict or "'immanent contradiction."[49] Had the young Zappa subverted "the stock formulae" of the cultural distribution of pop, and if so, could he still do this if the subculture became mainstream on the stage?

In *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart and the Secret History of Maximalism*, Michel Delville and Andrew Norris took up the theme of humiliation when describing Zappa's "Lost in Whirlpool" (Lost Episodes) as "a blues lament for a failed relationship," a failure for a child or young musician like Zappa who is "literally treated like shit."[50] Blues embarrassment became then channelled into humiliation where, in a *contrapasso*, the punishment of a child speeds up the steps of "clockwork poodles" of a fanbase that no longer knows what it means to feel the blues.

Contrasting the young and old Zappa, as the critics do, triggers Adorno's question regarding *the aging* of any music, which, claiming itself *new*, leaves its contradictions only empty and cold. Using Adorno to rescue something in Zappa's songs might result only in showing the late Zappa to be too bored even to be interested in the project of rescue. In 1954, when Adorno lectured on the aging of the new music, he contrasted the one who withdraws to compose a music according to its laws and necessities with the helpless and hopeless solitary sitter who refuses anymore to take steps.[51]

Adorno's concluded "Perennial Fashion—Jazz": "I am nothing, I am filth, no matter what they do to me, it serves me right."[52] The perennial fashion mattered for the prismatic analysis. The dancer assumed the mask of Dostoevsky's criminal who collaborated with the prosecutor as persecutor. With Kafka, the dancer became the bug for a jitter-bug, where, through naturalized reflexes, the ecstasy testified to a life where

---

49 Max Paddison, "The Critique Criticised: Adorno and Popular Music," *Popular Music* 2 (1982): pp. 201-218, here pp. 214-216.

50 Michel Delville and Andrew Norris, *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart and the Secret History of Maximalism* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005), pp. 71-2.

51 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Aging of the New Music," *Telos* (1988): pp. 95-116.

52 Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 132.

nothing more is demanded beyond life's "barren existence." The "rave" at having got all one desires came with no boycott. The acquiescence had no complaint. The "parodistic exaggeration" of enthusiastic compliance fall to an exaggeration of no consequence. The outcome of the trial was predetermined before any step was taken. What remained was only a degraded instinct allied to the sublimation of the aesthetic. In the sublimation, "victims" were metamorphosed into masters as monster insects—predators attracted predators in a dance of humiliation where only misfortune delivered pleasure. The humiliator triumphantly revoked real pleasure and freedom through a discipline industrialized for a collective that denied individuality to all and every dancer alike.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno described the mass guilt of desire and passivity of reaction turning to a resentment as mass groups repeatedly participated in the display of their own "degraded" condition. The objective reproduction of their humiliation demanded their identification with the display, a display brought under the rubric of vulgarity and commonness. He illustrated the infantilism in the advertisement that shows a child eating chocolate with eyes almost closed, as though a sin.[53] In *Minima Moralia*, he extended the blindness to any group that, with deep-cut wounds, capitulated to some form of patriarchal domination.[54] But he worried about a pseudo-psychology emerging where, in a "melting pot" or "melange," all wounds would seek the same cure in false bottles of the one democratized drink that fits all. He described "humiliation" as becoming inextricable from "fascist propaganda and hence fascism itself"—when Hitler invited his people to eat the *Eintopfgericht*. A nation humiliated by its defeat in the First World War would reunite through one-pot meals. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the one-pot became the *melting pot*, the liquidation of all differences to the same on both sides of *the great pond*.[55] From the *Volkswagen* to *chewing gum*, critical theory

---

53 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minnesota MN: University of Minnesota Press 1997), p. 240.

54 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Pt.1: #66.

55 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of* Enlightenment, pp. xvii & 244.

entered the factory to break down what was falsely being manufactured into unified goods. The doubled fragmentation (inherent in *critical theory*) worked in two directions, to expose a world in pieces and to leave a world in pieces against a world falsely synthesized.

Exodus 32: Moses distances himself from those he has taken out of Egypt. His brother Aaron steps in to instruct the people to melt their gold rings and necklaces to make the shape of a golden calf. Before the calf, they dance. Schoenberg's "Dance of the Golden Calf," premiered in 1951, captured the "wild" of the wilderness in the percussive use of "jazz" beats. The dance was danced to put opera's future into question. In his essay "Sacred Fragment",[56] Adorno sought the remains of the sacred in a prosaic language given over to the secular image. Assertions of authority fed the "shadow-side of modern individuation" where individuals spoke words casting neither shadow nor light. He found in the opera a refusal to sing so that, without any percussive monotony, the dance could "hit home with maximum force." In the same year of 1951, Gene Kelly saluted the rhythm of a tap-dance brought from America to Paris. Better the rhythm of a painter singing "I got rhythm" than the aggressive goose-stepping of an army that had so recently occupied the city—*une occupation plus allemande.*

"All are free to dance" has long been the promise of liberation, where being free *from* tyranny assumes a democratic condition not yet, and far from, achieved. In 1968, Zappa made a promise with "Take Your Clothes Off When You Dance": "There will come a time when everybody who is lonely will be free to sing and dance and love!"[57] Adorno had just died, and, for many, so too the promise of Schoenberg's modernism. Given the liquidation of a society or culture, everything was seen to have melted into air: first time tragedy, second time farce, time and time again. When the oldest song and dance became the new "metal" of music, it was for

---

56　Theodor W. Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 225-48.

57　https://www.zappa-analysis.com/take-your-clothes-off-while-you-dance1.htm

a rock music whose heavy style was said by hook and crook to *catch the ear* of the listener.

For the dialectic of enlightenment, every line of a song, like every catchy movement for the body, must be read tendentially for a critical theory to speak a truth against lies without yet putting the truth into words. Words of waiting and withdrawal are used against words spoken out loud to release the residue of meanings concealed by the hardness of positive sentences. I have tried to capture here what I think critical theory does best and what I have tried always to do: namely, follow a thought-image to watch every step taken turn back on itself. Through the inversion of steps, we get the wit that breaks through the false rationalizations that dominate a walking and talking that claims as often to be serious as it does popular. From critical theory, we learn that, for every generation A-Z, the spin and turn of the body politic must work through every conceivable contortion of arms and words—and most of all when the body seems so totally to have been taken in. Any engagement with the dialectic of enlightenment demands that we take difficult steps through the steel- or iron-willed rhythm (*stählernen Rhythmus*) that beats people down to bring the aesthetic and the political into a perfectly false totality.[58] It's how the analysis of any invitation to the enlightened dance begins and ends. From the invitation comes a dis-invitation, an invitation to think with different steps.[59]

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. ([1951]/2005) *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life.* Tr. Edmund F.N. Jephcott. London: Verso.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1967) *Prisms.* Tr. Samuel and Sherry Weber. Cambridge MA: MIT.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1988) "The Aging of the New Music," *Telos*, pp. 95-116.

---

58 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 128.

59 Thanks to many colleagues and audiences with whom I have discussed the themes of this essay A-Z.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1992) *Quasi una Fantasia*. Tr. Rodney Livingstone. London: Verso.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1997) *Gesammelte Schriften in 20 Bänden*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1998) *Aesthetic Theory*. Tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minnesota MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. (2005) *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords*. Tr. Henry Pickford, New York: Columbia University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. (2006) *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*. Tr. Rodney Livingstone. London: Polity.

Adorno, Theodor W. (2019) *Philosophy of New Music,* tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Minnesota MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Ashby, Arved (1999) "Frank Zappa and the Anti-Fetishist Orchestra," *The Musical Quarterly* 83/4: pp. 557-606.

Borders, James (2001) "Form and the Concept Album: Aspects of Modernism in Frank Zappa's Early Releases," *Perspectives of New Music* 39(1): pp. 118–160.

Cardew, Cornelius (1976) "Wiggly Lines and Wobbly Music," *Studio International* 192/984: pp. 247–55.

Dallas, Karl (1978) "Carry on Composing," *Melody Maker* (Jan. 28) https://www.afka.net/Articles/1978-01_Melody_Maker.htm.

Delville, Michel and Andrew Norris (2005) *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart and the Secret History of Maximalism*. Cambridge: Salt.

Denselow, Robin (1978) "Frank Zappa" *The Guardian* (Jan 25), p. 18.

Homolar, Alexandra and Georg Löfflmann (2021) "Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives," *Global Studies Quarterly* 1(1). DOI:10.1093/isagsq/ksab002.

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* Eds. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, tr. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Kracauer, Siegfried (1995) "Travel and Dance". In: *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays,* tr., Thomas Y. Levin, pp. 65-74. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Marlow-Stevens, Elliot (2022) "'What is music? Anything can be music': Frank Zappa's theory of art." *Popular Music* 41: pp. 37-55.

Murray, Charles Shaar (1978) "I just wanna be an all-round entertainer. Frank Zappa. Hammersmith Odeon," *New Musical Express* (4 Feb.). https://afka.net/Articles/1978-02_NME.htm.

Paddison, Max (1982) "The Critique Criticised: Adorno and Popular Music," *Popular Music* 2: pp. 201-218.

Peacock, Steve (1970) "The Sounds Talk-In. Frank Zappa," *Sounds* (5 Dec.) https://www.afka.net/Articles/1970-12_Sounds.htm.

Pouncey, Edwin (1978) "Zappa's Fun-filled Spectacular," *Sounds* (Feb. 4): p. 44.

Volpacchio, Florindo (1991) "The Mother of All Interviews: Zappa on Music and Society," *Telos* 87: pp. 124-136.

Watson, Ben (1993) *Frank Zappa. The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Wragg, D. (2001) "'Or Any Art at All?: Frank Zappa Meets Critical Theory." *Popular Music* 20(2): pp. 205–222.

Zappa, Frank (1974) *Apostrophe.* Milwaukee WI: Hal, Leonard.

Reason and Self-Reflection in
Dialectic of Enlightenment

Henry W. Pickford[1]

Abstract: This essay addresses two influential interpretations of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Habermas's charge of 'performative contradiction' is shown to rely on a particular understanding of the exercise of reason. The alternative interpretation of *Dialectic* as a disclosive critique by Honneth and others avoids the charge of self-contradiction but renders obscure first, how exactly it fulfills Horkheimer and Adorno's repeated injunction that reason must undergo "self-reflection," and second – as Honneth acknowledges – how the results of disclosive critique are to be expressed in rational judgments, truth claims, and so on. Drawing on Aristotle's distinction between two praxis-oriented forms of thought, the essay enriches the notion of rational activity beyond Habermas's characterization and suggests, in answer to Honneth, how we can speak logically about our rational activity as way of being that results from disclosive critique.

Introduction

On its eightieth anniversary, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* remains a text to which one could apply the title Adorno gave one of his essays on Hegel: "Skoteinos oder wie zu lesen sei." The reception history of the book, especially by subsequent members of the Frankfurt School tradition of Critical Theory, attests to the continued attempts to understand what claims the book is making and how it is making them.

My *terminus a quo* is Habermas's objection that Horkheimer and Adorno commit the cardinal sin of performative contradiction, and that

---

1   Henry W. Pickford is Professor of German and Philosophy at Duke University. He is the author of *The Sense of Semblance: Philosophical Analyses of Holocaust Art*; *Thinking with Tolstoy and Wittgenstein: Expression, Emotion, and Art*; co-author of *In Defense of Intuitions: A New Rationalist Manifesto*; co-editor of *Der aufrechte Gang im windschiefen Kapitalismus: Modelle kritischen Denkens*; editor and translator of Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* and *Selected Early Poems* of Lev Loseff; and author of over thirty articles and book chapters. He is currently co-authoring the book *Adorno: A Critical Life*, co-editing the *Oxford Handbook to Adorno*, and editing and translating a selection from Adorno's notebooks.

therefore their argument is aporetic, a dead end whereby the "way out" according to Habermas is to complement their notion of instrumental reason with that of communicative rationality. Examination of Habermas's argument, and the picture of reason animating it, leads to a consideration of the subsequent interpretation by Honneth and others that Horkheimer and Adorno are undertaking a disclosive critique of the enlightenment and its social-cultural context rather than prosecuting a deductive argument that ends in performative contradiction and the lingering "normative deficit" of early Critical Theory. While Honneth's approach seems a promising answer to Habermas's objection, the disclosive critique approach faces two considerations. First, it seems at odds with the persistent language in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of "self-reflection"; second, Honneth acknowledges an open question of how the result of disclosive critique relates to validity (truth) claims, that is, how we can reason about or with that result. To start to answer these concerns, I will consider Horkheimer and Adorno's stated aim of the book – the self-reflection of reason – and how to understand how this aim is realized in some of the textual strategies of the book. In doing so I will connect that aim to a form of judgment and thinking found in Aristotle's practical philosophy.

1. Habermas's Performative Contradiction Objection

In his *Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas criticizes his erstwhile teachers for remaining within the Weberian model of rationalization and for being unable to account for the normative foundations of their critical theory, the so-called "normative deficit" objection that has taken on a life of its own.[2] In the chapter in his later *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* entitled "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno," Habermas resumes and expands

---

2   Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Beacon Press, 1985), 374. For the larger context of Habermas's critique of earlier Critical Theorists, see Peter Hohendahl, „The Dialectic of Enlightenment Revisited: Habermas' Critique of the Frankfurt School," *New German Critique* 35 (1985), 3-26.

the critique of their "blackest book," *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, raising "doubts about the repeated self-reflection on the part of the Enlightenment itself."[3] According to Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno's account reduces rationality in two ways: it identifies rationality per se with instrumental (strategic) rationality, and it equates reasoning with power and domination (*Herrschaft*). The upshot of this two-fold reduction is that reason – and hence the rationality of Horkheimer and Adorno's own account – loses its "critical force" to make validity (truth) claims: enlightenment as "the advance of thought"[4] "turns against reason as the foundation of its own validity, critique becomes total."[5] In explicating this self-undermining of reason, Habermas claims that Horkheimer and Adorno commit a *performative contradiction*:

> … now reason itself is suspected of the baneful confusion of power and validity claims, but still with the intent of enlightening. With their concept of 'instrumental reason' Habermas and Adorno want to add up the cost incurred in the usurpation of reason's place by a calculating intellect … As instrumental, reason assimilated itself to power and thereby relinquished its critical force – that is the *final* disclosure of ideology critique applied to itself. To be sure, this description of the self-destruction of the critical capacity is paradoxical, because in the moment of description it still has to make use of the critique that has been declared dead. It denounces the Enlightenment's become totalitarian with its own tools. Adorno was quite aware of this performative contradiction inherent in totalized critique.[6]

In a later text Habermas defines performative contradiction as "when a constative speech act $k(p)$ rests on noncontingent presuppositions whose propositional content contradicts the asserted proposition p…[for example:] 'I hereby doubt that I exist.' … The skeptic entangles herself in such

---

3   Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (MIT Press. 1987), 106.

4   Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford University Press., 2002), 1.

5   Habermas, *Discourse of Modernity*, 118-9.

6   Habermas, *Discourse of Modernity*, 119.

performative contradiction denying constatively while pragmatically relying on, presuppositions of argumentation like a 'minimal logic'."[7] In his entry on Habermas for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Finlayson defines it thusly: "A performative contradiction arises when a rule that speakers pragmatically invoke by the illocutionary act of, say, assertion, is contradicted by the semantic content of that assertion. An example is Moore's paradox: 'It is raining but I don't believe it.'"[8] In another text he recounts the objection in *Philosophical Discourse* this way: "On Habermas's view, the contradiction allegedly exists because, on the one hand, the authors cannot but make a validity claim to truth on behalf of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and thus performatively commit to offer reason and arguments in support of it, while, on the other hand, they are prevented from so doing by the content of the theory, which implies that all rationality (and hence validity) is a disguised form of power or domination"[9]; and Freyenhagen emphasizes that the uttering of a claim contradicts the propositional content (as when a speaker says "I am mute").[10]

While Habermas's claim of *Dialectic*'s two-fold reduction in the concept of reason – viz., to its instrumental use and for purposes of power or domination – analytically permits different versions of his argument, the combined version can be stated as:

1. In asserting that p, Horkheimer and Adorno are exercising their capacities to reason oriented to truth (validity).

2. Let p = any and every exercise of reason is instrumentally oriented towards power and domination and not towards truth (validity).

---

7   Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification" in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (MIT Press, 1993), 43-115, here 80-81.

8   J. Gordon Finlayson, "Jürgen Habermas," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/habermas/

9   J. Gordon Finlayson, "Morality and Critical Theory: On the Normative Problem of Frankfurt School Social Criticism," *Telos* 146 (2009), 11.

10 Fabian Freyenhagen, "Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *Res Philosophica* 101/2 (2024): 245-269.

3. Therefore, in claiming that p, they contradict the propositional content of p.

Note that this argument holds only if truth/validity and power/domination are mutually exclusive, whereas a discourse of persuasion could combine both registers, as one arguably finds in Nietzsche's genealogical method.[11]

Note that If Habermas's performative contradiction objection stands, it's not just propositions about reason and enlightenment thinking that stand impugned, but every exercise of reason. And the scope of this claim is very vague and broad. One might think that providing a genealogical critique in the spirit of Nietzsche could evade Habermas's objection by emphasizing the indirect way reason is evaluated: Horkheimer and Adorno are providing a (fictional, exaggerated, etc.) history of humans that eventuates in the problematical and singular instrumental use of reason today, and the historical reconstruction is just description, not argumentation. But this won't work. Habermas relies heavily on the premise that for Horkheimer and Adorno the enlightenment (the present deformed form of reason) is "total"[12]; this would mean that every exercise of our rational capacity is undermined, the scope here is universal. For instance, drawing critical conclusions based on *Dialectic*'s "just so" history would use logical, rational (not just, say, narrating, story-telling) capacities, otherwise the genealogical account would not be a *critical* one. By way of illustration, imagine someone who lies offering a self-diagnosis by telling a history of how he came to lie: that history, and whatever conclusions he wants to draw from it, are as susceptible to "performative contradiction" as anything else he asserts.

---

11 Cf. Martin Saar, *Genealogie als Kritik. Geschichte und Theorie des Subjekts nach Nietzsche und Foucault* (Campus Verlag, 2007), 130-142. In the *Philosophical Discourse* chapter Habermas cuts off this possibility by assimilating *Dialectic* to a very problematic interpretation of Nietzsche's genealogical method, which I ignore here.

12 Cf. "totalitarian," Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4, 18, 33, etc.

2. Habermas's conception of reasoning

Habermas's performative contradiction objection rests on the explicit assumption that the philosophical, logical argument of *Dialectic* can be wholly abstracted, separated from its linguistic expression, which Habermas calls "rhetoric," and accordingly appeals to "[t]he reader who resists being overwhelmed by the rhetoric of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, who steps back and takes seriously the thoroughly philosophic claim of the text."[13]

Note that Adorno would not agree with this dismissive understanding of rhetoric as merely superadded affective ornament without philosophical import. Brian O'Connor offers a helpful gloss in this context, when he considers how in *Negative Dialectic* the personal and singular experiences Adorno recounts might relate to the presumed universality of the truth claims he's making. O'Connor focuses on Adorno's discussion of "rhetoric": "the linguistic exercise of authentic philosophical thought is, Adorno thinks, rhetorical"[14] where rhetoric is not simply ornament but "is on the side of content"[15] such that "rhetoric might narrow the gap between a singularity (Adorno's personality) and us."[16] For Adorno, a philosophical text's "rhetoric" refers to the idiosyncratic, singular qualities of the particular subject matter of thought that is constitutive of emphatic, "spiritual experience" (*geistige Erfahrung*) and that can transcend the abstract, formal and logical attributes of thinking that characterize Habermas's conception of philosophical texts.

Underlying the strict separability between rhetoric and philosophical claim is Habermas's presupposed conception of reason: it is "the critical capacity to take up a 'Yes' or 'No' stance and to distinguish between val-

---

13 Habermas, *Discourse of Modernity*, 110.

14 Brian O'Connor, "Negative Dialectics and Philosophical Truth," in *A Companion to Adorno*, edited by Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Max Pensky (Wiley Blackwell, 2020). 525.

15 Theodor W. Adorno, *GS* 6, 65.

16 O'Connor, "Negative Dialectics and Philosophical Truth," 525.

id and invalid propositions", and it is the exercise of this capacity that is "undermined" by the *Dialectic*'s equating reason with power/domination.[17] Here the exercise of reason for Habermas is something like that of a *logical calculator*, adjudicating (in)validity and adopting propositional attitudes towards discrete, atomistic, finite propositions as objects of thought.

It would seem to follow from this picture of reason that *self-reflection* would be the exercise of this capacity upon its own thoughts (understood as propositions) and attitudes (understood as complex propositions), which according to Habermas arises when enlightenment undertakes ideology critique : "[w]ith this kind of [ideology] critique, enlightenment becomes reflective for the first time [sic]: it is performed with respect to its own products – theories," where theories are sets of propositions combined with laws of logic.[18]

And if reason as this capacity is deformed, reduced to instrumental use for the purpose of domination, if all rational standards (validity, soundness, coherence, non-contradiction, etc.) are so reduced, then it cannot reliably make truth claims about the world and – self-reflexively – about its own propositions and theories. Because Horkheimer and Adorno maintain "their explanation of the corruption of *all* rational criteria, … In the face of this paradox, self-referential critique loses its orientation."[19]

Consideration of the *Dialectic* and its philosophical commitments affords several different criticisms of Habermas's presupposed, 'logical calculator' model of reasoning. For example, in the *first* case, Horkheimer and Adorno critique the very model of reason – ultimately the laws of logic – that Habermas assumes: "Thinking, understood by the Enlightenment, is the process of establishing a unified, scientific order and of deriving factual knowledge from principles, whether these principles are interpreted as arbitrarily posited axioms, innate ideas, or the highest abstractions. The laws of logic establish the most universal relationships within the order the

---

17 Habermas, *Discourse of Modernity*, 112.

18 Habermas, *Discourse of Modernity*, 116.

19 Habermas, *Discourse of Modernity*, 127.

define them. Unity lies in self-consistency. The principle of contradiction is the system *in nuce*."[20] Presumably this critique of even "minimal logic" would attach also to the laws of logic attending Habermas's communicative rationality: if so, *pace* Habermas, there is no exit, no "way out."[21]

In the *second* case, Horkheimer and Adorno reject Habermas's assumption that reason can be completely abstracted and 'purified' as the capacity to manipulate in thought propositions, theories, formal rules of inference, etc. Rather they persistently insist that reason is always embodied, in institutional formations in a particular historical-social reality: "We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that [enlightenment] thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today"; "Power confronts the individual as the universal, as the reason which informs reality"; "It is the concrete conditions of work in society which enforce conformism."[22] While Horkheimer and Adorno occasionally speak of reason becoming total, they also call it "totalitarian" and "autocratic,"[23] which are political categories. Ironically, Habermas too will address the necessarily embodied, institutionalized incarnation of reason when he turns from communicative rationality as a quasi-transcendental ideal speech theory to its less-than-ideal instantiation in social and political structures, in *Faktizität und Geltung*.

In the *third* case, Adorno does not accept Habermas's assumption that the exercise of rational capacities is limited to logical inference, argumentation, consistency in theory construction, etc. In "The Essay as Form" and various passages from other works, including *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno implicitly rejects Habermas's exclusive focus on discrete prop-

---

20　Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 63.

21　Amy Allen, "Reason, Power and History: Re-reading the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *Thesis Eleven* 120/1 (2014): 10-25, here 15.

22　Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvi, 16, 29; cf. Allen, "Reason, Power and History: Re-reading the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," 14-15.

23　Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4, 18, 28; "the antireason of totalitarian capitalism," 43.

ositions deductively related via logical laws, and moreover on behalf of the potential for self-critique: "Thinking as encyclopedia, rationally organized and yet discontinuous, unsystematic, loose, expresses the self-critical spirit [*selbskritischen Geist*] of reason"[24]; "In a sense, dialectical logic is more positivistic than the positivism that outlaws it. As thinking, dialectical logic respects that which is to be thought – the object – even where the object does not heed the rules of thinking. Thought need not be content with its own legality without abandoning it, we can think against our thought, and if it were possible to define dialectics, this would be a definition worth suggesting,"[25] where the phrase "where the object does not heed the rules of thinking" suggests Adorno's conception of the "rhetoric" of philosophical texts.

These points culminate, in a *fourth* case, with the rejoinder to Habermas that, as he acknowledges, Horkheimer and Adorno are fully conscious of the paradoxical, aporetic nature of the text of *Dialectic*: it accurately describes a dialectical suspension and self-undermining in the "advance of thought" and explains structural paradoxes in societies using this deformed, truncated reason.[26] A fictional dialogue in the sketch entitled "Contradictions" anticipates Habermas: "A. You are in contradiction with yourself. … Your own life presupposes the principle you are trying to evade. B. I do not deny it, but contradiction is necessary. It is a response to the objective contradiction of society."[27]

---

24 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Seabury, 1973), 29 (translation modified).

25 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 141.

26 On this line of interpretation cf. Alex Demirovic: „Habermas' Einwand, dass Horkheimer und Adorno sich performativ widersprechen, unterstellt, dass es nicht berechtigt sei, sich in dieser Form zu widersprechen. Doch kann vermutet werden, dass Adornos Konzeption zufolge Theorien in der Moderne sich performativ zwangsläufig widersprechen, weil sie jeweils einen Allgemeinheitsanspruch erheben, der mit ihrer Fallibilität nicht vereinbar ist – allein das dialektische Denken der Antinomien der Begriffe ist möglich." (Demirovic 1999, 521); „Der Intellektuelle soll lernen, Widersprüche zu ertragen, sie auf sich zu nehmen, sich in der Allgemeinheit das Begriffs bewegen und dennoch kritisch zu ihr zu stehen" (ibid., 525).

27 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 198.

Let us recall that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* arose out of long conversations between Horkheimer and Adorno about "dialectical logic."[28] Plausibly this means at least that thought does not halt at isolated, finite propositions, but rather propositions, including mutually contrary and contradictory ones, are 'mediated' into each other. An example, I suggest, is Adorno's early essay on the concept of natural history:

> If the question of the relation of nature and history is to be seriously posed, then it only offers any chance of solution if it is possible *to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.*[29]

That is, antipodal concepts like nature-history, enlightenment-myth, reason-domination, are never met in pure isolation, but are mediated into each other, in historically variable ways. "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology"[30] are not merely paradoxically related identity statements, but rather placeholders for the respects in which each will mediate the other, for instance the reason embodied in positivism, in the respect in which it pictures the world as given, independent, and representable, approaches the mythological picture of the world. The rhetorical figure of *chiasmus* best captures this aspect of dialectical thinking, which contradicts Habermas's understanding of reason as a logical calculator.[31] The antipodes are relatively independent but also

---

28 Cf. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel, Band II: 1938-1944*, edited by Christophe Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Suhrkamp, 2004), *passim*.

29 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," trans. R. Hullot-Kentor. *Telos* 60 (1984) :111-124, here 117. Original: „Wenn die Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Natur und Geschichte ernsthaft gestellt werden soll, bietet sie nur dann Aussicht die nur dann Aussicht auf Beantwortung, wenn es gelingt, *das geschichtliche Sein in seiner äußersten geschichtlichen Bestimmtheit, da, wo es am geschichtlichsten ist, selber als ein naturhaftes Sein zu begreifen, oder wenn es gelänge, die Natur da, wo sie als Natur scheinbar am tiefsten in sich verharrt, zu begreifen als ein geschichtliches Sein.*" („Die Idee der Naturgeschichte," *GS* 1: 354-5)

30 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

31 „Adorno bedient sich des Chiasmus zunächst, um das innere Verhältnis oder die gegenseitige Mediation der entgegengesetzten Termini hervorzuheben:

reciprocally defined and mediated poles (reason and society, enlighten-
ment and myth, ratio and mimesis, reason and domination) that can be
set against each other locally, as it were, to leverage critique. For instance,
this historically variable, dialectical construal of pairs of opposing cate-
gories explains how the supposed antipode to reason as *ratio*, namely
mimesis, can have both positively and negatively valenced instantiations:
the affinity between subject and object[32] but also pathic projection,[33] that
is, different directions of fit in the relation 'resemblance.' These antipodal
categories are not given to the philosopher-interpreter in isolation and
then combined in a description of modernity's paradoxes, rather they
are recognized retrospectively from the vantage point of the present, in
virtue of how they have developed, and such an historical 'dialectical
logic' informs the narrative and analysis of *Dialectic*.[34]

2. Disclosive critique

Perhaps the most influential response to Habermas's criticism of *Dialectic
of Enlightenment* is Axel Honneth's reinterpreting the kind of critique at
work in the book: Horkheimer and Adorno are not, or not only, offering
a straightforward ideology critique of western rationality, but a *disclosive*

Kraft ihres Gegensatzes sind die durcheinander bestimmt und somit nicht
in Isolation voneinander verständlich." Hans Marius Hansteen, "Adornos
philosophische Rhetorik oder ‚Wie zu lesen sei'," *Zeitschrift für Kritische The-
orie* 30-31 (2010): 97-124, here 109. Hansteen elaborates a raft of literary fig-
ures and expressive means used by Adorno: exaggeration, chiasmus, irony
as indirect expression, apophasis, *contradictio in adjecto* [his preferred trope,
a self-contradiction that keeps oppositions in motion]: "Adornos paradoxale
Charakteristik des Kunstwerks als Prozess im Stillstand gilt auch für seine
philosophischen Texte. Sie halten in ihrer Darstellung ein Denken fest, das
nicht anhalten will" (ibid).

32 E.g. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 45, 149-150, 270.

33 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 154-165.

34 This picture suggests the model of historiography presented by Marx in the
    Grundrisse, in which past "ruins and elements … [and] unconquered rem-
    nants" are discernible from current categories and formations in times of cri-
    sis. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin, 1993), 105-6; cf.
    Max Horkheimer, "Reason Against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment,"
    Theory, Culture & Society 10 (1993): 79-88, here 80.

critique, that is a critique that does not work within a given framework, but seeks to reveal a different framework or horizon of meaning (*Sinn*). On this account, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides "an alternative form of social criticism: it opens new horizons of meaning within which it can show the extent to which given circumstances have a pathological character"[35]; "through narrative illustration, through the device of chiasmus, and finally through the art of exaggeration[36] [as three examples of the 'rhetoric' used in *Dialectic*], the familiar facts of capitalist culture are described in a way that presents them to us in a completely new light. What is intended is the disclosure of our world as a social context of life whose institutions and practices can be taken as 'pathological' for the very reason that in an unbiased reflection they contradict the conditions of the good life."[37] Likewise Freyenhagen argues that a performative contradiction can be constatively infirm but have illocutionary and perlocutionary effects that subserve a disclosive critique and foster in readers critical capacities that cannot be presupposed under present (totalitarian) conditions, and perhaps even have a self-therapeutic function for the authors themselves.[38]

In his elaboration of disclosive critique in Adorno (and Dewey), Särkelä sees two moves made, a "pointing out" and then a "pointing to." The first move can be called, invoking Viktor Shklovsky, *defamiliarization*: "The theory's critical disclosure *decentres* our form of life: Adorno's lectures on society can then be read as a performative theory of the vicious circle of society, a highly elaborate *gesture of critical disclosure*, aimed at

---

35 Axel Honneth, „The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism," *Constellations* 7/1 (2000): 116-127, here 118.

36 "Die Generalisierungen der *Dialektik der Aufklärung* sind so grob, dass sie gar nicht beim Wort genommen werden sollen." Hansteen, "Adornos philosophische Rhetorik," 106.

37 Honneth, „The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society," 126.

38 Freyenhagen, "Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*."

helping his readers to alienate themselves from alienated society."[39] The second move involves the disclosure of new possibilities: "The theory's critical disclosure then also *recentres* our form of life: Adorno's lectures on society [e.g., *History and Freedom*] can be read as tracing the *objective possibilities* of adjusting the social environment."[40]

The operation of disclosive critique in turn can be performed in various ways. One mechanism is through affect, sentiment, and empathy: Richard Rorty on Dickens, Nabokov, and Orwell is one example of this method.[41] The pause in narration (by Homer, and remarked in *Dialectic*) to focus on the twitching feet of the hanged maidservants upon Odysseus' return is another, where the twitching is interpreted as indicating the momentary "objective possibility" of resistance "against death" that is "a semblance of freedom," a differential in the antipodes freedom and fate/necessity at that historical conjuncture that can be leveraged for critique and "historical work."[42] Another mechanism is more cognitive, with metaphors of "seeing things in a new light": here the defamiliarization engenders changes in perception, valuing, salience, etc. Honneth seems to have this in mind when he writes:

> Because it eschews metaphysical presuppositions, the normative judgment is not justified rationally; rather, it is intentionally evoked in the reader, as it were, in that such a radically new description of social living conditions is presented that suddenly acquire the new meaning of a pathological condition … A disclosing critique of society that attempts to change our value beliefs by evoking new ways of seeing cannot simply

---

39 Särkelä, "Vicious Circles: Adorno, Dewey and disclosing critique of society," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 48/10 (2022): 1369-1390, here 1383.

40 Särkelä, "Vicious Circles," 1384.

41 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). Hans Hansteen is another, approvingly invoking Bert van den Brink's interpretation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Das Buch sei ein Werk, das die Empfindlichkeit für die konkrete Erfahrung des Unrechts schärfe." Hansteen, "Adornos philosophische Rhetorik," 118, referring to Bert van den Brink, „Gesellschaftstheorie und Übertreibungskunst. Für eine alternative Lesart der *Dialektik der Aufklärung*," *Neue Rundschau* 1997/1 (1997), 37-59.

42 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 61, 62, and 49.

use a vocabulary of argumentative justification; rather, it can achieve its effects only if it employs linguistic resources that, by condensing or shifting meanings, show up facts hitherto unperceived in social reality.[43]

Disclosive critique avoids Habermas's performative contradiction objection because in its affective and cognitive operations it eschews discursive justification ("the normative judgment is not justified rationally"), and therefore presumably avoids the exercise of reason upon discrete, finite propositions that Habermas presupposes and which he holds is not 'corrupted' by the disguised power/domination within enlightenment reason. Several scholars following Honneth are inclined to a greater or lesser degree to this view, emphasizing the literary and rhetorical aspects of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and their disclosive efficacy.[44]

Acknowledging that disclosive critique eschews discursive truth claims and argumentation, Honneth ends his essay with an open question:

> Admittedly, in the end, after we examine the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in this changed light, the question remains open as to which kind of truth claims it can uphold. For it only evokes a new and unfamiliar perspective on our social world without at the same time providing social theoretical proof that things actually are that way. Hence the truth claim of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* will depend on whether in the future the members of the society it describes will one day agree to accept its new descriptions, and thus change their social praxis of life.[45]

On the one hand, reading *Dialectic* as a disclosive critique circumvents Habermas' charge of performative contradiction, since such critique functions without conventional discrete, propositional, truth claims and inferential argumentation, that is, without Habermas's conception of rea-

---

43   Honneth, „The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society," 123.

44   Scholars include: Hansteen, "Adornos philosophische Rhetorik"; Pierre-François Noppen, „Reflective Rationality and the Claim of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23/2 (2012), 293-320; Freyenhagen, "Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*."

45   Honneth, „The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society," 126.

son and its exercise. On the other hand, the success of the critique can only be established retrospectively, in that the newly disclosed perspective has come to "recenter our form of life," within which certain propositional truth claims will now have their place.

However, Honneth's model of disclosive critique, unlike Habermas's interpretation, does not emphasize critique as self-reflection. And yet Habermas appears correct in noting the role of self-reflection in *Dialectic*, whose stated goal is to achieve "enlightenment of the mind" in light of "the necessity for enlightenment to reflect on itself if humanity is not to be totally betrayed."[46] Indeed, various linguistic expressions and figures of self-reflection recur throughout the text.[47] These terms *prima facie* seem

---

46 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 163, xvii; similarly: "If enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate" (xvi); and regarding method: "As a critique of philosophy it does not seek to abandon philosophy itself" (xii). A natural question at this point would be whether, and if so, how, *Dialectic*'s vocabulary of reflection and self-reflection relates to the concept in Hegel. Hegel uses the term *Reflexion* with different meanings over the course of his career, pejoratively using it to name mechanistic, analytical thought in his early writings, later with approbation setting it nearly equivalent to 'speculation' in his later writings: cf. Miller, "Hegel on Reflection and Reflective Judgment," *Hegel Bulletin* 42/2 (2019), 201-226. Horkheimer and Adorno may be invoking that latter meaning, but this is a question for a paper of its own.

47 An informal, non-exhaustive list of the German expressions and their English translations in Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* includes: *Selbstbesinnung*/reflecting (xv), *Reflexion*/reflection (xvi), *Selbstbewußtsein*/self-awareness (2), *Reflexion auf sich*/reflection on itself (29), *wiedererkennen*/recognizing (31), *sich reflektiert*/is reflected (31), *reflektiert*/reflects (31), *Selbsterkenntnis*/self-recognition (31), *Selbstbesinnung*/self-reflection of thought (32), *Selbstbewußtsein*/self-consciousness (40), *Bewußtsein*/consciousness (43), *innewerden*/becomes aware of itself (60), *Selbstbesinnung*/self-reflection (61), *nachsinnen*/reflecting (62), *Bewußtsein von sich*/awareness of itself (66), *Sichselbstverstehen*/self-understanding (66), *Reflexion*/reflection (66), *reflektierend*/reflective (68), *unreflektiert*/unreflecting (74), *Reflexion*/reflection (90), *sich erkennen*/recognizable (93), *reflektierte*/self-reflective (156), *jenes Reflektierten*/ Reflection (156), *Reflexion*/reflection (156), *Es [das Subjekt] verliert die Reflexion nach beiden Richtungen: da es nicht mehr den Gegenstand reflektiert, reflektiert es nicht mehr auf sich und verliert so die Fähigkeit zur Differenz.*/It loses reflection in both directions: as it no longer reflects the object, it no longer reflects on itself, and thereby loses the ability to differentiate (156), on "the ability to make the true concerns of others one's own": *Diese Fähigkeit ist die zur Reflexion als*

at odds with disclosive critique if disclosive critique is viewed as the de-familiarization and the revelation of new horizons of meaning and objective possibilities. Moreover, at its most straightforward, self-reflection as one's taking distance from the contents of one's mind and reflecting, thinking, about those contents – which presumably is how Habermas thinks about taking a pro- or contra-attitude (Yes or No) to one's own discrete, propositionally articulated thoughts, not unlike other philosophers such as Christine Korsgaard and John McDowell – is notoriously problematic, in discussions of infinite regress, reliable introspective self-knowledge, transparency, and so on.[48]

While I have construed a stark dichotomy between disclosive critique and discursive, self-reflective critique, I also wish to concede that the text of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is richer and stranger than the dichotomy would suggest. By way of example, consider a passage from the second excursus, in which Horkheimer and Adorno show that the same form of reason, oriented towards abstraction, formalism, subsumption, etc. inhabits the moral rationalism and rejection of the senses in Kant's ethics and in the mechanically organized sexual experiments of Sade, and interpret the latter as a recognition scene filled with horror:

> For the *chronique scandaleuse* of Justine and Juliette which turned out as if on a production line, prefigured in the style of the eighteenth century the sensational literature of the nineteenth and mass literature of the twentieth is the Homeric epic after it has discarded its last mythological veil: the story of thought as an instrument of power. In taking fright at the image in its own mirror, that thought opens to view what lies be-

---

der Durchdringung von Rezeptivität und Einbildungskraft/This ability involves reflection as an interpenetration of receptivity and imagination (164), *Reflexionsform*/form of reflection (174), *sich wiedererkennt*/recognizes itself (209), *Reflexion*/reflection (211).

48 Christine Korsgaard, "The Activity of Reason," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 83/2 (2009), 23-43; John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994). On puzzles of self-knowledge see Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: an essay on self-knowledge* (Princeton University Press, 2001) and Matthew Boyle, "'Making up Your Mind' and the Activity of Reason," *Philosophers' Imprint* 11/17 (2011), 1-24.

> yond it. … It is the fact that Sade did not leave it to its enemies
> to be horrified by the Enlightenment which makes his work
> pivotal to its rescue.[49]

This passage combines the defamiliarizing affective ("taking fright," "be horrified") and cognitive (seeing things differently, in a mirror) aspects with the revelation of new possibilities ("thought opens to view what lies beyond it," that is, thought that is not "an instrument of power") of disclosive critique with the *image* of literal self-reflection. Here self-reflection is not the introspective examination and evaluation of the contents of one's own propositionally articulated thoughts (Habermas's apparent model), but rather the affective reaction to contemplating the pathological implications of one's mode of reasoning. Just as, according to the *Dialectic*'s account, fear supposedly first, and perpetually, instigated the instrumental and subjugating uses of reason, now, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, fear might induce humans to reconsider thought as an instrument of power. This passage would therefore seem to satisfy both the model of disclosive critique and the desideratum of "self-reflection" upon which Horkheimer and Adorno insist, where "self-reflection" is just the newest stage in development of reason in the face of fear. But this is a very thin notion of thinking and self-reflection: how rational, how "critical" is the "reconsideration" that is hopefully induced by the fright and horror, lest it fall back into a Habermasian model of reason?

I think, therefore, that Honneth's open question in general remains: if disclosive critique primarily is "seeing things differently," and not the introspective, self-knowledge model common in philosophy and apparently underwriting Habermas's model of reason, what kind of thinking, judgment, truth claim can attend the result of disclosive critique?

3. Self-reflection as an activity of reason

In this section I briefly sketch out a picture that at least holds the promise of an answer to this question. I will suggest that Aristotle's conception of *energeia* gives us a picture of reasoning as an activity, a condition in

---

49 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 92.

which human beings may *be*, that is other than Habermas's conception of reason as 'logical calculator' but that can also satisfy a sense of self-reflection that can answer Honneth's open question about disclosive critique, namely how it can result in judgments, truth claims, and so on. I will first present Aristotle's guiding thought, and then suggest that it can partially illuminate Max Weber's notion of value-rationality, which informs Horkheimer and Adorno's view that reason in the form of instrumental reason is distorted.[50] Finally, I offer some passages from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that support this account.

Aristotle identifies *praxis* ('action') as action that has its end (*telos*) internal to the action, as opposed to *poiesis* ('making'), whose end is external to the action, in the product made. Within the genus of *praxis*, Aristotle in turn distinguishes *kinêsis* (translated as 'movement,' 'change') from *energeia* (often translated as 'activity' or 'actuality') as two different kinds of an actualization of a capacity (*dunamis*, sometimes translated as 'potentiality'):

> … that in which the end is present is an action [*praxis*]. E.g. at the same we are seeing and have seen, are understanding and have understood, are thinking and have thought: but it is not true that at the same time we are learning and have learnt, or are being cured and have been cured. At the same time we are living well and have lived well, and are happy and have been happy. If not, the process would have had at some time to cease, as the process of making thin ceases: but, as it is, it does not cease; we are living and have lived. Of these processes, then, we must call the one set movements [*kinêseis*], and the other actualities [*energeias*].[51]

Kinêsis applies to any exercize of something's capacity to change in respect to place, quantity, or quality. Aristotle's examples include: becoming thin, being healed, learning something, walking to a destination, and so on. Any such change, Aristotle maintains, proceeds from something definite to something definite: there is a condition from which it starts

---

50 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 93.

51 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX.6, 1048b22-28; translation from *Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984). In general cf. *Physics* III.1-3, *Metaphysics* IX.6.

and an end toward which it proceeds.[52] While a *kinêsis* is occurring, the relevant change has not yet achieved the end towards which it is proceeding, and when the end is achieved, the *kinêsis* is exhausted. *Kinêsis* is thus an action or process which as it were vanishes in its *specific* or *finite* end, in its completion.

In these respects *kinêsis* contrasts with *energeia*, another way of exercise of a capacity, but one "in which the end is present": it is not the progressive process towards a certain end, but is an *active being*, in which at each moment the end of the activity is present and complete.[53] Aristotle's examples here are: seeing, understanding, thinking, living well, being happy. Each of these, he suggests, can be conceived as the exercise of a capacity, but there are actualizations which are complete at every moment of their occurrence, for "at the same time we are seeing and have seen, are understanding and have understood, are thinking and have thought, … and living well and have lived well, are happy and have been happy."[54] *Kinêsis* has a *time-specific*, *finite* end, and hence has two past aspects: the imperfect (I was walking to Damascus, which leaves open whether the goal was achieved) and perfect (I walked to Damascus). By contrast, *energeia* is such that its end does not vanish in its completion, but abides, or is habitual; its end is *general* or *infinite*; the predication is *time-general* and is expressed paradigmatically as, e.g. "the eye sees." The past tense here has only one form: "the eye used to see," that is, it lost that *hexis*, that capacity or potentiality.[55] Time-specific episodes of vision are *manifestations* of the habitual or constant activity, where the unique logic of manifestation is such that each moment is complete.[56] That is, *energeia* is

---

52 cf. *Metaphysics* IX.6, 1048b18, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.4, 1174b5, and *Physics* V.1, 224b35-225a3.

53 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX.6, 1048b22; here I am partly following Boyle "'Making up Your Mind' and the Activity of Reason," 19-21.

54 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX.6, 1048b23-26.

55 For a related discussion of the difference between *kinêsis* and *energeia* in terms of tense-inferences, see Charles, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Action* (Cornell University Press, 1984), 35-37.

56 Furthermore, if x is manifested in y (as health is manifested in a good diet),

a form of actualization of a capacity that consists, not in effectuating a certain result, but in *actively being* in a certain way.

As Aristotle's examples in the passage quoted above indicate, the distinction also holds regarding *intentional actions*. As G.E.M. Anscombe in "Authority in Morals" and more recently Sebastian Rödl have argued, *kinêsis* is an intentional action that can be expressed as an instrumental syllogism with a finite end: if my end is to be cured, then I should do actions A_1 through A_n, where each action A_i is a part of the process terminating in my becoming cured, that is, my attaining the state of being cured.[57] The end is finite because the actions that constitute its means, once performed, exhaust that end. An *energeia* by contrast expresses general or infinite ends. Being healthy, living well, are not finite ends that are exhausted by the person performing certain actions: say, eating well and exercising as means to attaining health. Rather such actions are *manifestations* of the infinite end: one eats well and exercises not in order to achieve health once and for all at a certain time (and then make health one's specific end again next week, say), but rather one does those actions habitually because doing them is a way of *actively being* healthy, that is, because one thinks that one who does them is healthy, that one who does them exhibits or manifests health.

---

the specific y stands to the general x in a unique, non-denumerable, non-constitutive way, unlike, say, part-whole mereology or member-set relation. On this interpretation in general, see Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

57 Cf. Anscombe in "Authority in Morals" on finite vs. infinite ends: "The reckoning what to do or abstain from in particular circumstances will constantly include reference, implicit or explicit, to generalities. […] Because of it human conduct is not left to be distinguished from the behavior of other animals by the fact that in it calculation is used by which to ascertain the means to perfectly particular ends. The human wants things like health and happiness and science and fair repute and virtue and prosperity, he does not simply want, e.g., that such-and-such a thing should be in such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time." G.E.M. Anscombe, "Authority in Morals," in *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (= *Collected Philosophical Papers*, volume three) (University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 43-50, here 48; Sebastian Rödl, *Self-Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 34-38.

From the initial quotes at the outset of this paper, it seems clear that in his critique Habermas views reason as the capacity to form and evaluate propositions, inferences, arguments, theories, including the components of judgments: concepts, intuitions, synthesizing (compositional) and analyzing (decompositional) operations, etc. These are the finite, discrete propositional judgments used, for instance, in means-ends reasoning in practical inferences that typically issue in *kinêsis*-movements. It is well known that Max Weber's distinction between instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and value-rationality (*Wertrationalität)* partly informs *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* account of reason. Weber writes that with instrumental action "the end, the means and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed", where value-rationality adjudicates between conflicting ends, and can tend towards an absolute, intrinsic end such that "the more unconditionally the actor devotes himself to this value for its own sake, to pure sentiment, or beauty, to absolute goodness or devotion to duty, the less he is influenced by considerations of the consequences of his action."[58] Instrumental rationality and value-rationality do *not* map cleanly onto *kinêsis* and *energeia*: Weber seems to consider both as discrete mental acts, differing primarily in their respective consequentialist and deontological commitments. But I want to suggest that it can be productive to consider value-rationality in terms of time-general or infinite ends. Value-rationality can be expressed in finite, time-indexed propositional form ("now my highest priority is devotion to duty for its own sake"), but not exclusively. Often final ends are expressed in time-general, so-called infinite judgments, that as it were stop the regress of means-ends reasoning: I am doing strength training in order to improve my health, but I'm not improving my health in order to attain any other time-specific state. My aim is not to achieve health at a certain time, as a momentary state; my aim is to *actively be* healthy, to be in the perpetual state or condition of health, to maintain that state, which involves all kinds of actions (what I eat, how I exercise, how I sleep, etc.)

58 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (University of California Press, 1978), 26.

that are not each set with the goal of achieving the state of health, rather they are habitual *manifestations* of *being* in the condition of health. Health is a way of actively being, not a kind of repetitive finite doing. So too, according to Aristotle, is living well, understanding, vision (as a vital function, not an episode of seeing), and so on, and my suggestion is that we can understand these final, infinite ends qua *energeias* as instantiations of Weber's value-rationality, *and* that in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the calamitous triumph of instrumental rationality means that rationality has been deformed, reduced, in that the actualization of its capacity in the sense of *energeia* is thwarted.

I've elaborated this distinction in orders of thought in readings of Marx's early writings[59], but here want to suggest that we can also understand at least some forms of value rationality along these lines. And if so, then the goal of "self-reflection" in *Dialectic* is *not* to add another belief or validity claim to the reader's set of beliefs, viz., "the instrumental use of my reason yields certain pathological consequences C_1, C_2, C_3, …, C_n," as Honneth apparently frames his open question. Rather the goal is to change the way the reader *actively is*, how her faculty of reason can be actualized, to move her to exercise it more expansively than merely instrumentally. While finite forms of self-distancing and self-reflection may play a role, a change in the way of actively being, in the sense of *energeia* is the aim.[60] I am not claiming that this line of interpretation wholly captures the project of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; my more modest claim is that this approach, properly worked out beyond this brief sketch, can answer both Habermas's objection and Honneth's open question.[61]

---

59 Pickford, "*Poiêsis, Praxis, Aisthêsis*: Remarks on Aristotle and Marx," in *Marx and the Aesthetic*, edited by Johan Hartle and Samir Gandesha (Bloomsbury Press, 2017), 23-48. Pickford, "Anthropological Solidarity in Early Marx." In *Solidarity in Open Societies*, edited by Jörg Althammer, et al., (Springer Verlag, 2019), 133-151.

60 For a careful exposition of this idea within the context of debates about self-knowledge, see Boyle "'Making up Your Mind' and the Activity of Reason."

61 There are seven overt references to Aristotle in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The most germane here invokes *De Anima*, where living organisms are understood has having a life-principle (*psuché*) in terms of their life functions,

   If this account is right then we should find instances or figures of what is to be achieved that represent a change of conscious being in the reader, rather than the modification of the set of atomistic propositions the reader holds to be true. And indeed several of the terms used in *Dialectic*'s semantic register of self-reflection as the goal of the book – including *Selbstbewußtsein, Selbsterkenntnis, Selbstbesinnung, Bewußtsein von sich* – suggest a holistic change in awareness, consciousness, and not merely the cognitive acquisition of a discrete belief about oneself or one's reasoning. Moreover, consider the exposition of the "ambiguity" of Kant's concept of reason at the start of Excursus II:

---

which are explicitly described as *energeias*: "Animal psychology, meanwhile, has lost sight of its object; engrossed with the chicanery of its traps and labyrinths, it has forgotten that to speak of and acknowledge a psyche or soul (*Seele*) is appropriate precisely and only in the case of animals. Even Aristotle, who attributed a soul to them, if an inferior one, preferred to speak of the bodies, parts, movements, and procreation of animals rather than the life peculiar to them" (Horkheimer and Adorno *Dialectic*, 204-5). I am suggesting that Horkheimer and Adorno are making a similar argument about human animals under current conditions and are striving to "redeem" their full rational capacity from its current deformity. In this context a later sketch ("In the Genesis of Stupidity") reads: "Mental life in its earliest stages is infinitely delicate … The body is crippled by physical injury, the mind by fear. In their origin both effects are inseparable… The suppression of possibilities by the direct resistance of surrounding nature is extended inwardly by the wasting of organs through fright … Stupidity is a scar. It can relate to one faculty among many or to them all, practical and mental. Every partial stupidity in a human being marks a spot where the awakening play of muscles has been inhibited instead of fostered" (ibid., 213-214). This line of thinking is echoed in Adorno's recorded postwar conversation with the conservative sociologist Arnold Gehlen:
"Gehlen: (…) How do you know what potential undirected human beings have?
Adorno: Well, I do not know positively what this potential is, but I know from all sorts of things – including the particular findings of the sciences – that the adjustment processes, which human beings are subjected to nowadays, lead to an unprecedented extent – and I think that you would admit this – to the crippling of human beings." Original in Grenz, *Adornos Philosophie in Grundbegriffen: Auflösung einiger Deutungsprobleme* (Suhrkamp. 1983), 246-7; translation in Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy. Living Less Wrongly* (Cambridge University Press. 2013), 2. My thanks to Fabian Freyenhagen for this reference.

> Reason as the transcendental, supraindividual self contains the idea of a free coexistence in which human beings organize themselves to form the universal subject and resolve the conflict between pure and empirical reason in the conscious solidarity of the whole. The whole represents the idea of true universality, utopia. At the same time, however, reason is the agency of calculating thought, which arranges the world for the purposes of self-preservation and recognizes no function other than that of working on the object as mere sense material in order to make it the material of subjugation.[62]

While the Kantian transcendental idealist framework is far from Aristotle, the idea of a capacity of reason whose actualization would secure a time-indefinite communal existence, a way of being, suggests *energeia* as the actualization in question, whereas calculation and subjugation suggests *kinêsis*. The opening chapter of *Dialectic* concludes by suggesting that, having aggrandized to itself unparalleled powers over the natural world, enlightenment had created the conditions in which all humans, beyond class division, are needed to administer its effects, opening the prospect of a universal subject who "can now devote itself to dissolving that power."[63] This too, amounts to a change in being, in a form of life in which different forms of reason are actualized. The unpublished conclusion to the chapter on the culture industry, reproduced in *GS* 3 under the title "The Schema of Mass Culture," concludes with this haunting image: "The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death. Yet they do not come from the sky. They are controlled from the earth. It depends upon human beings themselves whether they will extinguish these lights and awake from a nightmare which only threatens to become actual as long as men believe in it."[64]

---

62 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 65.

63 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 33-34.

64 Theodor W. Adorno, „The Schema of Mass Culture," in *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, edited by J.M. Bernstein (Routledge, 1991), 61-97, here 96. Original: "Die Transparente, die über die Städte ziehen und mit ihrem Licht das natürliche der Nacht überblenden, verkünden als Kome-

The image of *awakening* tropes a holistic change of state, not a discrete propositional attitude toward a propositional content, but rather a literal change in states of *being* from potentiality to actualization, one of the fundamental distinctions in this region of thought that Aristotle draws in his *Metaphysics*. And at the conclusion of the chapter on antisemitism we read: "Enlightenment itself, having mastered itself and assumed its own power [*Gewalt*], could break through the limits of enlightenment."[65] "*Gewalt*" suggests (also etymologically) power in the sense of disposition (*Verfügungsfähigkeit*) and the image of a deficient capacity achieving its full, undiminished actuality.[66]

Conclusion

These observations and remarks aimed first to clarify Habermas's reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a self-undermining critique of reason that exhibits a performative contradiction and reveals a 'normative deficit' in early Critical Theory. The alternative interpretation of *Dialectic* as a disclosive critique by Honneth and others avoids the charge of self-contradiction but renders obscure first, how exactly it fulfills Horkheimer and Adorno's repeated injunction that reason must undergo "self-reflection," and second – as Honneth acknowledges – how the results of disclosive critique are to be expressed in judgments, truth claims, and so on.

In this paper I have suggested that Aristotle's distinction between *kinêsis* and *energeia* can help, by providing a theory of the exercise of a rational capacity other than that of time-specific, finite, judgments which, for

---

ten die Naturkatastrophe der Gesellschaft, den Kältetod. Jedoch sie kommen nicht vom Himmel. Sie werden von der Erde dirigiert. Es ist an den Menschen, ob sie sie auslöschen wollen und aus dem Angsttraum erwachen, der solange nur sich zu verwirkliche droht, wie die Menschen an ihn glauben" (*GS* 3, 335).

65 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 172. Original: "Die ihrer selbst mächtige, zur Gewalt werdende Aufklärung selbst vermöchte die Grenzen der Aufklärung zu durchbrechen" (*GS 3*, 234).

66 Schmidt (1998, 833-835) identifies some of these passages as "moments of hope," whereas in addition I see them as intimating the kind of "rescue" required according to Horkheimer and Adorno.

example, characterize instrumental reasoning. Rather, *energeia* is a persistent way of actively being in which one or more time-general, infinite ends, which I associated with Weber's value-rationality, are manifested in various attitudes, propositions, and intentional actions. This picture of reason accomplishes two things: it offers an alternative to Habermas's picture of reason as a "logical calculator," operating on discrete, finite propositions; and it suggests, in answer to Honneth's open question, how we can speak logically about our rational activity, that is, the exercise of our rational capacities, as a way of actively being that can result from disclosive critique. This essay merely opens that prospect, a line of inquiry into the virtuosity and obscurity of a modern philosophical masterpiece.[67]

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. (1973ff). *Gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann et al. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp (abbreviated GS and volume number).

Adorno, Theodor W. [1933] (1984). "The Idea of Natural History," translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. *Telos* 60: 111–124

.Adorno, Theodor W. [1966] (1973). *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Seabury.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1991). *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Edited by Jay M. Bernstein. New York: Routledge.

Adorno, Theodor W., and Horkheimer, Max (2004). *Briefwechsel, Band II: 1938–1944*. Edited by Christophe Gödde and Henri Lonitz. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Allen, Amy (2014). "Reason, Power and History: Re-reading the Dialectic of Enlightenment," *Thesis Eleven* 120/1: 10–25.

Anscombe, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret (1981). "Authority in Morals." In *Anscombe, Ethics, Religion and Politics* (= *Collected Philosophical Papers*, volume three). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 43–50.

Aristotle (1984). *Complete Works of Aristotle*. 2 vols. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Boyle, Matthew (2011). "'Making up Your Mind' and the Activity of Reason," *Philosophers' Imprint* 11/17: 1–24.

Charles, David (1984). *Aristotle's Philosophy of Action*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Demirović, Alen (1999). *Der nonkonformistische Intellektuelle: die Entwicklung der Kritischen Theorie zur Frankfurter Schule*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Finlayson, James Gordon (2009). "Morality and Critical Theory: On the Normative Problem of Frankfurt School Social Criticism," *Telos* 146: 7–41.

Finlayson, James Gordon (n.d.). "Jürgen Habermas," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/habermas/

Freyenhagen, Fabian (2013). *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Freyenhagen, Fabian (2024). "Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on Dialectic of Enlightenment," *Res Philosophica* 101/2: 245–269.

Grenz, Friedrich (1983). *Adornos Philosophie in Grundbegriffen: Auflösung einiger Deutungsprobleme*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Habermas, Jürgen [1981] (1985). *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, Jürgen [1985] (1987). *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Translated by Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Habermas, Jürgen (1993). "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 43–115.

Hansteen, Hans Martin (2010). "Adornos philosophische Rhetorik oder 'Wie zu lesen sei'," *Zeitschrift für Kritische Theorie* 30–31: 97–124.

Hohendahl, Peter Uwe (1985). "The Dialectic of Enlightenment Revisited: Habermas' Critique of the Frankfurt School," *New German Critique* 35: 3–26.

Honneth, Axel (2000). "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social

Criticism," *Constellations* 7/1: 116–127.

Horkheimer, Max [1947] (1993). "Reason Against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment," *Theory, Culture & Society* 10: 79–88.

Horkheimer, Max, and Adorno, Theodor W. [1987] (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Korsgaard, Christine Marion (2009). "The Activity of Reason," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 83/2: 23–43.

Marx, Karl [1858–9] (1993). *Grundrisse*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. London: Penguin.

McDowell, John Henry (1994). *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Miller, Ezra Paul (2019). "Hegel on Reflection and Reflective Judgment," *Hegel Bulletin* 42/2: 201–226.

Moran, Richard (2001). *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Noppen, Pascal-François (2012). "Reflective Rationality and the Claim of Dialectic of Enlightenment," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23/2: 293–320.

O'Connor, Brian (2020). "Negative Dialectics and Philosophical Truth," in *A Companion to Adorno*. Edited by Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Max Pensky. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell: 519–530.

Pickford, Henry W. (2017). "Poiêsis, Praxis, Aisthêsis: Remarks on Aristotle and Marx." In *Marx and the Aesthetic*, edited by Johan Hartle and Samir Gandesha. London: Bloomsbury Press: 23–48.

Pickford, Henry W. (2019). "Anthropological Solidarity in Early Marx." In *Solidarity in Open Societies*, edited by Jörg Althammer et al. Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag: 133–151.

Rödl, Sebastian (2007). *Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rorty, Richard McKay (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Särkelä, Arvi (2022). "Vicious Circles: Adorno, Dewey and Disclosing Critique of Society," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 48/10: 1369–1390.

Saar, Martin (2007). *Genealogie als Kritik. Geschichte und Theorie des Subjekts nach Nietzsche und Foucault*. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag.

Schmidt, James (1998). "Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno's 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'," *Social Research* 65/4: 807–838.

Thompson, Michael (2008). *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Van den Brink, Bert (1997). "Gesellschaftstheorie und Übertreibungskunst: Für eine alternative Lesart der Dialektik der Aufklärung," *Neue Rundschau* 1997/1: 37–59.

Weber, Max [1922] (1978). *Economy and Society*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

The Unsublimated Anticipation of Pleasure: On Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Surti Singh[1]

Abstract: By focusing on the psychoanalytic structures that condition the formation of subjectivity in late capitalist mass culture, I aim to elucidate the relevance of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* not only as a corrective to Habermas's foundational critique of the text, but also for debates in feminist theory. In the first part of the article, I examine how the rationalized understanding of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* obscures Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of sexuality, particularly as it pertains to gender relations. More specifically, it obscures Horkheimer and Adorno's psychoanalytic framing of how the Kantian ideals underlining the Enlightenment—freedom, self-determination—transform into their opposite. In the second part of the article, I focus more closely on the culture industry chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to decode sexuality as the subterranean nerve center of society, which functions in contradiction to how things appear. In the last part of the article, I examine the implications of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique for debates in feminist theory.

Jürgen Habermas's influential critique of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* charges it with falling into a performative contradiction.[2] In his elaboration of this critique, Habermas argues that Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis of a totalizing and monolithic instrumental reason that destroys the realm of experience becomes entangled in irresolvable aporias. On the one hand, their critique of instrumental reason blocks the discursive conditions necessary to articulate what is actually destroyed by instrumental reason, it "denounces as a defect something that it cannot explain

---

2   Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment,*" *New German Critique*, no. 26 (Spring-Summer, 1982): 13-30.

in its defectiveness because it lacks a conceptual framework sufficiently flexible to capture the integrity of what is destroyed through instrumental reason."[3] On the other hand, their critique prevents the articulation of what could be an alternative to the damaged condition produced by instrumental reason. Habermas notes that while Horkheimer and Adorno have a name for what is destroyed and what ought to be recovered—*mimesis*, or a non-dominating relationship between subject and object—they lack the conceptual framework to precisely capture what this is. To do so, they would have to construct a theory of *mimesis*, which according to their own critique of instrumental reason is impossible. As a result, Horkheimer and Adorno must posit *mimesis* as something opposed to reason—an impulse—and therefore something barred from rational insight.

Rather than abandoning Horkheimer and Adorno's critique, however, Habermas proposes translating it into a new linguistic framework:

> the rational core of mimetic achievements can be laid open only if we give up the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness—namely a subject that represents objects and toils with them—in favor of the paradigm of linguistic philosophy—namely, that of intersubjective understanding of communication—and puts the cognitive-instrumental aspect of reason in its proper place as part of a more encompassing *communicative rationality*.[4]

Habermas develops a broad conception of reason that includes the instrumental-cognitive aspect of reason central to Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis, but that also contains possibilities blocked by their narrow and totalizing critique. That is, he finds the conditions for an intersubjective-communicative reason within Horkheimer and Adorno's work, which seeks to liberate subjects from their isolation within mass culture. Habermas further argues that there is evidence of an intersubjective model of communication based on mutual understanding and free rec-

---

3   Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. One, Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Beacon Press, 1984), 389.

4   Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 390.

ognition in Adorno's later work, such as in the following passage from *Negative Dialectics*:

> On the Kantian model, subjects are free insofar as they are conscious of themselves, identical with themselves; and in this identity they are also unfree insofar as they are subject to its compulsion and perpetuate it. As non-identical, as diffuse nature, they are unfree; and yet as such they are free, because in the impulses that overcome them—and the non-identity of the subject with itself means just that—they are also rid of the compulsive character of identity. Personality is a caricature of freedom. The ground of this aporia is to be found in the fact that the truth that lies beyond the compulsion to identity would not be simply different from it, but would be mediated through it.[5]

Habermas detects a Freudian lens in Adorno's reading of Kant in this passage, which he believes provides evidence for structures of intersubjectivity that must be in place for ego-formation to occur at all. On Habermas's interpretation of this passage, Adorno relies on Freud's structural theory of the mind—the id, ego, and superego—to critique Kant's notion of a free and autonomous subject. Furthermore, Habermas connects the impulses that disturb the self-identical subject to intersubjective structures of mutual understanding-the conflicts of the id-driven child in the context of the oedipal family drama give rise to the superego, which governs how the ego processes the reality of external and internal nature.[6] While there is certainly a Freudian inflection to Adorno's critique of Kant in the section "Truth-Content of the Doctrine of the Intelligible" of *Negative Dialectics* (as well in the prior sections), Habermas glosses over the central insight of Adorno's analysis. Adorno takes up Kant's notion of the intelligible world to demonstrate that although it makes possible the delusion that subjectivity is autonomous and free, it also contains an element of truth insofar as it assumes an aspect of subjectivity that cannot be rationalized. Indeed, this central insight, which is what Adorno de-

---

5   Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 391.

6   Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 391.

termines as the truth-content of the Kantian concept, is opposed to the idea that Adorno's critique simply intended to show that the notion of intelligibility obscures the intersubjective dimension of ego-formation.

Habermas interprets Adorno's notion of the impulses that overcome the subject according to a view of psychoanalysis that Adorno in fact strongly opposed; it was an approach that Adorno elsewhere called "revisionist psychoanalysis," which he associated with the work of Karen Horney and others who turned away from Freud's drive theory and embraced object relations theory.[7] Adorno charged the neo-Freudians with neutralizing the more radical aspects of Freudian theory, including the dominant role of sexuality in his work, and with ultimately facilitating the subject's adaptation to a contradictory and antagonistic reality. In this sense, Habermas's emphasis on interpreting psychoanalytic structures of reason as codes for intersubjectivity performs a similar function, it aims to provide the conditions for "a mutual and constraint-free understanding among individuals in their dealings with one another, as well as the identity of individuals who come to a compulsion-free understanding with themselves—sociation without repression."[8] This view does not account for Freud's emphasis on drive theory and brackets away the role of sexuality. Ultimately, Habermas reads Freudian psychoanalysis as the science of self-reflection.[9] Consequently, in the translation of Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis to the broader framework of communicative rationality, an important dimension of their critique is

---

7   Theodor W. Adorno, "Revisionist Psychoanalysis," trans. Nan-Nan Lee, *Philosophy and Social Criticism,* 40 no. 3 (2014): 309-338. For a discussion of Adorno's critique see Nan-Nan Lee, "Sublimated or castrated psychoanalysis? Adorno's critique of the revisionist psychoanalysis: An introduction to 'The Revisionist Psychoanalysis', *Philosophy and Social Criticism,* 40 no. 3 (2014): 309-338.

8   Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 391.

9   Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Polity Press, 1987). See Rainer Nägele et. al, "Freud, Habermas and the Dialectic of Enlightenment: On Real and Ideal Discourses," *New German Critique,* no. 22 (Winter 1981): 41-62 for an extensive analysis of Habermas's relationship to psychoanalysis and particularly the bracketing away of sexuality in his reading of Freud.

neglected. Habermas's interpretation forecloses the interpretive possibilities inherent within the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* since it assumes that what opposes instrumental reason can only be accessed through another expanded form of reason—i.e., communicative reason.[10]

In this article, I return to this idea of the impulses that overcome the subject as the moment of non-identity that resists the subject's compulsive identification with itself and therefore, its subjugation to instrumental reason. I turn specifically to Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the problem of sexuality that emerges in the formation of the Enlightenment subject. I take as my guide Adorno's thought that "in total contradiction to what takes place on the surface, sexuality becomes the nerve center of society."[11] In his discussion of sexual taboos, Adorno notes that sexuality occupies this central but subterranean role because social suffering is repressed and displaced onto it.

By recovering a more robust understanding of the psychoanalytic structures that condition the formation of subjectivity in late capitalist mass culture, I aim to elucidate the relevance of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* not only as a corrective to Habermas's critique, but also for debates in feminist theory, contra the feminist criticism that accuses this text of adhering to a patriarchal view of sexuality. In the first part of the article, I examine how the rationalized understanding of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* obscures Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of sexuality, particularly as it pertains to gender relations. More specifically, it obscures Horkheimer and Adorno's psychoanalytic framing of how the Kantian ideals underlining the Enlightenment—freedom, self-determination—transform into their opposite. In the second part of the article, I focus more closely on the culture industry chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlight-*

---

10 See Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis* (Columbia University Press, 2020) for a critique of the rationalized understanding of psychoanalysis in Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Robin Celikates.

11 Theodor W. Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (Columbia University Press, 1998),77.

enment, to decode sexuality as the subterranean nerve center of society, which functions in contradiction to how things appear. In the last part of the article, I examine the implications of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique for debates in feminist theory.

I.

According to Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the totalizing nature of instrumental reason is unable to describe the qualitative aspects of experience destroyed by reason, or to formulate an alternative. *Mimesis*, as a marker for this experience, remains a vague signifier. Habermas's solution, to show that instrumental reason is only one part of a larger sphere of communicative reason, allows for the rationalization of that which resists instrumental reason, and therefore, allows for the formulation of a concrete idea of intersubjectivity as a corrective to the alienated and automatized subject. Yet, this view of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as containing a nascent theory of intersubjectivity elides its disclosive role in illuminating the destruction of experience.

Although working within a similar framework, Axel Honneth views the function of language to be highly reflective in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* such that it calls upon aesthetic resources to induce a shift in the consciousness of the reader.[12] Through its rhetorical strategies, the text induces a shocking awareness of social pathology.[13] Honneth highlights three strategies of rhetorical critique—narrative metaphor, *chiasmus*, and exaggeration—that Horkheimer and Adorno employ in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to evoke normative judgements in the reader: The text "ac-

---

12 Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Polity Press, 2007).

13 See also Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (Verso, 2014) for a similar view. Rose argues that Adorno employs strategies such as stating two apparently contradicting standpoints to "induce in his reader the development of the latent capacity for non-identity thought—the perspective that the concept is not identical with its object," 62. In other words, Rose believes that Adorno's contradicting theses are non-literal and are intended to shock the viewer into an awareness of the contradictions produced by reified thought.

complishes this by presenting such a radically new description of social living conditions that the latter suddenly acquire the new meaning of a pathological condition."[14] Honneth believes that these radically new descriptions transform the reader's view of the social, as well as their values. The text successfully discloses facts about capitalist culture and reveals the pathological nature of its institutions and practices; however, Honneth notes that the validity of this critique can only be assessed in retrospect. The consequence of proceeding through linguistic and aesthetic strategies is that Horkheimer and Adorno cannot offer theoretical justification for their critique. Instead, the validity of their critique will only be established if future readers agree that society has indeed become what Horkheimer and Adorno described. In this sense, Honneth ultimately agrees with Habermas that there is no way to philosophically validate the legitimacy of the text. Since Horkheimer and Adorno equate all forms of conceptual knowing with instrumental reason, they can only seek out strategies unrelated to a rational orientation.

While Honneth's intent was to demonstrate the relevance of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for social criticism, his analysis occludes an important connection between the formal qualities of the text and its content. Horkheimer and Adorno's attention to what is manifest is motivated by the aim of deciphering its latent content.[15] Adorno describes this methodology in his "Essay as Form":

> The essay, however, is concerned with what is blind in its objects. It wants to use concepts to pry open the aspect of its ob-

---

14 Honneth, *Disrespect*, 57.

15 Sigmund Freud developed the distinction between latent and manifest content in his discussion of the interpretation of dreams. See *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (W.W. Norton & Company, 1966). Habermas has an extensive discussion of the methodological value of Freud's distinction between latent and manifest content, which he believes allows for an expanded hermeneutics. See chapter ten of *Knowledge and Human Interests.* Ultimately, Habermas discusses psychoanalytic interpretation as a form of self-reflection and therefore presumes a self-identical, cognizing subject that can perform the work of psychoanalytic interpretation according to the normative standard of free and public communication.

jects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entangled, that the net of their objectivity is a merely subject arrangement. It wants to polarize the opaque element and release the latent forces in it.[16]

The latent forces suggest a realm of experience that operates on a subterranean level, insofar as the reader or subject is also implicated in what Horkheimer and Adorno describe. That is, whereas enlightenment ideals posited the freedom and autonomy of the modern subject, the development of enlightenment reason into its dominating, calculative, and instrumental form requires that the subject repress its own nature and external nature. What is presumed, then, is not an intact and well-formed ego that can undertake the work of self-reflection, but rather, a critique of the ego itself. Habermas's and Honneth's readings of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* avoid the complexities of ego-formation that Horkheimer and Adorno discuss in their analysis, particularly as they arise from the problem of sexuality under capitalism.

Horkheimer and Adorno's text is paradoxical—it posits an all-encompassing, totalizing instrumental reason that destroys the realm of experience, and at the same time, provides descriptions that attempt to intervene in the sphere of experience enervated by instrumental reason. Their tactile descriptions provide a roadmap through that degraded sphere, revealing the regressive nature of what appears to be progress. In this sense, Horkheimer and Adorno's descriptions of sexuality are not general statements, but rather, are unraveled from within everyday phenomena and relationships, and more particularly, from within the constructions of subjectivity under capitalism to which the readers of the text and the authors themselves remain entangled.[17]

---

16 Theodor W. Adorno, "Essay as Form" in *Notes to Literature Vol. One*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Columbia University Press, 1991), 23.

17 See Fabian Freyenhagen, "Why Professor Habermas would fail a class on Dialectic of Enlightenment" *Res Philosophica*, 101 no.2 (April 2024): 245-269. Freyenhagen criticizes Habermas for the background assumption that the Enlightenment has made us sufficiently rational, an assumption that also informs Habermas's deployment of psychoanalysis as a form of self-reflection.

Central to the way in which Horkheimer and Adorno understand the problem of sexuality under capitalism is the effect produced by the shift away from the traditional source of socialization: the family. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx discussed the domestic sphere in relation to alienated labor, as both the source of respite for the worker and the worker's reproduction, where procreation becomes part of the overall fulfillment of animal desires:[18]

> As a result, therefore, man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions–eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.

> Certainly drinking, eating, procreating etc. are also genuinely human functions. But in the abstraction which separates them from the sphere of all other human activity and turns them into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal.[19]

Marx's analysis demonstrated the debilitating effects of the alienated labor process on the worker. Since it does not flow from the workers own relation to work, but rather, is an external, mechanized process imposed on the worker, a form of self-estrangement transpires. Marx uses the formulation of not feeling at home to describe this estrangement or alienation of the worker: "He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he

---

Rather than self-reflection, Freyenhagen proposes a reading of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a form of self-therapy. In a more explicitly psychoanalytic framework, Seyla Benhabib views the text as a working through of trauma. *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia Press, 1986).

18 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto,* trans. Martin Milligan (Prometheus Books). For a discussion of this text in the context of the impact of alienation on the relationship between the sexes, see Angela Y. Davis, "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation," *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

19 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto,* trans. Martin Milligan (Prometheus Books), 74-75.

is not at home."[20] Furthermore, the worker's labor activity does not intrinsically fulfill genuine needs, but instead, becomes a means to satisfy needs that are external to it. The workers' estrangement from their own life activity, then, leads to a loss of self. In this case, the worker only feels fully active in their animal functions, and procreation became one of the few available sources of (animal) pleasures. In Marx's analysis of alienation, procreation, which is degraded to an animal pleasure, has a particular implication for women. Angela Davis notes, "the implications for the woman who shares in these activities and ministers to her man's needs are formidable. Compelled to make only minimal contributions, or none whatsoever, to social production—not even in and through alienated patterns of work—she is effectively reduced to the status of a mere *biological* need of man."[21]

Horkheimer and Adorno acknowledge the powerful role this reduction to biological need continues to exert on the subjugation of women. In a fragment entitled, "Man and Beast" from the last section of the book, "Notes and Sketches", they explain this subjugation as tied to the equation of women with nature and biology:

> The woman is not a subject. She does not produce but looks after the producers, a living monument to the long-vanished time of the self-sufficient household. The division of labor imposed on her by the man was unfavorable. She became an embodiment of biological function, an image of nature, in the suppression of which this civilization's claim to glory lay. To dominate nature boundlessly, to turn the cosmos into an endless hunting ground, has been the dream of millennia. It shaped the idea of man in a male society. It was the purpose of reason, on which man prided himself. Woman was smaller and weaker, between her and man there was a difference she could not overcome, a difference set by nature, the most shaming, degrading agency possible within the male society. When domination of nature is the true goal, biological inferiority remains the ultimate stigma, the weakness imprinted by nature, the mark which invites violence.[22]

20 Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,* 74-75.

21 Davis, *Women and Capitalism,* 152.

22 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments,*

This quotation drawn from the notes and sketches is corroborated by Horkheimer and Adorno's opening chapter of the book, "The Concept of Enlightenment," which concerns the liberal, enlightenment project that promised freedom from the fear of nature and a Kantian assertion of autonomy over the previously unruly and dark corners of the world; yet this is precisely a project privy only to the male subject; women were required, paradoxically to remain mired in nature, that is, as noted above, to be prisoners of their biology and to fulfill their naturalized biological roles as reproducers.

Enlightenment thinking takes on several destructive features toward nature, which Horkheimer and Adorno describe as 1) patriarchal, insofar as the "mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature"; 2) democratic, insofar as it does not express any particular allegiances and is at the disposal of all who have the power to wield it. It "knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters"; 3) technological, insofar as it aims to produce a method of exploitation. "What humans seek to learn from nature is how to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts;" and finally it is 4) purely operational, insofar as it invalidates all other forms of knowledge that might still perpetuate the notion that nature is meaningful, mysterious, or sacred.[23]

As a result, and as discussed above, because of women's conflation with nature and her presumed biological inferiority, she becomes vulnerable to the same dominating features of Enlightenment thinking. Horkheimer and Adorno note in "Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality"

> Socially, the individual woman is an example of the species, a representative of her sex, and thus, wholly encompassed by male logic, she stands for nature, the substrate of never-ending subsumption on the plane of ideas and of never-ending subjection on that of reality. Woman as an allegedly natural being is a product of history, which denatures her.[24]

---

trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), 206.

23 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 8.

24 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 88.

Horkheimer and Adorno's perspective challenges the notion that the construction of woman under patriarchal conditions can be decoupled from this association with nature and the oppression that it brings forth. Nature is a fundamental condition that humans have historically attempted to conquer, and yet, nature is something to which women are expected to remain bound.[25] This is even the case with the decline of the traditional family and the entry of women into the workforce.

In "Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality," Horkheimer and Adorno describe this shift as such:

> Under big industry love is annulled. The decline of middle-class property, the downfall of the free economic subject, affects the family: it is no longer the celebrated cell of society it once was, since it no longer forms the basis of the citizen's economic existence. For adolescents the family no longer marks out the horizon of their lives; the autonomy of the father is vanishing and with it resistance to his authority.[26]

---

25 In "A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment? Horkheimer and Adorno Revisited," *New German Critique,* no. 56 (Spring-Summer 1992): 134-170, Andrew Hewitt takes the conflation of women with nature as the starting point for his analysis of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* On the one hand, he positions Horkheimer and Adorno, as male theorists, inside philosophy's phallocentric discourse, which has historically excluded women. Hewitt asserts that this exclusion allows women to "*escape* from the all-inclusive system of power," and at the same time raises the methodological question of whether Horkheimer and Adorno can successfully work with the "utopian margins of the feminine in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment."* By positioning woman as a utopian marker outside of rational discourse, Hewitt then levies the Habermasian worry about how Horkheimer and Adorno can address the question of woman without falling into a performative contradiction. Hewitt's analysis incorrectly asserts that Horkheimer and Adorno position woman as an irrational utopian marker existing outside of their own rational masculinist discourse, and therefore, shares the same shortcomings that afflict Habermas's rationalized understanding of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

26 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment:* 83-84. See Jessica Benjamin who reads critical theory's diagnosis that traditional forms of authority have waned as a form of nostalgia for those forms, particularly the patriarchal bourgeois family. "The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology" *Telos* no. 32 (June 1977): 42-64. For a rebuttal of Benjamin see Benjamin Fong, *Death and Mastery: Psychoanalytic Drive Theory and the Subject of Late Capitalism* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

This general shift produces a new dichotomy between love and sexuality. Horkheimer and Adorno surmise that the female child's servitude within the traditional patriarchal family generated hope in the prospect of romantic love that would lead her away from the stranglehold of the paternal home, even if that prospect was illusory. When the possibility of work opened to women, Horkheimer and Adorno note that the prospect of love is closed-there is a destruction of romantic love. The abstract equality promised by the market is in principle gender-blind, and yet, in practice, the "working woman" who must equally fend for herself as all workers, also takes on along with her fellow workers a "rational, calculating attitude toward their own sexuality," the very rational attitude that appeared on Sade's pages in the figure of Juliette. Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrate that the workforce enacts a separation between one's mind and one's body—love and pleasure become different things: "The Cartesian division of the human being into thinking and extensive substance is expressed with total clarity as the destruction of Romantic Love. The latter is taken to be a mask, a rationalization of the physical drive."[27] The separation of love and sexuality produces a bifurcated subject, with the mask of Romantic Love, concealing a more fundamental drive rationalized by the economic conditions of society. At the same time, while women adopted the bifurcated psyche of the Enlightenment subject, they did not occupy the same social status as their male counterparts. Women worked inferior jobs and were paid inferior wages, while at the same time, they were still responsible for work in the domestic sphere. "Since the 1950s, an increasing number of women were integrated into abstract labor and the process of accumulation, accompanied by a range of processes rationalizing domestic life, increased options for birth control, and the gradual equalization of access to education."[28] Women, who were already doubly socialized—i.e., admitted into the labor force

---

27 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 85-86.

28 Roswitha Scholz, "Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without the Body," *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, eds. Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson, and Nicholas Brown (MCM' Publishing, 2014), 136

while still primarily responsible for household duties—now experienced this as their dominant role and as a more integral part of capitalism. It is not unusual, Scholz writes, to see women "assume dissociated responsibilities, making possible the pervasiveness of the mother with several children who still manages to be a doctor, scientist, politician, and much more."[29]

In addition to the bifurcated Enlightenment subject, then, there is further division with respect to women, who continue to act as representatives of their sex. Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of the Enlightenment subject, then, vacillates between its universal development and the impact of this universal development on gender relations, a distinction that underlines their analysis of the culture industry.

II.

Horkheimer and Adorno contend that the decline of the family and the loss of traditional sources of authority and socialization did not lead to cultural chaos, but instead, a more powerful form of control that the culture industry purveyed through the commodity-form. The development of the culture industry was fueled by the technological rationality that made possible the mechanical reproduction of mass culture, and in turn, usurped the traditional role of the biological family. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry denotes the mass production of standardized cultural objects such as films, novels, pop songs, magazines, radio programs and television shows. It referred to the planned production of objects that exerted social control over the masses, rather than objects spontaneously arising from the masses themselves.[30] In this sense, Horkheimer and Adorno asserted that the culture industry performed the socialization that was once the prior function of "objective religion" and "precapitalist residues," including the family and the household, the very spheres that Marx described as the realm of (animal) pleasure.

---

29 Scholz, "Patriarchy and Commodity Society," 138.

30 Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture Industry Revisited," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Malden: Blackwell, 2000).

The chapter, "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," reveals how the manifest content of the culture industry—its hit shows, its celebrity system—conceals the latent desires and needs of the subjects who partake in the culture industry. The culture industry schematizes subjective perception, and at the same time, is unable to rationalize what is repressed.[31] A primary conduit of social control enacted by the culture industry is its promise of pleasure and entertainment, precisely the things that were once the purview of the household. In the culture industry, pleasure takes many forms, including the promise of sex, love, desire, eroticism, and beauty, among other markers and signifiers, but it is all purveyed through the same standardized form. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that while holding out the promise of pleasure, the culture industry never fulfills it, and that it is in fact the primary aim of the culture industry *not* to fulfil this promise of pleasure. The culture industry thus operates through denial rather than sublimation:

> This principle requires that while all needs should be presented to individuals as capable of fulfillment by the culture industry, they should be so set up in advance that individuals experience themselves through their needs only as eternal consumers, as the culture industry's object. Not only does it persuade them that its fraud is satisfaction; it also gives them to understand that they must make do with what is offered, whatever it may be.[32]

There is, then, a fundamental shift that occurs with the rise of the culture industry with respect to how needs are fulfilled, which Horkheimer and Adorno describe as a shift from sublimation (made possible by genuine works of art) to denial (enacted by objects of the culture industry).

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud discussed the sublimation of sexual drives as an "especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized

---

31 Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94.

32 Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 113.

life."[33] While Horkheimer and Adorno also view genuine works of art as performing this function of sublimation, the culture industry completely blocks this form of fulfillment and, instead, enacts a suppression of need. If sublimation offers a form of satisfaction, in the culture industry, individuals pursue sexual desires without fulfillment. The object of desire is constantly exhibited but remains out of reach: "the breasts beneath the sweater, the naked torso of the sporting hero, it merely goads the unsublimated anticipation of pleasure, which through the habit of denial has long since been mutilated as masochism."[34] In this condition, where the culture industry operates on the mechanism of denial, "the mass production of sexuality automatically brings about its repression."[35] Despite the progressive unyoking of sexuality from the imperative to reproduce, and the lifting of prohibitions on non-procreative sex, sexuality is stereotypically coded according to its socially sanctioned gendered forms. The appearance of sexual freedom is accompanied by greater repression.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud articulated a fundamental contradiction in the development of civilization itself. He contended that while the progress of civilization necessarily entailed restrictions on sexual life, these restrictions were at the same time the source of an unavoidable psychic suffering or cultural frustration. Beginning with the earliest civilizations and into Freud's present day, these restrictions concerned the question of object-choice. In the case of "sexually mature persons," for example, Freud noted:

---

33 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (W.W. Norton & Company), 51. Adrian Johnston thematizes the development of Freud's drive theory through three phases: the 1905 Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, the 1915 "Drives and Their Vicissitudes," and the 1920 Beyond the Pleasure Principle. "The Unfolding of the Freudian Drive," *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Northwestern University Press, 2005), 156-183. See also, J. Laplanche and J.B, Pontalis, "Instinct (or Drive)," *The Language of Psychoanalysis,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 214-217.

34 Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 111.

35 Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 112.

> Present-day civilization gives us plainly to understand that
> sexual relations are permitted only on the basis of a final, in-
> dissoluble bond between a man and woman; that sexuality as
> a source of enjoyment for its own sake is unacceptable to it;
> and that its intention is to tolerate it only as the hitherto irre-
> placeable means of multiplying the human race.[36]

While acknowledging that he had painted a somewhat extreme picture, and that transgressions against this norm were plentiful, he nevertheless stood by his claim that in general, the sexual life of civilized people was seriously disabled. By restricting sexuality to genital love and narrowing object-choice to the opposite sex, the partial drives of infantile sexuality are both unified into one aim and repressed as indecent or tabooed.[37] As Freud described, "extra-genital forms of satisfaction are viewed as perversions. And the standard which declares itself in these prohibitions is that of a sexual life identical for all."[38] Freud thus described a double restriction, one intended to stave off the drives associated with infantile sexuality and partial instincts, and the other intended to enforce genital love within the confines of monogamy and marriage.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, this double restriction takes on a new form in the culture industry, but it is not until his later work that Adorno diagnoses this as the desexualization of sexuality. In "Sexual Taboos and the Law Today" Adorno noted: "Rational society, or the domination of inner and outer nature, disciplines the diffuse pleasure principle that is harmful to the work ethic."[39] The desexualization of sexuality results in genital love *itself* issuing taboos rather than being the object of taboo. For example, "the 'healthy sex life' that in the most advanced countries today is encouraged by all sectors of the economy, from the cosmetics industry

---

36 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 30-31.

37 For Freud's theory of infantile sexuality, see *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: The 1905 Edition*, trans. Ulrike Kistner, ed. Philippe Van Haute and Herman Westerink (Verso, 2016).

38 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 60.

39 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos," 72.

to psychotherapy"[40] is taken to be a positive expression of fulfillment and satisfaction; yet for Adorno, this view of sex—this desexualization of sexuality—reduces it to a sanitized sport (for example, tracking how many calories one will burn while having sex, or treating sex as a prerequisite for a good night's sleep), and this precludes it from true eroticism. In fact, this healthy sex life entails restrictions on the very sphere of sexuality that would generate pleasure. The social tolerance of sexuality, then, stems from the fact that it is divorced from genuine pleasure, to the point that individuals in the culture industry are alienated from the very pursuit of this pleasure itself. In their chapter on Juliette, Horkheimer and Adorno describe the evolution of the twentieth century coldness toward sex: the "cynical roué whose side she takes has metamorphosed, with the help of the sex educator, the psychoanalyst, and the hormone physiologist, into the open-minded practical man who extends his affirmation of sport and hygiene to include the sex life."[41] The vacuousness of what officially passes as sexuality, as something that is part of an overall commodity culture, poses little threat to the dominant order. For this reason, the source of the restrictions on sexuality also undergoes a fundamental shift:

> Rational society…no longer needs the patriarchal commandment of abstinence, virginity, and chastity. On the contrary, sexuality, turned on and off, channeled and exploited in countless forms by the material and cultural industry, cooperates with this process of manipulation insofar as it is absorbed, institutionalized, and administered by society. As long as sexuality is bridled, it is tolerated.[42]

Genital sexuality, now freed from its older taboos, integrates the prior stage of infantile sexuality and its partial drives "into a unified drive serving the societal purpose of reproduction."[43]

The unification of the drive, however, also produces a tension between the capitalist construction of sexuality and the repressed biological

---

40 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos," 75.

41 Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 85-86.

42 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos," 72.

43 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos," 75.

drives; it is produced by the threat of the partial drives to the integrity of the ego. A prior experience of sexuality—infantile sexuality—impinges on the present, and furthermore, this is a prior experience that is off-limits to consciousness. In this respect, there is a tension that prevents the ego from total adherence to its impoverished and impassive sexuality.

Horkheimer and Adorno adapt Freud's thesis from *Civilization and Its Discontents* to their critique of late capitalism, which they saw as requiring a particular kind of renunciation of the pleasure principle, one that necessitated individuals to become completely adapted to the work ethic. However, in *Sexual Taboos* Adorno also appealed to the early Freud's view of infantile sexuality and its partial drives as a way of fleshing out in greater detail precisely what drives are repressed or tabooed by capitalism, and what is occluded when the realm of pleasure is yoked to the capitalist form of work or alienated labor. By restricting sexuality to genital love and narrowing object-choice to the opposite sex, the partial drives of infantile sexuality are both unified into one aim and repressed as indecent or tabooed.

For this reason, the depiction of sexuality in the products of the culture industry adhere to "rigid invariants," for example, "the wholesome slaps the heroine receives from the strong hand of the male star, his plain-speaking abruptness toward the pampered heiress, are like all the details, ready-made clichés, to be used here and there and always completely defined by the purpose they serve within the schema."[44] Although meant to provide leisure time, the standardized products of the culture industry have only one true aim: to orient individuals to the unity of production, or the sphere of work rather than pleasure.[45] In this sense, there is a totalizing and homogenizing function of the culture industry: "the whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry."[46]

---

44 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 98.

45 See Adorno's "Short Commentaries on Proust," *Notes to Literature,* trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Columbia University Press, 2019) for a literary example that defies the ready-made clichés of the culture industry.

46 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 99.

By effacing the boundary between the realm of cultural products and reality, such as when the moviegoer "perceives the street outside as a continuation of the film he has just left," there is no aspect of reality that is not colonized by the logic of the culture industry, effectively truncating the capacity for "imagination and spontaneity." Each product is "a model of the gigantic economic machinery, which, from the first, keeps everyone on their toes, both at work and in the leisure time which resembles it."[47] Further on, Horkheimer and Adorno note,

> entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again. At the same time, however, mechanization has such power over leisure and its happiness, determines so thoroughly the fabrication of entertainment commodities, that the off-duty worker can experience nothing but after-images of the work process itself.[48]

The only escape from the work process is through adaptation to it in leisure time. Horkheimer and Adorno thus maintain that the culture industry can manipulate individuality so successfully because the fractured nature of society has always been reproduced within it.

The culture industry enacts a totalizing closure, but this conformity is not produced by external constraint. Instead, it involves a transformation of the Kantian ideals of autonomy and freedom into their dialectical opposites. Kant's ahistorical formation of the categories of thinking obscured the way in which they produce conformity. Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the role of Kant's schematism in the culture industry chapter, or the analysis of Kant's categorical imperative in connection with the figure of Juliette, reveals the necessary psychoanalytic and historical materialist reading of these categories—their aim to venerate the human being ultimately produces subjects that are perfect conduits of the capitalist system.

At the same time, the culture industry is unable to fully colonize the sphere of material needs and drives. This is the arena that is forcefully

---

47   Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 100.

48   Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 109.

repressed, and yet, produces a tension in relation to that which is artificially imposed by the culture industry. The repression of needs and drives produces an inability to feel pleasure beyond what one is socially sanctioned to feel, and in this way also prevents a genuine acknowledgment of suffering: "Existence in late capitalism is a permanent rite of initiation. Everyone must show that they identify wholeheartedly with the power that beats them."[49] In this context, Horkheimer and Adorno's descriptions, particularly those that are crude and exaggerated, or those that appear archaic and out of touch with reality, have a specific function. When reading the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, one might make the objection: things are not like that! As subjects of the culture industry, we are also goaded by the unsublimated anticipation of pleasure, and thus recoil when we are instead presented with a reality that is not seamlessly integrated into our perceptions. To take an example, Horkheimer and Adorno paint an extreme picture of everyday life under capitalism:

> The citizens whose lives are split between business and private life, their private life between ostentation and intimacy, their intimacy between the sullen community of marriage and the bitter solace of being entirely alone, at odds with themselves and with everyone, are virtually already Nazis, who are at once enthusiastic and fed up, or the city dwellers of today, who can imagine friendship only as a 'social contract' between the inwardly unconnected.[50]

Such an extreme picture, I venture, does not produce a shocking awareness of our social pathology, but in fact prompts a negation on the part of the subject—a determinate negation insofar as an alternative is mentally marshalled to disprove this picture, even if that alternative is purely drawn from the realm of fantasy or from the sense that something unrationalized impinges upon our experiences. It is precisely this reaction that breaks with the compulsive identification that we unconsciously fulfill in our everyday lives. The revulsion with which Horkheimer and

---

49 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 124.

50 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 126.

Adorno write and which the reader feels produces contact with the impulses that permit nonidentity within an otherwise homogenizing realm.

III.

Horkheimer and Adorno diagnosed the problem of sexuality as emerging from its centrality to the production and reproduction of capitalism, which required its separation from the possibility of genuine pleasure. And the question persists today as to the nature of the relationship between sexuality and capitalism, and furthermore, whether sexuality can avoid being totally conditioned and co-opted by the imperative to work. If sexuality is indeed an ideological effect produced by the disciplining logic of capital, then is it possible to conceive of a true or authentic sexuality under such a regime, and relatedly, a sexuality that is not subservient to capital? To contest the idea that there is a total subsumption of sexuality to capital, an appeal to something outside of this disciplining control would seem necessary. This appeal to an outside of capitalism resides in the possibility of un-coopted biological or natural drives and thus, once again, carries the risk of essentializing and naturalizing sexuality, as though if the fetters of capitalism could be stripped away an authentic sexuality would flourish.

Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis points us precisely in the direction of biological or natural drives as the realm that requires investigation, not as an authentic realm of freedom, but as the realm through which the oppression of sexuality is enacted. The contradiction between the male project of conquering nature and the insistence that women remain bound to nature, which has been a central problem for feminist theorists, has become even more acute with the development of new reproductive technologies. In this last section, I briefly examine how the problem of nature, which relegates women to an inherently passive condition ripe for domination, informs the Marxist-Feminist analysis of reproductive technologies as both alleviating and exacerbating this condition.

While offering a powerful analysis of alienation, the notion that sexuality functioned as a form of respite and pleasure for the (male) worker

also fueled the feminist criticism that Marx naturalized this sphere.[51] In the *Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir noted: "Human society is an anti-physis: it does not passively submit to the presence of nature, but rather appropriates it. This appropriation is not an interior, subjective operation; it is carried out objectively in praxis."[52] Shulamith Firestone, commenting on this passage a few decades later noted that while humanity outgrows nature, the oppression of women according to their sex remains rooted in nature, which can no longer be justified. Nevertheless, she recognizes that this is a political problem, that "though man is increasingly capable of freeing himself from the biological conditions that created his tyranny over women and children, he has little reason to give this tyranny up."[53] In this sense, Firestone advanced the controversial argument that liberation required a fundamental change in biological condition. That is, the biological family itself resided on an inherently unequal power distribution. It could not be enough to simply dissociate women from biology, but rather, modeled on the idea of Marxist revolution, liberation involved "the revolt of the underclass (women) and the seizure of the control of reproduction."[54] This revolution would not simply be aimed at eradicating male privilege, but at 1) eradicating the sex distinction itself, such that rather than hetero- or homosexuality, sexuality would take on

---

51 As Silvia Federici notes, "Marx was not immune to the patriarchal tendency to consider women's reproductive work as a natural, instinctive, quasi-biological activity," *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender and Feminism* (PM Press, 2021).

52 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Vintage, 2011), 85.

53 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Bantam Books, 1970), 10. See also Davis "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation." Davis writes, "Men (i.e. males) have severed the umbilical cord between themselves and nature. They have deciphered its mysteries, subdued its forces, and have forged their self-definition in contradistinction to the nature they have conquered. But women are projected as embodiments of nature's unrelenting powers. In their alienated portrait, women are still primarily undifferentiated beings—sexual, childbearing, natural," 148.

54 Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.

a similar form to what Freud described as polymorphous perversity; and 2) reproduction would no longer be the burden of one sex for the benefit of both, but rather, by means of technology, could be decoupled from women all together. Firestone's solution, while acknowledging the importance of the sphere of biology in understanding the oppression of female sexuality resided, in the end, on the supposition that biology could be superseded without disarticulating the connection between technological rationality and capitalist logic. In this sense, the utopian hope placed on technology did not account for the way that it was wedded to, and an expression of, an instrumentalizing reason.

Firestone's work, despite its limitations, foreshadowed the development of contemporary technologies that are increasingly changing the very horizon of reproduction itself. Martha E. Gimenez, who has examined the problem of technology in the context of procreation under capitalism, offers a contemporary analysis of this phenomenon through social reproduction theory. In the case of reproductive technologies specifically, Gimenez discusses their contradictory role with respect to the family:

> Under capitalism, the nuclear family is the more widespread observable form of the mode of reproduction. This family form is characterized by the unity or confluence of relations of sexuality, reproduction (physical and social), and economic cooperation between men and women. Capitalist development, however, at the same time it selects this family form as the most 'functional' for daily and intergenerational reproduction, constantly undermines it through changes in the productive forces in the realms of production and reproduction.[55]

Gimenez asserts that the development of new reproductive technologies effectively decouple procreation from the social relations of production, i.e., sexual relations and procreation that lead to pregnancy and childbirth, and have led to the creation of a new contradictory mode of pro-

---

55 Martha E. Gimenez, *Marx, Women and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist-Feminist Essays* (Brill, 2018), 196.

creation that in essence undermines the very core of the nuclear family. The problem of instrumental reason and the contradictions it produces, although not named as such, underlines the analysis:

> But the main form relations of procreation take are market relations between buyers (couples or individuals) and sellers of professional services or of elements of the reproductive process (i.e. sperm, eggs, embryos, wombs). These are not, however, purely exchange or monetary relations, for they establish genetic connections among people which have, up to now, been considered the biological basis for kinship relations.[56]

The development of reproductive technologies unsettles the connection between the naturalized sphere of sexual relations and procreation, and the technological means of procreation that usher in processes removed from this traditional sphere, and that can potentially transform procreation into another form of capitalist production. This is a striking example of the dynamic that I have described in this paper, it illustrates a deep contradiction arising from the material conditions of sexuality: gains in women's sexual freedom under capitalism are, paradoxically, accompanied by new forms of sexual oppression. Gimenez, for example, discusses ways in which these technologies are liberating for certain affluent women and at the same time, highly oppressive for working-class and minority women, and those who cannot afford these technologies. Indeed, like Horkheimer and Adorno, Gimenez demonstrates that sexual relations and procreation are inseparable from the dynamic of accumulation and reproduction.

Gimenez's account of the contradictory development of reproductive technologies invites the question of how sexuality is not only regulated but also necessarily repressed by this development, a question that pertains to the persistence of the naturalization of procreation even in the face of technological developments that challenge its biological basis. Similarly, the question of sexuality emerges as a problem that requires analysis in contemporary critical theory, which draws upon the

---

56 Gimenez, *Marx, Women and Capitalist Social Reproduction,* 196.

resources of Marxist Feminism and Social Reproduction Theory. Nancy Fraser's recent *Cannibal Capitalism* foregrounds the importance of social reproduction theory for understanding the hidden abodes of capitalism that make possible waged labor: "Wage labor could not exist in the absence of housework, child-rearing, schooling, affective care, and a host of other activities which help to produce new generations of workers and replenish existing ones, as well as to maintain social bonds and shared understandings. Much like 'original accumulation,' therefore, social reproduction is an indispensable background condition of commodity production."[57] Like Gimenez, Fraser mentions the role of reproductive technologies in creating the conditions by which the social-reproductive sphere is "cannibalized" by capital; much more remains to be developed about the role of sexuality in this sphere, which is indicated only briefly and in relation to other social-reproductive functions.

If for Freud, our fundamental drives produced untenable desires that had to be sublimated or transformed into more appropriate goals, in the context of twentieth-first century capitalism, even the more appropriate goals of procreation as the dominant, acceptable form of sexuality, has, through technology, become reified, i.e., detached from the physical body and taken on a life of its own. There is thus a process of "inner socialization" that makes it possible for our inner lives to conform to objective demands or social forces, and this process involves disciplining the diffuse pleasure principle, which is not only opposed to the work ethic of capitalism but harmful to the principle of domination itself.[58] In the final analysis, discounting the aspects of sexuality that are repressed under capitalism keeps socially sanctioned sexuality yoked to the reproduction of capitalism.

Conclusion

This article returned to the vexed distinction between form and content in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with the following aims: 1) to invite a

---

57 Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do about it* (Verso, 2022), 9.

58 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos," 72.

reading strategy that is attentive to the dialectical relationship between the manifest and latent content of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; 2) to assert that the latent content involves a non-rationalizable realm of experience that nevertheless exerts effects on the level of what is manifest; 3) to demonstrate that the non-rationalizable realm of experience is not an irrational marker, but rather, arises from the fundamental contradiction in the material conditions of capitalist society, i.e, in the fundamental distinction between work and leisure, and 4) to demonstrate that exposure to this contradiction generates displeasure, both in the experience of reading the text, and in Horkheimer and Adorno's own disclosure of the negativity that is otherwise obscured by the language of positive science. Through their descriptions, Horkheimer and Adorno dismantle the false notion that because the concepts of instrumental reason profess clarity, equality, and standardization, that the world upon which they operate reflect those same qualities. Horkheimer and Adorno's text reveals the experience of nonidentity that already emerges in the tension between the mutilated form of sexuality as labor relation and the partial drives that are repressed. This is an immanent and material starting point for thinking about a non-repressive, non-identical form of sexuality. To imagine a total leap out of the Enlightenment, capitalist form of sexuality would precisely mean to lose the tension that arises between this form of sexuality and what is repressed by it; for Adorno, "all happiness is aroused by the tension between the two."[59]

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. (2000). *Culture Industry Revisited*. In *The Adorno Reader*, edited by Brian O'Connor. Malden: Blackwell.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1991). *Essay as Form*. Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen. In *Notes to Literature*, Vol. One. New York: Columbia University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. (2014). *Revisionist Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Nan-Nan Lee. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 40(3), 309–338.

---

59 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos," 75.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1998). *Sexual Taboos and Law Today*. Translated by Henry W. Pickford. In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. (2019). *Short Commentaries on Proust*. Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen. In *Notes to Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Allen, Amy (2020). *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Benhabib, Seyla (1986). *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Benjamin, Jessica (1977). *The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology*. *Telos* (32), 42–64.

Davis, Angela Yvonne (1998). *Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation*. In *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

de Beauvoir, Simone (1953). *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley. London: Lowe and Brydone Ltd.

Federici, Silvia (2021). *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender and Feminism*. Oakland: PM Press.

Firestone, Shulamith (1970). *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Bantam Books.

Fong, Benjamin (2016). *Death and Mastery: Psychoanalytic Drive Theory and the Subject of Late Capitalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Fraser, Nancy (2022). *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do about It*. London: Verso.

Freud, Sigmund (2010). *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Freud, Sigmund (1966). *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Freud, Sigmund (2016). *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: The 1905 Edition*. Translated by Ulrike Kistner. Edited by Philippe Van Haute and Herman Westerink. London: Verso.

Freyenhagen, Fabian (2024). *Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on*

  Dialectic of Enlightenment. Res Philosophica, 101(2), 245–269.

Gimenez, Martha E. (2018). *Marx, Women and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist-Feminist Essays*. Leiden: Brill.

Habermas, Jürgen (1987). *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1982). *The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading Dialectic of Enlightenment*. *New German Critique*, (26), 13–30.

Habermas, Jürgen (1984). *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. One: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hewitt, Andrew (1992). *A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment? Horkheimer and Adorno Revisited*. *New German Critique*, (56), 134–170.

Honneth, Axel (2007). *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Horkheimer, Max, and Adorno, Theodor W. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Johnston, Adrian (2005). *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Laplanche, Jean, and Pontalis, Jean-Bertrand (1974). *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Lee, Nan-Nan (2014). *Sublimated or Castrated Psychoanalysis? Adorno's Critique of the Revisionist Psychoanalysis: An Introduction to 'The Revisionist Psychoanalysis'*. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 40(3), 309–338.

Marx, Karl (1998). *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*. Translated by Martin Milligan. New York: Prometheus Books.

Nägele, Rainer, et al. (1981). *Freud, Habermas and the Dialectic of Enlightenment: On Real and Ideal Discourses*. *New German Critique*, (22), 41–62.

Rose, Gillian (2014). *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. London: Verso.

Scholz, Roswitha (2014). *Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without*

the Body. In *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, edited by Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson, and Nicholas Brown. Chicago: MCM' Publishing.

A Dialectic of Gendered Domination

Nathan DuFord[1]

Abstract: This paper provides a new interpretation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1945) through its sexed/gendered figures. I argue that the text posits the violent creation of the sexual division of labor as the origin for sex difference: sex difference arises by virtue of a difference that is created for domination. The text, in demonstrating the workings of myth as Enlightenment and Enlightenment as myth, relies on this creation of sex/gender difference as a foundational structure of domination. The first part of the paper interprets Odysseus and Juliette through the lens of the concept of Enlightenment, outlining how these characters work together: revealing the origin and replication of domination of the sexed/gendered human being. The second part of the paper draws attention to the analogy between the woman and the Jew in the text. This analogy demonstrates sex/gender as a social relation, rather than an essential identity.

The gender politics of the members of the Frankfurt School have often been ignored due to early interpretations that critique their supposed reinforcement of gender norms, misogyny, and homophobia. It's not uncommon to find claims that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* doesn't contain a discussion of sex/gender, but where we find claims that it does, it is often thought to be riddled with the so-called sexual conservatism of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Interpreters such as Martin Jay have argued that the text is a straightforward endorsement of patriarchal norms.[2] Barbara Becker-Catarino, interpreting the first excursus, concludes that: "In Horkheimer and Adorno's reinvention of the Odysseus myth, the course of man's civilization is charted as inevitable social dom-

---

1 Nathan DuFord, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Government at Smith College. His work focuses on the politics of sex and gender broadly construed. His first book, *Solidarity in Conflict* (Stanford University Press 2022), is based in feminist political thought and provides a defense of conflict in democratic organizing. Currently, he is working on two manuscripts: one on the sexual politics of the early Frankfurt School members and a second on the psychosexual politics of trans antagonism.

2 Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (University of California Press, 1973), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnwsg, 310.

ination of, and against an enchanting, desirous nature/woman."[3] As a consequence, the degraded and mutilated idea of woman under the Enlightenment-cum-patriarchal system, is read back into the text as though Horkheimer and Adorno endorse woman's natural state as domination by men. Crucially, the inverse is also true when Jay, for instance, comments on *Studies on Authority and the Family* but drops the family from his analysis.[4]

Many interpretations of the sexed/gendered dimensions of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have focused on the relationship of women to nature, and the other objects that compose the constellation of non-identity such as love and art, including my own.[5] In focusing on the way that women are made to stand in for nature, though, we miss the way that "women" are made to stand in for women. This isn't to say there has not been extensive writing on the named women in the text; Penelope, Circe, and Juliette all have had their roles analyzed and dissected.[6]

This paper aims to do something larger: connect the role that gender plays to the text's overarching argument. I argue that Horkheimer and Adorno present the construction of men and women as a prototypic

---

3   Barbara Becker-Cantarino, "Patriarchy and German Enlightenment Discourse: From Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*" in *Impure Reason: Dialectic of Enlightenment in Germany* eds. Robert C. Holub, W. Daniel Wilson, Wayne State University Press (1993): 48-64, 58.

4   Barbara Umrath, "A Feminist Reading of the Frankfurt School's Studies on Authoritarianism and Its Relevance for Understanding Authoritarian Tendencies in Germany Today," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 4 (October 2018): 861–78, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7165927.

5   Rochelle DuFord, "Daughters of the Enlightenment: Reconstructing Adorno on Gender and Feminist Praxis," *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (November 1, 2017): 784–800, https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12360.

6   Andrew Hewitt, "A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment? Horkheimer and Adorno Revisited," *New German Critique*, 1992, 143; Rebecca Comay, "Adorno's Siren Song," *New German Critique*, 2000, 21; Lisa Yun Lee, *Dialectics of the Body*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203936887; Robyn Marasco, "There's a Fascist in the Family: Critical Theory and Antiauthoritarianism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): 791–813, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7165871.

form of social domination–sex itself is a difference constructed for the purposes of domination. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in demonstrating how fascism is embedded in reason, relies on the claim that patriarchy is an example of the book's thesis. On this view, sex differentiation is a myth that is already enlightened, with enlightened ideas about sex differentiation reverting to myth.

Patriarchy: Mythic and Enlightened

In the first paragraph of the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they claim that Francis Bacon's vision of human sovereignty over nature as established via knowledge is "a patriarchal one: the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature."[7] Horkheimer and Adorno begin by establishing that the critique of enlightenment metaphysics and epistemology must be a critique of the patriarchal order of things. If Bacon's vision of humanity is the enlightened one which leads to fascism, then the patriarchal idea of the human being must be directly critiqued. Patriarchal gendered understandings of human beings are also explicitly put in service of the project of sovereignty via knowledge. They write: "For Bacon as for Luther, "knowledge that tendeth but to satisfaction, is but as a courtesan, which is for pleasure, and not for fruit or generation.".""[8] Knowledge itself should be useful like a wife bearing one's children, not pleasurable like a prostitute. Everything must be used and for use in this Enlightenment metaphysical schematic. We see women placed into the category of 'thing' or 'nature' by patriarchal human sovereignty: good only to the extent they can be useful. This fundamental division of the world between subject and object, man and nature, has long been said to create the binary distinctions characteristic of the enlightenment's patriarchal nature**.** To be a man is to use and to be a

---

7   Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Nachdr., Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002), 2.

8   *ibid*.

woman is to be used, that is the meaning of human sovereignty.[9]

Following this critique of enlightenment, the two say that "Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them."[10] The sovereignty of man and the sovereignty of the dictator are the same. As sovereign, the patriarch (here both man and dictator) knows enough to manipulate his subjects. The arch epistemological sovereign, the scientist, knows enough to *create his subjects*. Enlightenment knowledge is power over *creation itself*.[11] This is why enlightenment knowledge cannot be satisfied by the courtesan-given pleasure. The scientist must have power over existence, just as the sovereign must have the power over life and death: "Their 'in-itself' becomes 'for him'."[12] The hunger for knowledge as power forces the world to become *for knowledge* and as it is for knowledge, it is *for use*. Kant delineates this clearly in his "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History." In staging the encounter between Adam and the world immediately after the fall, he writes

> When he first said to the sheep, "the pelt which you wear was given to you by nature not for your own use, but for mine" and took it from the sheep to wear it himself, he became aware of a prerogative that he had by nature over all animals, he enjoyed over all the animals; and he now no longer regarded them as fellow creatures, but as means and instruments to be used at will for the attainment of whatever ends he pleased.[13]

9   Karyn Ball, "Rethinking 'Toxic' Sovereignty? On Horkheimer and Adorno's 'Second Nature' between Nietzsche's 'Bad Conscience' and Freud's 'Death Drive,'" in *Feminism and the Early Frankfurt School*, ed. Christine A. Payne and Jeremiah Morelock (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill nv, 2024).

10 Horkheimer and Adorno, 6.

11 Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, New Directions in Critical Theory (New York (N.Y.): Columbia University Press, 2017).

12 Horkheimer and Adorno, 6.

13 Immanuel Kant, "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History," in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss and H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 221–34; 8:114.

The bodies of other beings are themselves 'for him.' The establishment of the unity of nature is the domination of all things which makes them into instruments of man. It is this 'substrate' of 'domination' that constitutes 'the unity of nature'–nature exists wherever the patriarchal idea of knowledge is enforced. Otherwise, there is no unifying concept to the things which exist outside of us, nature as such is just what men take to be theirs for control and manipulation by sovereign power.

There is no enlightenment without this power and there is no critique of enlightenment without critiquing it. Enlightenment's epistemological orientation is patriarchal. Horkheimer and Adorno recognize as such immediately, but go on to work with the idea of patriarchy indirectly through a variety of gendered plays of enlightenment subjectivities, epistemologies, metaphysics, and morality. Zeus's scales, "symbolize the justice of the entire patriarchal world, point back to mere nature." The seat of all justice is the domination of women-cum-nature. This claim demonstrates the naturalization of patriarchal domination, which then can appear as justice, rather than injustice. For enlightenment (as for myth) "equivalence itself becomes a fetish. The blindfold over the eyes of Justitia means not only that justice brooks no interference but that it does not originate in freedom."[14] A woman, Justitia, can be made into the god of equivalencies only so long as she is blindfolded: already constrained by the false equivalencies of patriarchal sovereignty. We can make equivalencies, make what is unlike fungible, only if we constrain both subjects and objects to the epistemological and metaphysical system that sees everything as 'for him,' understood not merely in the universalist 'him' but in this specifically gendered one.

This close reading of the first section of the first chapter demonstrates the claim without which my interpretation has no grounding: that the sex/gender of the objects of analysis in the text are meaningful rather than accidental or incidental. Sex/gender difference appears throughout *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. My interpretation of the text in this paper reads sex/gender back into it specifically where it has been covered over, uni-

---

14 Horkheimer and Adorno, 12.

versalized, or selectively ignored. In part, my argument is that it is the readers of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* who have engaged in the very false equivalencies and objectifications of the text that the text diagnoses.[15] That is, they have failed to maintain a sufficiently dialectical view of the text wherein "dialectical images were intended as historically specific constructions, not Jungian archetypes."[16] The result of these universalized readings is a text that cannot account for the norms that produce sex/gender differentiation and thus patriarchal power, allowing readers to argue that Horkheimer and Adorno are reifying the patriarchal view of women, rather than pointing to "woman" as constituted by and for patriarchy.

In depicting the exact metaphysical/epistemological construction of the incomplete Enlightenment as creating and coming from the 'human sovereign,' Horkheimer and Adorno position the hierarchical system predicated on the domination of women as embedded in the project of Enlightenment. They argue that the "guise of brutal facts as something eternally immune to intervention" justifies the social injustice that created those facts.[17] While this state of affairs was once understood to be mythic and religious, the 'facts' arising from patriarchy are concealed in modernity via liberal feminist thought, bound to the so-called natural facts of sex differentiation which sees men and women as fundamentally different but equal nonetheless.

But, the pair argue that social wholes and their attendant norms must have been instituted via violence. "In the first stages of nomadism [...]

---

15 As cited above, Barbara Umrath has made a parallel argument concerning the most prominent secondary literature on *Studies on Authority and the Family*, from which the concept of 'the family' is nearly absent. Similarly, Marasco highlights that secondary literature on *The Authoritarian Personality* often engages in the same effacement of sex/gender and sexuality through ignoring the family (Robyn Marasco, "There's a Fascist in the Family: Critical Theory and Antiauthoritarianism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): 791–813, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7165871.)

16 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 107.

17 Horkheimer and Adorno, 21.

men tracked prey while the women performed tasks which did not require rigid commands. How much violence preceded the habituation to even so simple an order cannot be known."[18] In their rigid refusal to depict second nature as first nature, they highlight that a division of labor among the sexes/genders was implemented with force. The division of labor and sex differentiation appear together. The rise of sex differentiation *as* labor specialization is merely a habituation to what was a violent political and economic order. It is not an unchanging sex difference that causes this division of labor, but the division of labor that causes taxonomic sex differences.[19] Rather than finding something resembling a sexed nature in the past, Horkheimer and Adorno find a system of political-economic domination that generates obedience.

As Barbara Umrath puts it, discussing how this specific claim has been overlooked by critical theory insensitive to sex/gender: "traditional or everyday knowledge then functions as a taken-for-granted starting point that informs the production of critical theory and scientific knowledge."[20] In overlooking that the pair begin their analysis of myth/enlightenment with the recognition that the sex/gendered division of labor always requires the pre-existence of a violence that implemented it, interpreters have affected the naturalization of gendered domination that the pair argue directly against. The domination that results in our contemporary regime of sex/gender requires "the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand."[21] Rather than recognizing the infinite variability in bodies, genital constructions, personalities, and desires among human beings, the mythic/Enlightenment sex/gender regime insists that reason must stop short of criticizing it. Everything that doesn't fit within it must be cast aside, regardless of and because of its naturalness. The

---

18 *Ibid.*, 15.

19 For a contemporary argument to this end, see: Kay Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition: Gender as Accumulation Strategy," in *Feminism against Cisness*, ed. Emma Heaney (Duke University Press, 2024), 135–57, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.14443783.9.

20 Umrath, 80.

21 Horkheimer and Adorno, 20.

"purely natural existence" of human beings is the "enemy of civilization" and this includes the human being prior to the violent division of labor that generates sex difference.[22] Reading binary sexing/gendering as a form of the domination of nature for the express purpose of creating specific kinds of men and women, each requiring the domination of different elements of the whole person, makes clear that Horkheimer and Adorno see the concept of Enlightenment itself as imbued with patriarchal domination.

Odysseus is not simply the man of reason in myth. He is also the first man in that he is the dialectical opposite to Nietzsche's last man. Odysseus' manhood is not only based on his patriarchal role over women in the epic. His manhood, according to Hokheimer and Adorno, is composed of his continuous victory of coldness and cunning. They note that once Odysseus has heard the sirens' song, "the myth is finished."[23] They analogize this to the Sphinx's death after Odysseus solves the riddle, "[t]hat being is man." Odysseus is the first man to use man to overcome (and thus cancel-out) the mythic feminine's attempts to control him. Unlike these feminine entities, Odysseus is capable of using his own death as the basis of life: his control of nature, his manipulation of its rules, allows him to create himself again in death.[24] Odysseus is the first self-made man, with emphasis placed on the *man*.

Within this mythic world, Homer depicts the 'cyclopes' lives as 'barbaric' because they lack the foundational contract: as self-sufficient entities, families do not need to have extensive relations with each other. Yet, the cyclopes live in "a patriarchal society based on kinship and the suppression of the physically weaker."[25] The operative law for the Cyclops is the law of the father, which is structured by Homer as predating civilization. It is depicted as the natural organizing principle of society, which must take on the contract in order to rationalize a determinate order of

---

22 *Ibid,* 24.

23 *Ibid,* 47.

24 *Ibid,* 48-49.

25 *Ibid,* 51.

the world and its contents, not just the family. As Becker-Cantarino interprets it, this passage is a demonstration of "patriarchy mesmerized with itself." Yet, Horkheimer and Adorno highlight the connection between mythic patriarchy and bourgeois property relations, demonstrating that both are the subjects of false naturalizations. This passage can be read as an endorsement of patriarchal structures only to the extent that one wishes to read an endorsement into their depiction of bourgeois property relations.

Patriarchy, as mythic formation, is depicted as subjective law, rather than the *Tauscheprinzip*, as Enlightenment law, which introduces objectivity via the equalization of what is unlike. Here, Horkheimer and Adorno draw out the dialectic between myth and Enlightenment as one between the (naturalized) mythic patriarchal law and the (naturalized) rational law of exchange. Discussing the arrangement of reproduction, they note "how high a price was paid for establishing this orderly arrangement" on behalf of women, who now are locked into two forms of "female self-alienation" as "harlot and wife."[26] Neither mythic law nor Enlightenment law is natural, both are socially instituted and maintained forms of patriarchal rule via pre-historic violence leading to the "suppression of the physically weaker."

It is in this context that a mythic civilization can contain a goddess such as Circe who "bestows joy and destroys the autonomy of its recipient"[27] and therefore cannot be traced in origin back to either a stereotypic matriarchal or patriarchal history. As Circe turns men into "wild beasts," governed only by instinct and therefore lacking the capacity to be rational, she liberates them *from* instinct while bringing a promise of joy. These wild beasts are governed by her mythic power toward a peaceable existence with man. What could be understood as the joy of liberation from subjections, instead is seen as an insult, because the fascist "conceives of animals only as means of humiliating humans."[28]

---

26 *Ibid*, 57-58.

27 *Ibid*, 55.

28 *Ibid*, 210

Western reason has left concern with the unreasoning animal to women as "[t]he woman is not a subject." Instead, the imposition of labor specialization onto women made her "an embodiment of biological function, an image of nature, in the suppression of which this civilization's claim to glory lay."[29] The men can access the pleasures that civilization requires we renounce, but only by reverting to myth, to prehistory: men can access forbidden pleasures, but can never experience them *as men*. Man can find the pleasures of man only to the extent that they are men no longer. Horkheimer and Adorno read this process as a reversal of the subjugation of women in patriarchal society: "Like her [Circe], women are predisposed, under the pressure of civilization, to adopt its judgment on women and to degenerate sex."[30] Just as Odysseus needs to subjugate nature, so too does Circe subjugate man *to* nature via magic. The subjugation of women to nature is an extension of the process discussed above: the cyclopes lack any civilization, and so the subjugation of women is depicted as the natural order of things.

As seductress and as weak and vulnerable, woman "reflects back the vain lie of power, which substitutes the mastery over nature for reconciliation with it."[31] The dualist view of women is tamed through marriage: women are powerless under their husbands and powerful only through them. The roles that women are permitted to play via Circe and Penelope, but also by enlightenment reason, demonstrate the libidinal order of patriarchal domination. The one who is secure in their life and property will gain no pleasure from it, while pleasure is sold by the one excluded from the marriage contract: the sex worker. In conditioning pleasure on its own denial, Circe becomes "the last hetaera" and "emerges as the first female character."[32] That is, Circe truly rationalizes love by predicating it on exchange. The wife exchanges her own pleasure for security in her husband's property. The sex worker makes this contract explicit in exchanging pleasure for the husband's property.

---

29 *Ibid*, 206.

30 *Ibid, 56.*

31 *Ibid*, 56.

32 *Ibid, 57.*

Odysseus is the first self-made man and Circe the first female character. In making this argument, Horkheimer and Adorno have laid out a critique of the order of bourgeois exchange as it develops and maintains patriarchal relations. It is in the implementation of the *Tauschprinzip* that the older, mythic patriarchal order takes on the character of rational patriarchy. We move from beast to man, Cyclops to Odysseus, prostitute to wife. It is the making of the prostitute, as the instantiation of what could have been the pleasure principle of swine into the exchange principle of men, into wives, as the bourgeois form of female, that buries both the naturalization of sexual difference and the rationalized form of domination based on it which exists prior to reason as myth. In myth the principle of exchange, the prostitute's fee, is at least her own. Marriage, as a contract and thus exchange, bridges this divide only via an austerity of warmth, an exclusion of the "island of solidarity," and the renunciation of love as instinct, as the vestige of prehistory which links us to the beast, the beast which is now our best hope of living well.

Horkheimer and Adorno's meditation on Odysseus ends with the hangings meted out on "faithless maidservants who have sunk into harlotry [...] exhibits the coldness of anatomy and vivisection, keeps a record, as in a novel, of the twitching of the subjugated women."[33] In his reflection on the brief moments before the maids die, the narrator asks "Not for very long?" With rope around their necks, the maids' dangling feat appear to dance. Horkheimer and Adorno interpret the narrator's question as an expression of hope, which "lies in the fact that it is long passed."[34] As the paradigmatic patriarch, Odysseus sends the maids, raped by Penelope's suitors, to Hades. But not without forcing them to clean up the bloody mess that he's made.

It is not just Odysseus who functions as the man of myth who is already the man of reason. In an analogous way, Juliette is a modern woman who is always also the man of myth. Juliette represents the reversion of enlightenment to myth. Though, this happens via a subversion of the

---

33 *Ibid*, 61.

34 *Ibid.*, 62.

typical view of the mythic woman. As Simone de Beauvoir describes her, mythic woman

> is so necessary to man's joy and his triumph that if she did not exist, men would have had to invent her. They did invent her.
>
> But she also exists without their invention. This is why she is the failure of their dream at the same time as its incarnation. There is no image of woman that does not invoke the opposite figure as well: she is Life and Death, Nature and Artifice, Light and Night. Whatever the point of view, the same fluctuation is always found, because the inessential necessarily returns to the essential.[35]

The rational, calculating woman demonstrates the lie of patriarchal myths constructing women's mental lives as deficient. As Juliette breaks free of this patriarchal myth she falls prey to the same relapse into myth that rational man effects: treating science as religious truth.

Juliette is the rationalized version of Circe.[36] She is the female character matured through enlightenment. As a fully rational adult, Juliette is the paradigm of bourgeois coldness. Juliette is the calculating and rational man of science. Odysseus is reactive and primitive, "inventing" mythic woman for his own purposes of joy and triumph: the hero's journey ends in a reunion with the good wife and the casting of the dead harlots to hell, having already left a trail of deceased mythical feminine figures in his wake. Juliette is depicted far more as male or masculine than she is as female or feminine.

Pity is taken to be the opposite of the bourgeois coldness endemic to the man of reason, the scientist, and as such to Juliette's values. As "the source of unrestrained compassion" women are not only weak, but sinful. Pity is where enlightenment and counter-enlightenment find common ground. Both reject what is framed as a female, "sensuous awareness of

---

35 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Capisto-Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, First Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 240.

36 Rebecca Comay, "'Adorno Avec Sade ...':," *Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (2007): 371–82, https://doi.org/10.5840/symposium200711234.

the identity of the general and particular, as conscious mediation."[37] In its association with the body, femininity, and nature, reason *must* reject pity if it is to be rationalized. Our "sensuous awareness" as they put it is part of the residue of our primitive nature. It connects us back up to the softness of our bodies, their vulnerability, and our solidarity in them. This is the very reason it needs to be alienated. Sensuous awareness is a quality of a receptive body: a body which takes what is outside in. This body is the "enemy of civilization" as surely as any residue of nature is.

Like Odysseus, Juliette refuses the receptivity necessary for more than the Enlightenment distortion of reason because it also threatens to destroy the subject (formed as it is via Enlightenment reason). Caught in the throes of reaction formation, Juliette constructs an encompassing identity of being rational and scientific. Far from rejecting womanhood, though, she simply neglects it. It's as if her sex/gender has no social meaning: her work is unconstrained by her sex and so her sex is unconstrained by her work. This neglect carries over to the readings of *DoE* as lacking theories of gender or patriarchy. Juliette, her aloofness aside, lives in the sexed/gendered world that the enlightenment as patriarchal myth generated. She can only be seen in relation to her being a woman, albeit one who lacks a "natural femininity." Other women have been damaged and controlled by their subjugation under patriarchy, via fathers, husbands, the Church. Juliette boasts of having not been 'the effect of the whip.' In her adoption of rationalized reason and rejection of bodily sensuousness, she navigates the construction of her sex and gender as existing only within the man's world of coldness. She is the effect of her domination of herself, molding herself into an enlightened subject by ridding herself of natural impulses or pre-social residues.

It is this opposition to irrational reason, via enlightenment morality (more specifically and directly Kantianism) that comprises the bulk of her rejection of the feminine and womanly. In place of the 'irrational reason' of myth, Juliette substitutes a sanitized version of nature as itself perversion. Pleasure, though, serves only to remind us of the sensuousness of

---

37 Horkheimer and Adorno, 79.

our bodies. It is a distraction from the order of everyday life. It exists only because of the law. Not only does Freud position pleasure as contradiction to the law, but in doing so, he must posit perversion as universal. There are no 'normal' sexualities, because we seek pleasure in sex. That pleasure is charged most highly when it is subversive. Juliette's entire claim to subversion, then, owes its origin to the moral law itself. Much like the way that yearning for a homeland owes its possibility to the very thing that has alienated us from home, property, so too does pleasure owe its possibility to the very thing that alienates us from it, the law.[38]

Juliette's attempt to destroy the Catholic Church via sexual exploits against the idea of love falls into the mythic: a prehistory of the deformation of human beings into women. Odysseus in his attempt to return home via the domination of nature falls into the enlightenment, requiring that he also dominate *himself* into being the first man. The parallel construction of the domination of nature demonstrates how flexible it can be. Nature is everything and everyone, the quest for domination as unending as one of Juliette's orgies of pain. Drawn out depictions of torture here lack the "Not for very long?" that signals the relatively quick, rationalized, deaths of the handmaidens in the Odyssey. The torture is not to be reflected upon, as if it must be subject to reason. The torture can merely follow the 'natural' sadistic instinct for pleasure. It's in this very movement that myth reappears: everything happens for a reason and that reason is to destroy mythic reality via itself.

In contravention of the 'stereotypical' women presented by the analysis of Odysseus according to Mills, Juliette is a thoroughly modern woman.[39] Presenting herself as if she were a man in male society, she takes up the mantle of sadism: directing her aggressivity toward others because of

---

38 As a related aside, the notion of a homeland and homesickness as being rooted in the property regime, which is what alienates us from "home" runs through the text. The gendered relations of the home are placed into pre-history, Odysseus searches for home, Juliette has never had one, and the Nazi desire for a homeland are all part of this constellation.

39 Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, *Woman, Nature, and Psyche* (Yale University Press, 1987).

their weakness. In a gender reversal, it is Odysseus who is presented as the masochist: always harming himself in his quest to manipulate nature for his own advantage. As Comay argues, the readings of Homer and Sade are "more or less equivalent."[40] Just as Odysseus is not presented as in the natural condition of man's dominance, presenting domination as the *natural* condition of women is a trick of ideology: mistaking the social for the natural in order to justify the existing order of social domination as "brute fact." To say that this is a 'male' understanding of women is, strictly speaking, correct. In the logic of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 'woman' is always a category of interpretation for the male point of view, because women have been made after the inverse image of men. This inverted image is a thoroughly social one, in so far as men can become women when they yearn for the attentions of power: "man now lays down his arms before man, but with dark, unswerving coldness. He becomes a woman, with eyes only for power."[41] Just as women are made to exist *for men*, so are men made to exist for the fascist sovereign power, becoming feminine and passive in their desire for power bestowed upon them by a man. One should recall here their claim that women can attain power only via men, either through means like marriage or the sex-work contract.

Horkheimer and Adorno's depiction of women is also coincident with mid-century feminist thought that sees the existence of women as *for men*. The natural history of women is presented to the reader as a process of violent invention, separation, and expulsion. As Regina Becker-Schmidt describes it,

> [d]ualisms are, on the one hand, an expression of historical processes of separation, in which elements that belong to *one and the same* context become detached from one another. […] On the other hand, they mark a distorted social perception. Through polarization, differences are accentuated, while reciprocities are neglected.[42]

---

40 Comay, "Adorno avec Sade…" 277.

41 Horkheimer and Adorno, 210.

42 Regina Becker-Schmidt, *Pendelbewegungen – Annäherungen an eine feministische Gesellschafts- und Subjekttheorie: Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1991 bis 2015* (Opladen

Berlin Journal of Critical Theory | Vol. 9, No. 2 (July, 2025)

The exaggeration of difference between men and women, and between Juliette and women invoke the opposite: one must exaggerate them because sexes are not terribly different after all.[43] They must be made different through a process of false equivalencies and prehistoric explanations.

In Hewitt's "A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment?" he argues that given the structure of the dialectic, the question is whether Horkheimer and Adorno were capable of 'getting it right' as regards women. He claims, effectively, that Horkheimer and Adorno are caught in a performative contradiction concerning a patriarchal conception of women. Is "woman" something that can be 'gotten right' without replicating the patriarchal structures and gestures that make a woman what she is? Emptied of all bourgeois norms, scientific rationality, and mythic prehistory, we are left with an empty shell of woman as a concept. This is not simply the case for women, though.

One may analogize Hewitt's argument to Bahr's in "The anti-Semitism studies of the Frankfurt school: the failure of critical theory."[44] In each case the author presents the internal contradictions and 'victim blaming' as the cause of the failure of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to shed any real light on the specific dynamics of domination for which it attempts to account.[45] In each case, the specific dynamics of victimhood are purportedly so badly accounted for that the general victim stands in for the spec-

Berlin Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2017), 185. As cited by: Katharina Hoppe, "Dependency Denial in Crisis: Revisiting Feminist Critiques of Dualism," *European Journal of Social Theory*, May 21, 2024, 13684310241253572, https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310241253572.

43 One is reminded here of Adorno's claim in *Minima Moralia* that "In psycho-analysis nothing is true except the exaggerations." (Theodor W. Adorno 1903-1969., *Minima Moralia : Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, Radical Thinkers; 1 (London: Verso, 2005), 29.)

44 Ehrhard Bahr, "The Anti-Semitism Studies of the Frankfurt School: The Failure of Critical Theory," *German Studies Review* 1, no. 2 (1978): 125–38, https://doi.org/10.2307/1429527.

45 For a thorough accounting of this claim, see: Fabian Freyenhagen, "Adorno and Horkheimer on Anti-Semitism," in *A Companion to Adorno*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Max Pensky, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2020), 103–22, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119146940.ch7.

ificities of anti-Semitism or patriarchy. Yet, the notion that the dominated collaborate in their domination is a long-time philosophical puzzle, capturing interest from Spinoza to Hegel to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. As Jessica Benjamin puts it, "the elements of self-control, intentionality, and authority are meant to uphold the difference between violator and violated," she concludes that "control, as we have seen, tends to become self-defeating."[46] This self-defeat, epitomized by Odysseus but built into the Enlightenment subject, is the psychic basis of the fungibility of the victim and the violator. It is a trick of Enlightenment ideology to believe that our thought, including the concepts generated for sex differentiation, is separable from history and nature. One falls back into the dialectic of enlightenment when one thinks one has the ability to control their identity in such a way so as to create identity that is severed from the conditions of its construction. This is quite literally how the excursus on Juliette leads us to the critique of the culture industry. Susan Buck-Morss describes this as a version of mythic identification wherein "the subject was incapable of sufficient distance from the object to experience it dialectically, that is, critically as a nonidentical other, and identity itself became synonymous with the impotence of the subject and his domination by the social system."[47]

In the end, the excursus on Juliette, enlightenment, Kant, Sade, and Nietzsche becomes a critique of Sade's patriarchal view of women. Sade, like Juliette herself, is caught in the "inner discord of the Enlightenment itself." In his attempt to present a non-religious view of the degradation and humiliation that women deserve, he recapitulates the mythic view of women: naturally weaker and existing solely for the satisfaction of men. This is, however, the religious view. Women, as naturally weaker, are given the benefits of 'chivalry' as compensation for their domination. The strong men are protecting the weak women, but that protection comes in the form of degradation and violence, "her defenselessness legitimiz-

---

46 Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (Pantheon, 1988), 65.

47 Buck-Morss, 171.

es her oppression."[48] Where women are revered as priestesses, prophetesses, mothers, or Madonna the reverse image of it is "the obsessive belief in witches,"[49] which is nothing other than punishment for women who have undermined or questioned the patriarchal order of worth and strength, revealing it as more than "brute fact."

Women and Jews

In the excurses, we find the construction of sex/gender, sexuality, and its relationship to Enlightenment as myth/myth as Enlightenment. The bourgeois man, Odysseus, and the bourgeois woman, Juliette, conceptually work together to demonstrate the total alienation of human beings from each other in sex and love, laying bare the structures of domination and power that make this not just possible, but necessary. In "Enlightenment as Mass Deception," we're clued into how such structures are maintained today. Sade and Nietzsche having won, the collective experiences of religion/myth need to be supplanted with something else that can hold the weight of the ideological 'is,' which translates the effects of power into the effects of nature.

While formally, the culture industry chapter concentrates on the way that media can be leveraged for the purposes of fascism (and perhaps at this point cannot but effect the purposes of fascism), it also is what constructs the roles that modern men and women play in society. In constructing certain patterns of behavior with human beings to match, mass culture has made men and women into what they are today.[50] They write, for instance, that the girl in Texas will fashion herself to be as indistinguishable from the starlet as possible. This massification is easily identified today through various panics concerning social media 'trends' and 'influencers'–a significant number of which focus on sex differentiation, gender ambiguity, and sexuality as sites of contagion.

The figure of the woman of mass culture is complimented by their

---

48 Horkheimer and Adorno, 86.

49 *Ibid*, 87.

50 Marasco, 2006.

analysis of both mass culture's masculinity and the construction of love that it provides. The masculinity created and enforced by mass culture provides the occasion for women to strive to be the corresponding love-interest or at minimum, to adopt a ready-made construction of the man and woman in love. This picks up directly where the discussion of Juliette has left off: in the destruction of love in favor of individualism. In developing sameness via sameness the culture industry patterns society after itself. Sameness on screen develops into a constricted set of beliefs about the possible and the actual. The mass deception being posed by the Enlightenment is the very naturalization of the sexes/genders and the patriarchy that made them. While Horkheimer and Adorno argue in the first chapter that the patriarchal view of the world is that everything exists to be known and manipulated, its adjunct is the fungibility of everything in mass culture. Everything is fungible and so everything is known. As they put it,

> Each single manifestation of the culture industry inescapably reproduces human beings as the whole has made them. And all its agents, from the producer to the women's organizations, are on alert to ensure that the simple reproduction of mind does not lead on to the expansion of mind.[51]

One may, at this point, draw out the many comments that Horkheimer and Adorno make here that depict women's things as thoughtless or as the worst kinds of cultural objects. It is important to remember, however, that this depiction is a depiction of the "women's" media that is created by the culture industry. Not only that, but it also is a depiction of how the culture industry depicts women's interests and existence as lesser than, subordinate to, or otherwise frivolous as compared to men and their interests.

Read in this way, that 'women's organizations' necessarily reproducing women who reproduce the patriarchal mind is a critique of the inadequacies of current mass cultural gestures toward women's emancipation. In part, this is because those organizations are part of the industry

---

51 Horkheimer and Adorno, 100.

of culture. One cannot help but to think about the many high profile schisms and fractures of "the" women's movement, which eventually even pushes some women from the category of womanhood altogether, on account of their disagreements about what is to be done and on whose behalf they will do it. The fashionable organizations for women are capable of becoming so fashionable because they extend, rather than challenge, the cultural conception of women's role in society. They end the chapter, in fact, with a rumination on the 'young girl' who has only "freedom to be the same" because she is subjected to the same economic coercion as everyone else.[52] The freedom of association under the culture industry is only freedom to participate in the associations generated by the culture industry: ones that simply reproduce the capitalist and patriarchal conditions.

The chapter on the culture industry, in its focus on the replication of unthinking sameness that supports the economic and political status quo, delineates the bourgeois gendering at the base of culture. This bourgeois gendering, much like the gendering of Odysseus and Juliette, puts the matter of gender's patriarchal origins to the side, depicting it as the natural order of things. Of course, in identifying with women, girls will want to be like them, and in the pursuit of men, girls will want to be like the women men want. Men, on the other hand, in wanting approval for their masculinity from other men, present themselves as the action hero, who himself becomes a woman in his quest for men's desire.[53]

---

52 *Ibid.,* 136. There are productive resonances here with Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl*, that could be fruitful to develop, though they are adjacent to my argument here. (Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines, Semiotext(e) Intervention Series 12 (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).

53 *Ibid.,* 210. While the argument that the fascist man is a woman or homosexual is most well known for its appearance in *Minima Moralia*'s aphorism, "Tough Baby" the pair expand on it, making clear that they mean this not to be an argument against homosexuality, but rather an argument against admiring the power that binds us. Andrea Long Chu's *Females* makes a similar argument in terms of being female, to the extent that we are enamoured with the fascist forces that give us the subjectivity we have, we're all female. It is this exact issue that Wendy Brown takes up in "Wounded Attachments." (Wendy Brown,

The elements of anti-Semitism, as a series of theses, combine to create a psychosexual/social picture of this person who has undergone the incomplete Enlightenment. We receive a picture of the elements of the fascist via the role that Jews play in his psyche: the same role that women play. The excursus on Juliette ends in the following way:

> The explanation for the hatred of woman as the weaker in mental and physical power, who bears the mark of domination on her brow, is the same as for the hatred of the Jews. Women and Jews show visible evidence of not having ruled for thousands of years. They live, although they could be eliminated, and their fear and weakness, the greater affinity to nature produced in them by perennial oppression, is the element in which they live. In the strong, who pay for their strength with their strained remoteness from nature and must forever forbid them selves fear, this incites blind fury.[54]

In connecting the hatred of women and the hatred of Jews, Horkheimer and Adorno posit a far more extensive critique of the role of patriarchal relations than is generally recognized. Far from ignoring the plight of women, they see the plight of women as the plight of Jews. In many ways the occasion for the existence of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is an attempt to grapple with the way that incomplete Enlightenment reason leads to fascism (because it was always fascism to begin with). It is as much a critique of the fascism embedded in what became ordinary patriarchal social forms as it is of anti-Semitism. Yet the critique of anti-Semitism seems to suffer from an incoherence of the theses, they do not hang together and, unless interpreted negative dialectically, contain numerous internal contradictions.[55] As noted earlier, just as one can interpret their

---

"Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 390–410; Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (London ; New York: Verso, 2019).)

54 Horkheimer and Adorno, 88.

55 In describing the theses, Martin Jay writes that they "offered what might be called a decentered constellation of factors juxtaposed in unmediated fashion." (Martin Jay, "The Jews and the Frankfurt School: Critical Theory's Analysis of Anti-Semitism," New German Critique, no. 19 (1980): 137–49, https://doi.org/10.2307/487976, 144.) This style of unmediated juxtaposition requires that an interpreter draw the necessary connections between the constellative

view of women as misogynist, one can interpret their writing on anti-Semitism as victim blaming.

However, this is simply a continuation of the book's tactic of representing Enlightenment subjectivity as it has been constructed for domination: the Jew has been made by Enlightenment anti-Semitism, just as the woman was made in the pre-mythic time by the assertion of a natural sexed division of labor. These constructions are presented as the achievements of the Enlightenment in the same way that the slingshot leads to the atom bomb. It is these conceptions that also connect the hatred of Jews to the hatred of women. They place violent fascist desire as the outcome of "blind, murderous lust" which sees "in the victim the pursuer who has driven them to desperate self-defense."[56] The sexual impulse, repressed, is converted into lust of another kind: for the destruction of difference.[57] The 'reasons' the fascist gives, the rapist gives, are both "a ruse and a compulsion" in which "[t]he person chosen as foe is already perceived as foe."[58] Just as the sexed division of labor is placed into pre-history, making the domination of women both natural and necessary by creating women itself, so too is the fascist's victim of choice presented as having the essence of what must be destroyed: nature. This conceptualization of the fascist's target provides 'reason' in a sense of both explanation and in the sense of justification.

These conceptions, such as Jews having an undeniably Jewish essence, for example, are structured by non-scientific ways of relating to the world. It is in this sense that they argue that both the victims and the

---

elements themselves. As Anson Rabinbach delineates it, Horkheimer and Adorno hold Jews responsible for their own fate (elimination). But, despite these "sins" Rabinbach argues that the two succeed in developing a critique of the notion that Jews are not human beings. (Anson Rabinbach, "Why Were the Jews Sacrificed?: The Place of Anti-Semitism in Dialectic of Enlightenment," New German Critique, no. 81 (October 1, 2000): 49–64, https://doi.org/10.2307/488545.)

56 *Ibid.,* 154.

57 *Cf.:* Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Women, Floods, Bodies, History, vol. 1* (U of Minnesota Press, 1987).

58 Horkheimer and Adorno, 154.

fascists are effectively interchangeable. There is nothing that composes the Jew that doesn't compose the fascist and vice versa. The distinctions drawn here are social ones. As Shane Phelan argues, in discussing Adorno's *Jargon of Authenticity*, "the social is itself always being constructed, that it is not an essence or a fixed structure, but is open to human action."[59] In arguing that Jews, Catholics and protestants "can replace the murderer, in the same blind lust for killing, as soon as he feels the power of representing the norm," Horkheimer and Adorno recognize that there is no natural essence behind social relations, the relations themselves are dialectical products of the same social that makes them.[60] Crucially for their argument, these social relations could have been otherwise. Put differently, they still can be otherwise in the future such that, as Jake Romm has argued, "[s]ince the Nakba, it is the Zionist who represents the norm; the Palestinian has now taken their place as victim—the constellation has changed."[61]

This is not simply a tokenistic admission, either. It *must* be the case that we are all capable of being perpetrators and victims, otherwise we need to endorse the mythic idea of identity: that nature has simply created some as strong who must, by nature, dominate those who nature has made weak. Gendered allusions and metaphors play a constant role throughout their analysis of anti-Semitism. Fascist supplicants are depicted as women who want nothing more than to be devoted to the one who dominates and humiliates them. One may read this analogy as an acceptance of the idea that women are particularly masochistic, self-effacing, and incapable of maintaining the responsibilities of freedom. Though, given the rest of the text, it makes more sense to read this in the reverse. To the extent that we yearn for authority, to be dominated,

---

59 Shane Phelan, "The Jargon of Authenticity: Adorno and Feminist Essentialism," Philosophy & Social Criticism 16, no. 1 (January 1990): 39–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/019145379001600103, 49

60 Horkheimer and Adorno, 140.

61 Jake Romm, "Elements of Anti-Semitism: The Limits of Zionism," *Parapraxis*, July 21, 2024, https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/elements-of-anti-semitism.

to be hurt, we are all women: created to be dominated and exploited, an invention that is both invisiblized and justified by the ideological trick of mistaking woman as a social relation for the natural existence of the subject as woman. In identifying with the "power that beats them," men must undergo a "permanent rite of initiation" and constantly seek to prove their masculinity via self-destructive means.[62] The desire for subordination is not in any sense natural: neither Jews, nor Black people, nor women are naturally submissive. They are constructed in such a fashion to serve particular purposes of power.

The elements of anti-Semitism are historically and materially specific to mid-century Europe. But the limits of Enlightenment that they demonstrate are not. Suitably modified, we can uncover the same dynamics of domination, exploitation, and annihilation in every relationship of fascism to its others. The psychic life of the fascist devotee is the same toward all weakness. Any display of it brings the anxiety of prehistory, the anxiety that one is unprotected and always at the will of others or the whims of an indifferent nature. The anxiety in response to archaic fears that cannot be worked through, because they cannot be admitted, will continue to drive the central fascist contradiction: it is actually the enemy's provocation that causes fascist violence, and the enemy's provocation is being the subject of violence. The enemy must be a natural victim who calls forth the violence to which they are subject.

Conclusion

Even if it were the case that a woman was everything negative that men attributed to her, she still wouldn't be the correct target of patriarchy; just as the Jew who does fulfill anti-Semitic stereotypes doesn't thereby deserve the camp. The assignment of error in targeting a victim relies on the idea that there is a "correct" victim. In insisting that Horkheimer and Adorno have mischaracterized the objects of fascist violence and domination, critics impose the mythic structures back onto society: a world of subjects who 'really are' or 'really are not' one thing or another. What's

---

62 Horkheimer and Adorno, 124.

being missed by these critics is that while they are 'right' about what the Jew is, so are Horkheimer and Adorno, and so is the SA who lashes out from archaic anxiety.

What it means to be the object of domination is that one has been molded by domination to be just such a subject. There's no 'domination free' subjectivity available, not to women or Jews, not to fathers or officers. What it is to be both a man and a woman is to have been made into what you are via patriarchal norms. Failure to see that the victims of systems of domination are made into the subjects that the system depicts them as is to deny the real conditions in which they live. Many women were not taught to read, or permitted in schools, and forbidden physical activities that would have given them stronger bodies. They were molded by patriarchal norms as the type of thing that justifies the patriarchal norm. This is also true for men in male society. Rejection of this idea is once again to assert a fact free characterization of the essence of man or woman: the very thing that begins the system of domination in the first place.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. (2005). *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso (Radical Thinkers; 1).

Allen, Amy (2017). *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press (New Directions in Critical Theory).

Bahr, Ehrhard (1978). "The Anti-Semitism Studies of the Frankfurt School: The Failure of Critical Theory." *German Studies Review*, 1(2), 125–138. https://doi.org/10.2307/1429527.

Ball, Katrin (2024). "Rethinking 'Toxic' Sovereignty? On Horkheimer and Adorno's 'Second Nature' between Nietzsche's 'Bad Conscience' and Freud's 'Death Drive'." In Caren A. Payne and Jeremy Morelock (Eds.), *Feminism and the Early Frankfurt School*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV.

de Beauvoir, Simone (2011). *The Second Sex*. First Vintage Books ed. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New

York: Vintage Books.

Becker-Schmidt, Regina (2017). *Pendelbewegungen – Annäherungen an eine feministische Gesellschafts- und Subjekttheorie: Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1991 bis 2015*. Opladen, Berlin, Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich.

Benjamin, Jessica (1988). *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon.

Brown, Wendy (1993). "Wounded Attachments." *Political Theory*, 21(3), 390–410.

Buck-Morss, Susan (1979). *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. 1st Free Press paperback ed. New York: The Free Press.

Chu, Andrea Long (2019). *Females*. London; New York: Verso.

Comay, Rebecca (2000). "Adorno's Siren Song." *New German Critique*, (81), 21.

Comay, Rebecca (2007). "'Adorno avec Sade …'." *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, 11(2), 371–382. https://doi.org/10.5840/symposium200711234.

Freyenhagen, Fabian (2020). "Adorno and Horkheimer on Anti-Semitism." In Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Max Pensky (Eds.), *A Companion to Adorno* (1st ed., pp. 103–122). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119146940.ch7.

Gabriel, Karen (2024). "Two Senses of Gender Abolition: Gender as Accumulation Strategy." In Eli Heaney (Ed.), *Feminism against Cisness* (pp. 135–157). Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.14443783.9.

Hewitt, Andrew (1992). "A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment? Horkheimer and Adorno Revisited." *New German Critique*, (56), 143.

Hoppe, Katrin (2024). "Dependency Denial in Crisis: Revisiting Feminist Critiques of Dualism." *European Journal of Social Theory*, https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310241253572.

Horkheimer, Max, and Adorno, Theodor W. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press

(Cultural Memory in the Present).

Jay, Martin (1973). *The Dialectical Imagination*. University of California Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnwsg (Accessed: 7 January 2025).

Jay, Martin (1980). "The Jews and the Frankfurt School: Critical Theory's Analysis of Anti-Semitism." *New German Critique*, (19), 137–149. https://doi.org/10.2307/487976.

Kant, Immanuel (1991). "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History." In Hans Siegbert Reiss and Hugh Barr Nisbet (Eds.), *Kant: Political Writings* (2nd ed., pp. 221–234). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought). https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511809620.013.

Lee, Lois Yung-Tien (2016). *Dialectics of the Body*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203936887.

Marasco, Robyn (2018). "There's a Fascist in the Family: Critical Theory and Antiauthoritarianism." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117(4), 791–813. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7165871.

Mills, Patricia Jagentowicz (1987). *Woman, Nature, and Psyche*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Phelan, Shane (1990). "The Jargon of Authenticity: Adorno and Feminist Essentialism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 16(1), 39–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/019145379001600103.

Rabinbach, Anson (2000). "Why Were the Jews Sacrificed?: The Place of Anti-Semitism in Dialectic of Enlightenment." *New German Critique*, (81), 49–64. https://doi.org/10.2307/488545.

Romm, Joseph (2024). "Elements of Anti-Semitism: The Limits of Zionism." *Parapraxis*, 21 July. https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/elements-of-anti-semitism.

Tiqqun (2012). *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Translated by Ariana Reines. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) (Semiotext(e) Intervention Series, 12).

Umrath, Benedikt (2018). "A Feminist Reading of the Frankfurt School's Studies on Authoritarianism and Its Relevance for Understanding Au-

thoritarian Tendencies in Germany Today." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117(4), 861–878. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7165927.

Undeceivable without Doctrine
Dialectic of Enlightenment as Philosophical Montage

Arvi Särkelä[1]

> "Wir wissen, was wir wissen,
> wir habens teuer bezahlen müssen."
> – Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*

Abstract: This essay investigates the method of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and asks what is critical about it. It seeks to contribute to a history of methods of philosophy, which clears away transhistorical misunderstandings in philosophy. Much has recently been written about Adorno's style, but the question of method is different: whereas a style seems to include an individual imprint and may at most be *imitated* by others, a method may be *adopted* in and across historical contexts. A history of methods must therefore take into account both what the authors say about their method and how their work actually works in its historical context. This brief study suggests that the way Horkheimer and Adorno proceed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has something to do with literary montage and the catastrophic state of the world it was written in. The essay seeks to bring that connection into clearer view. To that end, it assembles a constellation of remarks drawing on cultural history, social history, conceptual analysis, and passages from Horkheimer and Adorno's enigmatic book as well as from Adorno's work before and after it.

1. Far in the back of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, enveloped in a fragment named "Contradictions," there is a dialogue.[2] Two youths are having a conversation. B aspires to be a writer,

---

1   Arvi Särkelä is Lecturer and Postdoctoral Researcher at ETH Zurich, Switzerland. He focuses on the history of methods of philosophy and the philosophy and history of social critique. He is the author of *Vicious Circles: Disclosing a History of Critique* (Stanford University Press, 2026), *Immanente Kritik und soziales Leben: Selbsttransformative Praxis nach Hegel und Dewey* (Klostermann Verlag, 2018) and many articles on history of philosophy and social philosophy.

but A asks why she would not want to become a physician instead. B responds that she would be uncomfortable with the role of the physician to represent "business and its hierarchy vis-à-vis the patient."[3] The physician today, she explains, is "an agent of big business against consumers," and adds that "if the commodity being administered is life and the consumers are sick, that's a situation I'd prefer not to be in."[4]

"So you think there shouldn't be any doctors, or the old charlatans ought to come back?", A rejoins.[5] B denies having implied such a thing; she is merely horrified by the prospect of taking that role herself. She draws an analogy: "I would not want to be a public prosecutor, yet giving a free run to armed robbers would seem to me a far greater evil than the existence of the body of people who put them in prison. Justice [*Justiz*] is reasonable," and explains: "I am not against reason; I only want to investigate the form [*Gestalt*] it has taken."[6]

A does not give in. She pushes toward refutation by performative contradiction: "Your own life [*Existenz*] presupposes the principle you are trying to evade."[7] B does not deny the contradiction. She contends that her own survival in contemporary society depends on the work of physicians and judges; she admits to being drawn into their guilt yet washing her hands from their dirty work. However, she maintains that this contradiction is necessary. Her performative contradiction is, she clarifies,

> … a response to the objective contradiction of society. In a division of labor as complex as that of today, horror can manifest itself in one place and bring down guilt on everyone. If word of it got about, or if even a small proportion of people were aware of it, lunatic asylums and penal institutes might be hu-

---

3   Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1947]), 198.

4   Ibid.

5   Ibid.

6   Ibid.

7   Ibid.

> manized and courts of justice might finally be superfluous. But
> that is not the reason why I want to be a writer. I just want to
> be clearer about the terrible state in which everything is.[8]

And so they go on, until A asks whether B would not start studying medicine at once, if she knew that she thereby, in the future, were able to save a loved one who would otherwise certainly die. B contends that this would be likely but asks whether A can now see that "with your love of implacable logic you are forced to offer the most absurd examples, while I, with my impractical obstinacy and my contradictions, have remained within the bounds of common sense."[9]

This conversation, the authors suggest, is repeated in contemporary society "wherever someone refuses to give up thought in face of praxis."[10] Traditionally, philosophers have been required to deliver axiomatical theories with reliable application to any moral problem. In the normal case, Horkheimer and Adorno go on, this amounts to a justification of society's already sanctioned scale of values – with the bonus of "all the comforts of sophisticated reasoning, demonstration, and evidence."[11] However, in the rare case where philosophy remains recalcitrant to the prevailing order, a general doctrine is demanded even more vigorously, they observe: "If thought does not simply reaffirm the prevalent rules, it must appear yet more self-assured, universal, and authoritative than if it had merely justified what was already in force."[12] For recalcitrant thought, this justificatory pressure becomes nearly unbearable, and so it tends to give up on its recalcitrance and formulate alternative general doctrines with constructive proposals, which may then be used to continue what is. And these doctrines will find willing listeners, they have "advertising appeal."[13] "What people cannot endure," Horkheimer and Adorno contend, "is the attempt

---

8   Ibid.

9   Ibid., 199.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 197

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

to evade the either/or, the mistrust of abstract principles"; what thus really marks recalcitrant philosophical thought they name "steadfastness [*Unbeirrbarkeit*] without a doctrine."[14]

How can one translate *Unbeirrbarkeit* to English? Edmund Jephcott interprets it as "steadfastness." Yet, to be *unbeirrbar* is importantly different from being steadfast (for which the German language knows the word *standhaft*). Whereas the steadfast person stands firmly in place, immovable, the *unbeirrbar* one may run around wild, or just lie on the water and look peacefully at the sky, letting the waves carry and move her. She will just not *let herself be misled*, *beirrt*, in doing what she does, or *deceived* to do or think something else than her task at hand. For want of a word, to display *Unbeirrbarkeit ohne Doktrin* in one's thinking would mean to have the power to resist being deceived without yet falling back on a doctrine: to excel at a thinking recalcitrant to the lures both of prevailing practices and of alternative theories.

In the dialogue, B displays this recalcitrant virtue. What we can learn from her example is that

– it is not against reason, but seeks to investigate its gestalt;
– it will display an affinity with ordinary language: like ordinary language, it resists being pinned down to technical terms and becomes constantly entangled in contradictions; and like ordinary language, it seeks not to avoid those contradictions but relates to them by living, or reflecting, them;
– it operates as a literary practice: it does not seek to convince its interlocutor but to get "clearer," as it were, come to terms with the gruesome state of society.

Does the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, too, display such a thinking? – By what means?

2. Four decades later, four decades ago: Jürgen Habermas enters a lecture hall of Goethe-University in Frankfurt, West Germany. He wants to dis-

---

14 Ibid.

tinguish his doctrine of communicative reason from earlier critiques of reason, including earlier critical theorizing, exemplified by the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, – and he wants to do so with convincing arguments.

The argument: Horkheimer and Adorno make the argumentative mistake of a performative contradiction.

A problem with the argument: performative contradiction is a mistake only in rather exotic language games which put assertive speech acts at their center.

In many language games, a performative contradiction is a completely reasonable thing to do. For example, one may say during a quarrel "I cannot talk with you" by which one would be pointing to things like the interlocutor's failure to listen properly, one's own feeling of not reaching the interlocutor, or to something else jamming the flow of conversation.[15] Or a person in a state of anxiety might say to their friend "I don't have a body" by which she would point to a world of anxiety in a way that is importantly different from saying "I don't feel my body." By a blatant contradiction in what one is *saying*, one may be *showing* something significant, let one's interlocuter experience the situation differently than they otherwise would. In philosophy, too, contradictions are often means of showing rather than saying. Heraclitus may have said "The road up and the road down is the same" and by that, in the philosophical language game of the day, he may have pointed to the circularity of all becoming or to the contradictory nature of reality or to the curious circumstance that things carry opposite aspects. Why should a writer like B (§1) seek to avoid performative contradictions? – She would, indeed, give up one of her methods to have her reader experience the objective contradictions in society.

---

15 For more sophisticated rejoinders to Habermas argument of performative contradiction, see Fabian Freyenhagen, "Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *Res Philosophica*, 101, no. 2 (2024): 245-269, and Henry Pickford, "Thinking with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," draft. On performative contradiction, see Jaakko Hintikka, "Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?," *The Philosophical Review*, 71, no. 1 (1962): 3-32.

But eager to make his argument convincing, Habermas begins his lecture by presenting another and more interesting one. "We no longer share," he says, the "mood [*Stimmung*]" behind the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[16] A bit further into the lecture he specifies that only against the background of this mood does it become "intelligible how the impression could indeed get established in the darkest years of the Second World War that the last sparks of reason were being extinguished from this reality and had left the ruins of a civilization in collapse without any hope."[17] It was the catastrophic mood of 1944 that put Horkheimer and Adorno under the impression that reason was over and done with. – Was B deceived by the prevailing (dis)order after all?

Habermas is right. It does not take much reading in social history to see that Horkheimer and Adorno were reacting to a different world than him. Following Eric Hobsbawm's famous triptych of the "short twentieth century," *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seals the "age of catastrophe" from 1914 to 1945, whereas Habermas has lived through capitalism's "golden age" from 1945-1973 and is criticizing it in the midst of the "age of crisis" from 1973 to 1991.[18] Horkheimer and Adorno were writing in an era characterized by an unparalleled scale of human catastrophe and unforeseen forms of social cruelty – "impersonal cruelties of remote decision" in Hobsbawm's words.[19] Habermas, by contrast, theorizes in an era of crisis and uncertainty where global instabilities create legitimation problems, in different ways and to different degrees, in all parts of the world.[20]

But was 1944 (just) deceptive or was it (really) catastrophic? And what about a deceptive world, one in which "impressions" of civilizational collapse and general hopelessness just "get established" in the heads of

16 Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno." In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987 [1985]), 106.

17 Ibid., 116f.

18 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), 6.

19 Ibid., 50.

20 Ibid., 9.

philosophers – is it not, in some sense, catastrophic? – Habermas *relativizes* the world of Horkheimer and Adorno vis-à-vis enlightenment yet keeps his own world stable: Horkheimer and Adorno are supposed to miss the point of communicative reason, the emancipatory promise of the uncoercive coercion of the better argument, because they were deceived by deceptive times, but Habermas does not see his own optimism about reason-giving as conditioned by a post-war welfare society confident of overcoming crises by administrative reforms, public spending and occasional privatizations.

One may, then, ask: which mood reveals more about the reality of enlightenment, that of 1944 or that of 1984? Which of these worlds is more telling as to the promises and dangers of reason? And do *we*, reading and writing four decades after Habermas, eight decades after Horkheimer and Adorno, live rather in an age of crisis or in one of catastrophe? – What difference does it make for critical thought?

Adorno, for one, seemed not to be in a hopeless mood in 1944. In an aphorism of *Minima Moralia* dated that year, he paraphrases B: "… a gaze averted from the beaten track, a hatred of brutality, a search for fresh concepts not yet encompassed by the general pattern, is the last hope for thought. In an intellectual hierarchy which constantly makes everyone answerable, unanswerability alone can call the hierarchy by its name."[21]

3. Consider this clinical conception of "crisis" and "critique." – Both words derive from κρίνειν, which means "to distinguish, to make a difference." The etymological lexicon *Kluge* teaches that "crisis" was initially a medical term denoting the decisive point of an illness and that "critique" once meant the critical days, the days of the crisis of an illness, the period when it is not yet clear whether the patient will survive or die; then the word came under the influence of the meaning strand "to judge, evaluate, decide," and to associate with "criterion."[22] The clinical conception

---

21 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1974 [1951]), 67f.

22 Elmar Seebold, ed., *Kluge: Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter), 542f.

is, then, this: social critique responds to a social crisis, a critical situation where it is yet undecided whether the society can be brought to reason or not, and social critique operates, as a hand of reason, to overcome the crisis.

Yet, what about situations where the decision has already taken place? *Kluge* tells that the ancient Greeks called a situation where the decision had already been made, where things had turned down, καταστροφή, "catastrophe."[23] With this word they also denoted the turning point in a tragic play. – Must critique remain silent in face of catastrophe? In a situation of that type, the aspiration to bring society back to reason by a critical judgment on its failure to live up to its own ideal, may seem futile, because the ideal on which it was built was crushed under the weight of the collapse. Or consider a situation where no one will see the hand of reason waving: society appears irredeemable as there is no agent available any longer to call upon to heal it. Perhaps no agent can see any interest to do so; unlike in Marx and Engels' critical days, the target audience would, as it were, have more than just its "chains" to lose, yet no "world to win" in sight.[24] Or consider a situation where the social pressures to adapt to what is just grow so overwhelming that only a lucky few will ever have time to complain and "critique" becomes an idle game of academics meeting on Zoom.

During critical days, critics may regard normative judgment on institutions and practices as their preferred method, since they can rely on there being a target audience, which is not only willing to remove social wrongs but also has a tacit "likemindedness," which affords its members to be sensitive to reasons and enact the judgment themselves.[25]

---

23 Ibid., 480.

24 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012 [1848]), 102; see also Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society: 1964* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 38, 49f.

25 Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 50f, as well as Sabina Lovibond, "Between Tradition and Criticism: The 'Uncodifiability' of the Normative." In her *Essays on Ethics and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 114; see also Arto Laitinen

Horkheimer and Adorno's diagnosis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is, however, that this enactment does not take place in 1944: "[j]udgment is no longer based on a real act of synthesis but on blind subsumption."[26] Part of the catastrophic character of the situation they see themselves confronting is that normative judgment has become increasingly reliant on pre-existing standards, that is, it has become yet another mechanism of adaptation to the prevailing scale of values: "If, at an earlier historical stage, judgment consisted in the swift decision which immediately unleashed the poisoned arrow, in the meantime exchange and the institutions of law have taken their effect. The act of judgment passed through a stage of deliberation [*Stufe des Abwägens*] which afforded the judging subject some protection from brutal identification with the predicate."[27] Normative judgments were critical as long as they developed criteria out of themselves by experimentally pooling different solutions and employing phantasy to see different aspects of the situation at hand. This is, Horkheimer and Adorno believe, no longer a salient characteristic of the practice of judgment: "In late-industrial society there is a regression of judgment without judging."[28] The judging critic is, as it were, no longer present in the process of judgment. – Could an experimental and imaginative pooling, a successor of critical judgment for an age of catastrophe, be created?

During critical days, critique may also operate within the institutional sphere of reason known as *Wissenschaft*, science in a wide sense. It may, for example, provide sociological enlightenment by producing empirically grounded theories of society and so uncover reason deforming relations of domination, which will aid and empower the target audience to remove those structures and so bring about a more rational society. On the first page of its preface, the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* report

---

and Arvi Särkelä, "Social Wrongs," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 26, no. 7 (2023): 1048-1072.

26 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 166f.

27 Ibid., 167.

28 Ibid.

that something like this was their initial intention (though this may be a feint on Adorno's part, see §7 below): "While we had noted for many years that, in the operations of modern science, the major discoveries are paid for with an increasing decline of theoretical education [*Bildung*], we nevertheless believed that we could follow those operations to the extent of limiting our work primarily to a critique or a continuation of specialist theories."[29] However, Horkheimer and Adorno soon came to abandon this hope: "in the present collapse of bourgeois civilization not only the operations but the purpose of science have become dubious."[30] The attempt, they believe, to trace the sources of the current self-destruction of science must refuse blind obedience to the procedures and demands of current science. – What could renew or replace theoretical *Bildung* in an age of catastrophe?

Undeceivability without doctrine is a paradoxical virtue of social critique in catastrophic times. Yet, the avenues both of normative judgment and of scientific research seem blocked to it. – How can it proceed?

4. Two decades earlier, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) was shown in Berlin. A wave of montage fever swept through Germany. Cinematic montage, soon to be applied locally in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927), made it possible to recreate the discontinuous space and tempo of the urban landscape. Yet, this motif was secondary, and so was the wave of montage experimentation. By the mid-1920s namely, montage had already become the dominant method among modernist writers, artists, and architects in the Weimar Republic. Through photomontage, the Berlin Dadaists sought to figuratively destroy the old order of both art and society and assemble new, utopian social spaces. A parallel presence of montage became apparent in the architecture and design of the Bauhaus school in Weimar. The method soon influenced a wider cultural spectrum, from advertising and photojournalism to the political theatre works of Erwin Piscator

---

29 Ibid., xiv.

30 Ibid.

and Bertolt Brecht. In short, montage served as the primary method for creating a new, visionary social space.[31] – Where did this montage fever come from?

An influential work for the German-speaking world, which is rarely appreciated outside it, is the gigantic drama *The Last Days of Mankind* by the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus, written between 1915 and 1922.[32] This "play" (it is impossible to stage) deals with what Kraus saw as the end of the world, the First World War. For us, this war is overshadowed by the Second World War, which was, by almost any measurement, even worse and included Auschwitz and Hiroshima. For those, however, who lived a century ago, only one world war had taken place, and it was something inconceivable, something that could never happen, yet had happened, and therefore had to be conceived.

The method of Kraus' satire consists of collecting quotations, cutting and pasting them, and then arranging and rearranging them in such a way as to disclose the absurdity in the cruelty of the war. More than half of the text is verbatim quotations from documents he collected during the war years. The drama does not have a coherent plot but consists of no less than 220 scenes depicting different situations of everyday life during the war. The scenes take place in 137 different locations and feature 1114 characters. But no heroes. The critical gesture of *The Last Days of Mankind* is as clear as it is contradictory: we *must* but *cannot* stage the end of the world.

Soon, montage began to be used in literature in increasingly diverse ways.[33] The most notable example is Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1928). Through the montaged portrayal of protagonist Franz Biberkopf, the reader experiences how the inherently contradictory and fragmented

---

31 See, for example, Michael Jennings, "Of Weimar's First and Last Things: Montage, Revolution and Fascism in Döblin's *November 1918* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz*." In *Politics in German Literature*, ed. Beth Bjorklund and Mark E. Cory (New York: Camden House, 1998), pp. 132-152.

32 Karl Kraus, *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit: Bühnenfassung des Autors* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005 [1922]).

33 See Jennings, "Of Weimar's First and Last Things."

social environment extends to the most intimate layers of the individual to obliterate any positive individuality from within. But by then, montage had already expanded into philosophy.

The first to make full use of montage as a method of philosophical thinking is Walter Benjamin. His *One-Way Street* (also 1928) could be described as inventing a form of philosophical montage derived from photomontage, film, Kraus's literary montage and Louis Aragon's surrealist version of it.[34] Benjamin's intricate arrangement of heterogenous elements and text types pushes the boundaries of conceptual thought but he also employs dadaist visual techniques in order to disclose a new type of space for thought.

In his Parisian exile in the 1930s, Benjamin attempts to construct a montage of the 19th century with the working title "The Arcades Project" (*Passagenarbeit*). Here, he produces philosophical theory through the historical montage of an enormous number of voices that have been neglected by conventional history: "Method of the project: literary montage. I have nothing to say. Only to show."[35] *Theory* no longer consists of a normatively structured set of valid propositions, but of collected, cut and pasted linguistic images through which the reader shall learn a new way of seeing: this project's "theory is intimately linked with that of montage."[36] – Montage becomes a way of liberating "theory" from *doctrine* (§1).

Benjamin's philosophical montage is designed for critical engagement with catastrophe. To this aim, he combines it with apocalyptic combinatoric in Jewish messianism. Gershom Scholem, his close friend, remarks that the Kabbalistic literary practice of combining and rearranging elements of scripture to disclose the contradictory aspects of the apoca-

---

34 Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*. In his *Selected Writings*, vol 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004 [1928]), pp. 444-489. On the influences, see Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 288ff.

35 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univeristy Press, 2002), N1a,8, 460, translation amended.

36 Ibid., N1,10, 458.

lypse (catastrophe/redemption) presented a methodological precursor to avant-gardist literary montage.[37] Scholem's interest in Kabbalistic combinatorics can be traced back to the first years of his intense exchange with Benjamin on language.[38] Yet, the central lever for mounting montage from literature to philosophy is Benjamin's slightly later idea of thinking in *constellations*.[39] The concept of constellation marks for him the point of divergence of *critical* montage from surrealist literary montage: "whereas [the surrealist] Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening."[40] The critical force of Benjamin's philosophical montage is to lie in the assembled and arranged constellation's flash-like *disclosure*. Critique comes to be linked with enabling a way of seeing by means of a combinatory gesture in a "perilous critical moment."[41]

Consider the difference of this "critical moment" with the "critical days" of the clinical conception in §3. Benjamin's catastrophic conception of critique subverts the corner concepts of the clinical conception: "Definitions of basic historical concepts: Catastrophe – to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment – the status quo threatens to be preserved. Progress – the first revolutionary measure taken."[42]

Parallel to, and completely independently of, Benjamin's invention of thinking in constellations, Ludwig Wittgenstein, from 1931 onwards, develops a philosophical montage as the method leading up to his *Philo-*

---

37 Gershom Scholem, "Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum." In his *Judaica 1* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003 [1963]), 68.

38 For these connections see Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." In his *Selected Writings*, vol 1; Gershom Scholem, "Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala." In his *Judaica 3* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016 [1970]), pp. 7-70; and Andreas Kilcher, *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala als ästhetisches Paradigma: Die Konstruktion einer ästhetischen Kabbala seit der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 1998), 340ff.

39 Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019 [1928]), 10f.

40 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N1,9, 458.

41 Ibid., N3,1, 463.

42 Ibid., N10,2, 474.

sophical Investigations. Again, the montage results in a mosaic of voices.[43] Likewise an avid reader of Kraus, Wittgenstein saw the composition of his book as an act of culture: "Culture is like a great organization which assigns to each of its members its place."[44] The "members" referred to here are the elements of his philosophical montage, his fragmentary remarks, his voices. They were to be written, collected, arranged, and rearranged, in such a way as to provide a view of the whole, which, however, could not be spelled out, but could, by the right arrangement, be made to light up.[45] Again, a propositional system is replaced by collected, cut and pasted linguistic pictures. And Wittgenstein, too, hints at wanting his cultural montage to be understood to constitute recalcitrance to an apocalyptic age.[46]

5. In an aphorism of *Minima Moralia*, dated fall 1944 and named "Out of the Firing-Line," Adorno notes that the Second World War, lacking "continuity, history, an 'epic' element," will not leave any coherent trace in the cultural memory: "Everywhere, with each explosion, it has breached the barrier against stimuli beneath which experience, the lag between healing oblivion and healing recollection, forms. Life has changed into a timeless succession of shocks, interspaced with empty, paralysed intervals."[47] But even more menacing than this overwhelming omnipresent

43 On the development of Wittgenstein's montage method, see Alois Pichler, *Style, Method and Philosophy in Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

44 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998 [1977]), 8.

45 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007 [1953]), §122, §127, §§132f.

46 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, 4; Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 64; see also Sabina Lovibond, "Wittgenstein, Tolstoy, and the 'Apocalyptic View.'" In her *Essays on Ethics and Culture*, pp 36-53, and Ben Ware, "Wittgenstein's Apocalyptic Subjectivity." In *Wittgenstein and Literary Studies*, ed. Robert Chodat and John Gibson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 194-213, as well as Arvi Särkelä, "'The Truly Apocalyptic View': Physiognomy of a Critical Gesture in Wittgenstein," *Critical Times*, forthcoming.

47 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 54.

violence of the war is to Adorno the prospect that this mass of trauma-ta, of inwardly absorbed shocks, will fuel future destruction. – The ca-tastrophe turns permanent: "Karl Kraus was right to call his play *The Last Days of Mankind*. What is being enacted now ought to bear the title: 'After Doomsday' [*'Nach Weltuntergang'*]."[48]

But what did Adorno think of Kraus' attempt to collect and arrange those discontinuous traces?

6. "Montage" can mean process, product or method: the term can refer to the use of pre-existing parts in aesthetic practice, to the resulting artwork itself, or to the way in which the elements were used. Sometimes, the terms "assemblage" and "collage" are used as synonyms.[49] Etymologi-cally, the term derives from craftmanship and has the sense of mount-ing, assembling, setting up, putting together. An older layer is the French verb *monter*, which means to lift, to transport something from a lower to a higher position. Montage is used as a method of artistic practice in litera-ture, photography, film, painting, theater, sculpture and music. Unlike in quotation, it is in literary montage not necessary to indicate the source of the assembled parts. The collected elements can be words, prints, apho-risms, notes, photos, quotidian things, scenes and so on. In literary mon-tage, they are usually collected from the press, advertising, everyday communication or from various historical sources. But for the work to be montage, the elements are usually supposed to be heterogenous. Edgar Voigts-Wirchow, for example, defines montage as an aesthetic practice in which "the particles are joined together without joints, remain heteroge-nous and appear inhomogenous as discernible fragments."[50]

Roland Innerhofer states that more than anything montage means "a

---

48 Ibid.

49 Viktor Žmegač, "Montage/Collage." In *Moderne Literatur in Grundbegriffen*, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer and Viktor Žmegač (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1994), 286; Ro-land Innerhofer, "Montage." In *Online Encyclopedia of Literary Neo-Avant-Gar-des*, January 9, 2021, https://www.oeln.net/montage (accessed May 9, 2025)

50 Edgar Voigts-Wirchow, "Montage/Collage." In *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie*, ed. Ansgar Nünning (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 2004), 472.

method."[51] As a method of artistic practice, it involves taking elements from their original context and transporting them into a new, strange context. By this gesture, the individual elements acquire new meaning while still referring to the old environment, and so a new space is disclosed – constituted by the assembled elements and their arrangement. Montage interrupts the flow of reading, or looking, and can so be intensified to create a shock effect. In this way, it both creates contrasts and evokes new associations. Typically, in literary montage, the text has no homogenous unity in which the constituent parts are grounded; instead, the parts are fragments that are to some degree interchangeable in their order. This may put the reader in the position of seeing new differences and new similarities. Voigts-Wirchow and Innerhofer agree that this use of materials leads both to alienation effects and a stronger reference to reality.[52] The historian of literature Viktor Žmegač specifies that the alienation effect may be regarded as caused by the cognitive shock (*Erkenntnisschock*) at which modernist montage aims.[53] – Perhaps, then, one could say that montage is a method of alienating the recipient from an alienated state of society.

Žmegač distinguishes between "integrative" and "demonstrative" montage.[54] Depending on how strongly the text appears fragmented, two poles of a continuum may be distinguished. Whereas an integrative montage seeks to conceal the cuts between the fragments, a demonstrative montage accentuates them. By hiding the breaks between the fragments, integrative montage tends toward a dissolution of montage. By making the fragments clearly recognizable *as* fragments, demonstrative montage intensifies the shocks and engages the recipient to perform the synthesis themselves. – Perhaps, then, one could say that demonstrative montage disrupts the organic and mimetic work of art in order to invoke the living recipient's mimetic capacities: the reader must do the work of

---

51 Innerhofer, "Montage."

52 Ibid.; Voigts-Wirchow, "Montage/Collage."

53 Žmegač, "Montage/Collage."

54 Ibid., 287f.

seeing similarities, making connections, recognizing patterns, investigating the gestalt.

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a work of demonstrative literary montage. Originally named "Philosophical Fragments," its authors do near to nothing to hide the cuts. Moreover, the fragments are reasonably interchangeable in their sequential order. It may make sense to start one's first reading of the book by going through the prefaces and the treatise on "The Concept of Enlightenment." But even a first-time reader may really study the rest of the fragments in whatever order. Of course, the order in which one reads the rest makes a difference for one's experience of the work. Yet, this may be quite intentional. (Must there be one correct experience stipulated by the author of a philosophical work? Can she be expected to wish to evoke *different* experiences?) For example, if one jumps from the "Concept of Enlightenment" directly to the fifth thesis of "Elements of Antisemitism," which elaborates the concept of mimesis, one's experience of the chiasmus of myth and enlightenment in the Homerian allegory of "Excursus I" is likely to be quite different.

But these elements, the fragments, are themselves also strikingly heterogenous. There are

– three treatises (*Abhandlungen*) that are really structured more like essays: on the concept of enlightenment, on culture industry, and on antisemitism, the last of which is itself really a montage of fragments;
– two "excurses," the first of which is a historical allegory, which combines a poetic side with philological study; the second is itself a disorienting montage of quotations (from Kant, de Sade and Nietzsche);
– a large number of "notes" and "sketches" that are highly diverse in style and may themselves individually combine distinct text types such as aphorism with dialogue.

Certainly, then, as a work of modernist literature, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a work of demonstrative montage. – But is it a work of *philosophical* montage? And, if so, is that supposed to make it *critical*? – Perhaps the fact that the book consists of heterogenous elements collected, cut and

pasted, with remaining traces of glue, is not only a feature of its literary style, but indicative of its *method of thinking*. And, if so, perhaps that way of thinking is what it Horkheimer and Adorno thought it would take to be undeceivable without doctrine. Perhaps it is a remaining venue for critical thinking in an age of catastrophe.[55]

7. The idea that recalcitrant thought cannot react to the catastrophic state of the world by proceeding as normative judgment or as scientific research (§3) is not as new to Horkheimer and Adorno as they dramatize it in the preface of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. At least not to Adorno, since it is the central concern of his inaugural lecture of 1931, "The Actuality of Philosophy," which Horkheimer originally defied.[56] The lecture outlines a method of philosophical thought as collecting and arranging elements.

In the catastrophic world, into which the young Adorno places philosophy, "nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces" which it finds in the "ruins" of reality.[57] At the very outset of the lecture, Adorno therefore strictly distinguishes his method of critique from any form of normative judgment: "No justifying reason," he tells, "could rediscover itself in a reality whose order and form [*Gestalt*] suppresses ev-

---

55 Several philosophical commentators, such as Bert van den Brink and Axel Honneth, have noted the importance of literary methods (such as exaggeration, chiasmus) for understanding how *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is critical. In the following two paragraphs (§§7f), I take a different line than these authors. To me it seems that montage, originally a literary method, is applied in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a full-blown *philosophical* method. In other words, montage becomes a method of philosophical investigation (which is different from, albeit interwoven with, literary creation and presentation). See Bert van den Brink, "Gesellschaftstheorie und Übertreibungskunst: Für eine alternative Lesart der 'Dialektik der Aufklärung,'" *Neue Rundschau*, 1 (1997): 37-59, and Axel Honneth, "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism," *Constellations*, 7 (2000): 116-127.

56 See Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005 [2003]), 136ff.

57 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," *Telos*, 10, no. 1 (1977 [1931]): 120.

ery claim to reason."[58] Instead of an object of judgment, philosophy must treat these traces as "riddle figures."[59] But Adorno also distinguishes philosophical thought from scientific research: on his (apparently rather limited) view of them, the sciences build their findings upon accepted previous findings, whereas philosophy, by contrast, takes each of its findings as a "sign that needs unriddling."[60] In short, "the idea of science is research; that of philosophy is interpretation [*Deutung*]."[61]

Philosophy, then, collects traces of reason in the ruins of reality and interprets them as riddles. Because of the riddle character of its object, this type of "interpretation" is a paradoxical practice: it must, namely, proceed "without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation."[62] Like Kraus collected bits and pieces of ordinary communication during the war for his literary montage of the end of the world (§4), Adorno's "interpretation" sets out to collect fleeting and disappearing traces in the riddle-like social reality which persists despite the catastrophe (§5).

Adorno's choice of the word "interpretation" for the method he is outlining might be slightly misleading, because its purpose is not to discover meaning behind these splintered phenomena. Rather, this specific type of interpretation really is to proceed like riddle-solving in that the solution and question are expected to appear at once: "… the function of riddle-solving is to light up the riddle-gestalt like lightning and to sublate it."[63] An unriddler neither seeks to hermeneutically read an immanent meaning out of the phenomena, nor is she solving a problem in the sense, where the formulation is already the problem half-solved. Rather, the unriddler is to disclose their gestalt. The question only "lights up" with the solution "suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same

---

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 126.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., 127, translation amended.

time."[64] The meaning flits past: the riddle dissolves. – How?

This is where Adorno develops a demonstrative *philosophical* montage (in contrast to [just] literary montage, §6).[65] The unriddling namely proceeds by bringing "the singular and dispersed elements of the question… into various groupings."[66] Collected elements are arranged and re-arranged. This combining and juxtaposing of elements will go on "long enough for them to close together in a figure [*Figur*] out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears."[67] The interpreter collects elements from the riddle-like social environment and arranges and rearranges them into "changing constellations…, until they fall into a figure, which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears."[68] The method of philosophical thought, Adorno explains with reference to Benjamin, is "to interpret unintentional reality, in that, by the power of constructing figures… out of the isolated elements of reality, it sublates questions."[69] The critical task of the philosophical montage is, then, not to pass a normative judgment or to uncover a wrong, but to illuminate catastrophic reality: "Interpretation of the unintentional through a juxtaposition of the analytically isolated elements and illumination of reality by the power of such interpretation is the program."[70]

Although Adorno quotes Benjamin's idea of constellation, there is an important difference in their methods of philosophical montage. Tellingly, when he introduces the concept of constellation, Adorno immediately qualifies it with "or, to say it with less astrological and scientifically more current expression, … changing experimental arrangements [*Versuchsanordnungen*]."[71] Whereas Benjamin, above all in the *Arcades Project*, puts

---

64 Ibid., translation amended.

65

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., translation amended.

70 Ibid., translation amended.

71 Ibid., translation amended.

much emphasis on the *collecting* of the elements and displays a strong confidence in the critical force of what one just happens to stumble on, Adorno stresses the composition of the collected cuts: the *construction* of the montage. The figures that come out of the collecting and the experimental arranging "are not simply given [*Selbstgegebenheiten*]," Adorno underlines: "Rather, they must be produced by human beings."[72]

For the construction of such disclosing figures, Adorno suggests the unriddlers "… to group the elements of a social analysis in such a manner that the way they came together made a figure."[73] This experimental arranging requires the type of pooling of solutions, which normative judgment in a catastrophic social reality does not anymore afford; and, whereas it receives its elements from social analysis, it does not wholly rely on its institutionalized procedures (§3). It goes beyond them in experimenting with arrangements by employing phantasy, the mimetic capacity to immerse in riddle-like reality and to perceive similarities, aspects, gestalts there, a "phantasy which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it, and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement [*Anordnung*]: aspects, granted, which phantasy itself must originally generate."[74]

The sole justification (if it even is one) for such a philosophical montage is that it really does strike, light up a gestalt, disclose: in Adorno's words, the figures are "legitimated in the last analysis alone by the fact that reality crystalizes about them in striking conclusiveness."[75] Such a disclosure is an uncontrollable event, since it depends on reception. Like the montage artist (§6), the montage philosopher can only collect, cut, arrange, rearrange in an experiment to light up a gestalt, but whether it really does strike depends on the constellation with the recipient. Indeed, like the disruption of the organic artwork in montage art was to evoke new ways of seeing in the receiver, the philosophical montage is to en-

---

72 Ibid., 131.

73 Ibid., 128.

74 Ibid., 131, translation amended.

75 Ibid.

gage its addressees to perform the disclosure themselves. "Like a source of light, the historical figure… may lay bare the gestalt of a reality,"[76] yet there is no guarantee that the addressees will enter the constellation, put themselves in the position of seeing the gestalt.

What the montaging philosopher offers to the addressees is, then, neither a doctrine nor an argument, not even a picture. She gives them, Adorno emphasizes, a *key* in their hand: "The point" of this unriddling montage, he says, "is to construct keys, before which reality springs open."[77] The unriddler collects, arranges and experiments with elements until their assemblage comes to take the shape of a key combination by which the addressees may themselves perform the disclosure.[78] She creates combinations by the help of which the recipients may have an experience, which they would not otherwise have, on their own accord.[79]

This entire process of philosophical montage, Adorno tells, is a *gesture*: a "transformative gesture of the riddle-play [*Rätselspiel*]."[80] As a product, it "provides the image of resolutions to which materialist praxis alone has access."[81] The young Adorno believes that such a disclosure is *critical* because it comes with a demand to make a social difference: "… out of the construction of a configuration [*Figur*] of reality the demand for its real change always follows promptly."[82] Question and solution, dissolution and demand, all are to light up in one strike. – Critique in catastrophe is a gesture.

8. Riddles and problems imply different attitudes. Take, for example, this question: "Why is the wholly enlightened humanity, instead of entering

---

76 Ibid., 128, translation amended.

77 Ibid., 130.

78 For the simile of the key combination, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973 [1966]), 163.

79 For a more detailed study of disclosing critique of society, see Arvi Särkelä, *Vicious Circles: Disclosing a History of Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2026).

80 Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," 129, translation amended.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

a truly human state, sinking into a new kind of barbarism?"

If one takes it as a problem, one could

– seek to explain according to some scientific procedure how things went wrong and appeal to a target audience to learn from this explanation;

– denounce enlightenment, give up the project, and revindicate myth in its place;

– criticize the enlightenment that went so wrong as limited or one-sided and propose a less violent version of it.

(All of these courses of thinking were adopted in reaction to the great barbarities of the 20th century.)

But if one takes the question as a riddle, one will take it as a sign, rearrange its elements, pool solutions and employ phantasy to set the question aright, and one might seek to construct a key for one's interlocutors to light up the gestalt of the question.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the key is a reduction to two theses: "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."[83] These theses form a chiasmus: "myth" extends to its opposite, "enlightenment," and "enlightenment" reverts to its opposite, "myth." Here it is important to distinguish between "thesis" and "key." While both constitute, in this particular case, chiasma, the thesis is a proposition and the key a figure. Horkheimer and Adorno write in the preface: "The critical part of the first essay can be broadly summed up in two theses: Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology. These theses are worked out in relation to specific subjects in the two excurses."[84] The *thesis* of the chiasmus is formulated in the first essay and the two excurses, whose many elementary rearrangements, in turn, can be understood as montaging a figure, which may serve as a *key* to the work as a whole. The reduction of the first fragments to a key combination allows the rest of the enigmatic work to melt together as a

---

83 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

84 Ibid.

figure before which the gestalt of enlightenment should light up. In other words, the chiasmus is formulated as thesis in the first essay and excurses but is related to the whole as a key. This is, I take it, what the authors indicate when they write that the first essay is "the theoretical basis of those which follow."[85] (Remember: "theory" has no longer anything to do with a normatively structured system of propositions.)

On her path through the collected fragments, the reader experiences this figure, again and again, in changing experimental arrangements. With the help of this key, she is to see connections, recognize patterns, until she experiences the gestalt that reason has come to take. In that moment, the question dissolves. The question, why an enlightened humanity sinks into barbarism, loses its grip and turns meaningless: as she sees myth in enlightenment, enlightenment in myth, the reader becomes alienated from the alienated question. Now, she sees the aspect under which humanity was never enlightened in the first place: myth still reigns. And she sees the violent civilizational break, assumed by the question, as a rather consistent continuation of what was assumed as "barbarism."

Both the making and the use of this key require a pooling of solutions and employment of phantasy, the phases that Horkheimer and Adorno believe scientific procedure and normative judgment to have lost in the age of catastrophe (§3). And they both contribute to the type of theoretical *Bildung* that the age threatens to eradicate: theory not in the sense of doctrine but as rational recalcitrance to both prevailing practice and alternative theory (§1).

There seems, however, to be a difference to the young Adorno's unriddling montage. Whereas Adorno of 1931 appealed to a "materialist praxis," which has "access" to the "resolution," Horkheimer and Adorno of 1944 no longer seem to entertain *this* critical hope. While the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also hold that "a true praxis capable of overturning the status quo depends on theory's refusal to yield to the oblivion in which society allows thought to ossify,"[86] the translatability of this

---

85 Ibid. (I thank Fabian Freyenhagen for pushing me to get clearer on this.)
86 Ibid., 33.

undeceivability into a practical *demand* has been disrupted. At least, the power of the disclosure to facilitate a demand is no longer part of what is supposed to make it critical. Instead, such expectations now threaten to turn critique into "propaganda": "What is suspect is not, of course, the depiction of reality as hell but the routine invitation to break out of it. If that invitation can be addressed to anyone today, it is neither to the so-called masses nor to the individual, who is powerless, but rather to an imaginary witness, to whom we bequeath it so that it is not entirely lost with us."[87] – B does not seek to change the world but to "get clearer about the terrible state" in which it is.

9. Adorno, for one, is surely a methodological pluralist. Not only do his ways of working undergo significant transformations from the early 1930s to the late 1960s, but also at every instance of this philosophical trajectory his writings display a diversity of methods. In no way has this essay sought to claim that montage is *the* method of his philosophy. Rather, by bringing the links between montage, catastrophe, critique and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* into view, it seeks to *clear away misunderstandings* of that work, misunderstandings pertaining to its method (§2). Having these connections in clear view may make certain questions about its argumentative mistakes disappear.

Much has been written about Adorno's style, but the question of method is different.[88] Not all features in ways of writing are features of style. Style seems to include an individual imprint, denote what is "characteristic of author, period, place, or school,"[89] usually excluded from our use of "method." Put differently, whereas a style may at most be *imitated* by others, a method may be *adopted* in and across historical contexts. A history of methods must therefore consider both what the authors say about their method and how their work *really* works – in its historical context. The latter involves looking at how the work relates to methods

---

87 Ibid., 213.

88 See the contributions of Plamen Andreev and Matteo Falomi in this volume.

89 Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 35.

in circulation in its cultural environment, including the arts.[90]

Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reacts critically to a catastrophic world (§2). Criticizing a catastrophic world is different from criticizing a world in crisis or a world in decline or a golden age (§3). For Kraus, demonstrative literary montage was a paradoxical method of critically disclosing catastrophe by demonstrating the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of representing the catastrophe; Benjamin transformed demonstrative montage to a philosophical method of critically thinking catastrophe (§4). The young Adorno gave Benjamin's method a constructive turn (§7);[91] with Horkheimer, he constructed a key for the critical disclosure of the gestalt of catastrophic oscillation of enlightenment and myth (§8). – But would montage still today present a method of philosophical thinking recalcitrant both to prevailing practices and alternative theories (§1)?

The montage makers mentioned in this essay, from Kraus and Döblin through Benjamin and Wittgenstein to Horkheimer and Adorno, had all, in very different ways, been shattered by the First World War. But the method of montage would also play a role on the way to the Second. While Benjamin, Wittgenstein, Horkheimer and Adorno in exile were collecting, cutting and pasting together their philosophical montages, Leni Riefen-

---

90 I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to make a clearer distinction between my study and the discussion of Adorno's style.

91 The relationship between Adorno's philosophy and Benjamin's Arcades Project is notoriously complicated. I do not mean to claim that the *Arcades Project* (as a work) influences *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Rather, what I hope to have shown is that (a) like Benjamin (and other contemporary philosophers) Horkheimer and Adorno adopt a method in circulation in their cultural environment, namely that of montage, and (b) Benjamin adopted montage as a philosophical method before Horkheimer or Adorno, and (c) Horkheimer and Adorno modify that method in significant ways that can be described in relation to Benjamin and Kraus, whereby Adorno contrasts it explicitly to Benjamin's way of thinking in constellation (§§7f). A sufficient presentation of the relation of Adorno's philosophical montage to that of Benjamin's transcends the limits of my brief study and would have to include an analysis of their correspondence during the second phase of the Arcades Project. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this possible misunderstanding to my attention.

stahl was at home perfecting Ruttmann's film montage into a veritable hell machine. *Triumph of the Will* is a work of montage. In his late work *November 1918* (1943), Döblin loses hope and lets the montage itself fall apart. In his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno remarks that the shock for which the montage was intended had become blunted.[92]

In montage, elements are taken from their original context of use and inserted into a new, foreign context. The assemblage thus constructs new spaces for aesthetic experiencing and conceptual thinking. But there is no guarantee that this is a *critical* gesture. And it is by no means clear that this can serve as privileged method of critical thinking in our age. Whereas in the interwar period, montage was undoubtedly an innovative method in the arts, today it must be considered routine practice. It has become conventionalized in video clips, advertising, and digital design. Yet, it beckons us out of the shadows of our recent history. Its catastrophic thinking winks to us who live in a climate change that has surpassed the point of no return, a political order where unpredictable oligarchs are clinging to control of the nuclear arsenal, and a social environment where the remaining non-competitive spaces are sliced up and fed to no longer metaphorical administrative machines. Perhaps by arranging and rearranging the memories of those catastrophic times will help us see the gestalts of critical thinking that may light up paths to respond undeceived and without doctrine to the catastrophes that are ours.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. (1931 [1977]) "The Actuality of Philosophy." *Telos*, 10 (1), pp. 120–133.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1951 [1974]) *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Trans. by Edmund F. N. Jephcott, London: Verso.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1966 [1973]) *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. by E. B. Ashton, London: Routledge.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1970 [2002]) *Aesthetic Theory*. Ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, London:

---

92 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002 [1970]), 155.

Continuum.

Adorno, Theodor W. (2019) *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society: 1964*. Ed. by Timo ten Brink and Marcel Philipp Nogueira, trans. by Wieland Hoban, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Benjamin, Walter (1916 [2004]) "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." In his *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, pp. 62–74, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Benjamin, Walter (1928 [2004]) *One-Way Street*. In his *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, pp. 444–489, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Benjamin, Walter (1928 [2019]) *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Trans. by Howard Eiland, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Benjamin, Walter (2002) *The Arcades Project*. Ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Brink, Bert van den (1997) "Gesellschaftstheorie und Übertreibungskunst: Für eine alternative Lesart der 'Dialektik der Aufklärung.'" *Neue Rundschau*, 1: pp. 37–59.

Eiland, Howard and Jennings, Michael W. (2014) *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Freyenhagen, Fabian (2024) "Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*." *Res Philosophica*, 101 (2): pp. 245–269.

Goodman, Nelson (1978) *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Habermas, Jürgen (1985 [1987]) "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno." In his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. by Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 106–130.

Hintikka, Jaakko (1962) "Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?" *The Philosophical Review*, 71 (1): pp. 3–32.

Hobsbawm, Eric (1995) *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*. London: Abacus.

Honneth, Axel (2000) "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism," *Constellations*, 7: pp. 116–127.

Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. (1947 [2002]) *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Innerhofer, Roland (2021) "Montage." In *Online Encyclopedia of Literary Neo-Avant-Gardes*, available at https://www.oeln.net/montage (accessed May 9, 2025).

Jennings, Michael W. (1998) "Of Weimar's First and Last Things: Montage, Revolution, and Fascism in Döblin's November 1918 and Berlin Alexanderplatz." In Barbara Bjorklund and Marc E. Cory (eds.), *Politics in German Literature*, New York: Camden House, pp. 132–152.

Kilcher, Andreas B. (1998) *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala als ästhetisches Paradigma: Die Konstruktion einer ästhetischen Kabbala seit der frühen Neuzeit*. Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag.

Kraus, Karl (1922 [2005]) *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit: Bühnenfassung des Autors*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Laitinen, Arto and Särkelä, Arvi (2023) "Social Wrongs." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 26 (7): pp. 1048–1072.

Lovibond, Sabina (2002) *Ethical Formation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lovibond, Sabina (2016 [2022]) "Wittgenstein, Tolstoy, and the 'Apocalyptic View.'" In her *Essays on Ethics and Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 36–53.

Lovibond, Sabina (2019 [2022]) "Between Tradition and Criticism: The 'Uncodifiability' of the Normative." In her *Essays on Ethics and Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 97–115.

Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich (1848 [2012]) *The Communist Manifesto*. Ed. by Jacob C. Isaac, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Müller-Doohm, Stefan (2003 [2005]) *Adorno: A Biography*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Pichler, Alois (2023) *Style, Method and Philosophy in Wittgenstein*. Cam-

bridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pickford, Henry (draft) "Thinking with the Dialectic of Enlightenment."

Särkelä, Arvi (2026) *Vicious Circles: Disclosing a History of Critique*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Särkelä, Arvi (2025) " 'The Truly Apocalyptic View': Physiognomy of a Critical Gesture in Wittgenstein." *Critical Times*, forthcoming.

Scholem, Gershom (1963 [2003]) "Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum." In his *Judaica 1*, Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, pp. 7–74.

Scholem, Gershom (1970 [2016]) "Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala." In his *Judaica 3*, Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, pp. 7–70.

Voigts-Virchow, Eckart (2004) "Montage/Collage." In Ansgar Nünning (ed.), *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie*, Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, pp. 472–473.

Ware, Ben (2022) "Wittgenstein's Apocalyptic Subjectivity." In Robert Chodat and James Gibson (eds.), *Wittgenstein and Literary Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 194–213.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953 [2007]) *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1977 [1998]) *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*. Ed. by G. H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, revised by Alois Pichler, trans. by Peter Winch, Oxford: Blackwell.

Žmegač, Viktor (1994) "Montage/Collage." In Dietrich Borchmeyer and Viktor Žmegač (eds.), *Moderne Literatur in Grundbegriffen*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, pp. 286–291.

Thinking as Exaggeration

Plamen Andreev[1]

Abstract: This paper argues that exaggeration, such as Adorno and Horkheimer employ it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is not merely a rhetorical figure, but a practice of thinking mediated in language. I first explicate the notion of exaggeration implicit in Adorno's conception of thinking, where it figures as a specific use of concepts that 'over-identifies' objects with concepts, grasping objects as mediated by an antagonistic social process and emphatically demonstrating the non-identity of concepts and objects ordinarily masked by thinking. Turning to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I argue that Adorno and Horkheimer over-identify social reality with the concept of totality in order to enable an intellectual experience of its aporetic, antagonistic character – the absurdity of being ruled over by a socially produced appearance of 'nature' that is at once actuality *and* illusion. Finally, I argue that exaggeration's conceptually performative demonstration of absurdity is simultaneously a *gesture* in defiance of absurdity. I discuss this with references to Hegel, Kafka and Odysseus, whose cunning embrace of myth demonstrates the impossibility of fulfilling its statutes.

> My head –
> A lantern sunk in blood and smashing glass
> –Geo Milev, "*My Head…*"

There is no feature more characteristic of Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophical style in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* than exaggeration.[2] The many individual elements of which the book is composed are the more concentrated in abbreviated insight, the more their outer edges are

---

1   Plamen Andreev is a postdoctoral researcher and teacher who completed his PhD at the University of Essex, under the supervision of Fabian Freyenhagen. His thesis, currently being prepared for publication as a monograph, substantively reinterprets the claims and critical methodology of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by accounting for Adorno and Horkheimer's mode of presentation. He is currently researching philosophical style in Adorno and the Frankfurt School more generally, focussing on Romantic irony, exaggeration and gesture.

2   Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Henceforth cited as DE.

sharpened by exaggeration – the more pointed the text's propositions, the more polemical its juxtapositions, the more breathless its argumentative leaps. The work originally titled 'philosophical fragments' is equally a collection of exaggerations, since the fragment, and what gapes between fragments, is also exaggeration. Such language produces a philosophy both more intellectually intense and more open to misinterpretation – it is no doubt largely responsible for the polarised, vexed reception of Adorno and Horkheimer's book. It is difficult to imagine how a more tamely composed text, in stricter conformity with the demands of so-cial-scientific convention, could manage to radicalise a new generation of readers despite being out of print for decades (as happened in the 1960s, when pirated copies of the book began circulating amongst German students). Conversely, when Jürgen Habermas broke with the earlier program for a critical theory of society in his reading of the *Dialectic* – the most consequential one in the history of its reception – it was once more Adorno and Horkheimer's tempestuous style that was at issue.[3] The critique of self-destructive enlightenment is not sustainable, Habermas argued, because it is presented through an optics that oversimplifies the image of modernity so hyperbolically that it fails to do any justice to its rational achievements. The totalising diagnosis of 'self-preservation gone wild' appears to have dragged the diagnosticians themselves out into the wilderness.

As salient as it may appear in this context, Frankfurt School scholars seldom accord exaggeration, and matters of style more generally, a distinctly *philosophical* significance for their understanding of the *Dialectic* and its claims. This neglect is surprising, considering the state of scholarship on philosophers no less self-reflective and deliberate about their use of language than Adorno and Horkheimer. No serious Nietzsche or Kierkegaard scholar can afford to ignore their style – it is widely acknowledged that their philosophical thinking is bound up with their writing

---

3   Jürgen Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 106- 130.

in such ways that understanding their philosophy at all is inconceivable without understanding their style. Sensitive scholarship will at least acknowledge that a similar relationship between thinking and linguistic form obtains in Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophical practice, but this insight is too rarely or incompletely mobilised in interpretations of the *Dialectic*, and too often it falls away altogether. While Adorno was still alive, it was Habermas himself who called him a 'writer among philosophers', recognising the compelling philosophical justifications for Adorno's preoccupation with style.[4] Habermas's later essays on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have abandoned such subtleties. Effectively collapsing the distinction between writing and philosophy, form and content, the relationship between which he had earlier discerned as key to Adorno's philosophical practice, Habermas reads the *Dialectic* and its exaggerations all too literally, concluding that the negativist mode of social criticism it represents undermines its own discursive validity.[5]

It is possible to defuse this long-standing criticism in an interpretive direction opposite to the one taken by Habermas. If his literal reading collapses form into content, sympathetic commentators are often tempted to divorce the two and treat exaggeration on a narrowly rhetorical plane, whether in the context of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* itself,[6] or when discussing Adorno's work as a whole.[7] Exaggeration is thus construed as a linguistic device through the aid of which one deliberately strays from a faithful, nuanced description of some state of affairs, amplifying some features and attenuating others. In exaggerating, one is said to divert from the activity of purportedly 'serious' thought for some purpose external to thought as such.

---

4   Jürgen Habermas, 'Theodor W. Adorno: Ein philosophierender Intellektueller', in *Philosophisch–politische Profile* (Frankurt aM: Suhrkamp, 1984), 161.

5   Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment'.

6   Axel Honneth, 'The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism', *Constellations* 7, no. 1 (2000): 116-127, **https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00173**.

7   Peter E. Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2023), esp. 27-30.

And yet, at the end of *Juliette* excursus, Max Horkheimer writes that 'only exaggeration is true'.[8] Statements like these, reiterated in various ways by Adorno throughout his own work, suggest that whatever the pair of them are up to, they are not *merely* exaggerating. Instead, it would seem that they are implicitly relying on a conception of exaggeration as linked to thought in some non-accidental way – rather than construing it as an external linguistic device relating to thought only accidentally, e.g. for the purposes of critique.

The aim of this paper is to clarify the nature of this conception of exaggeration and make it productive for developing a better understanding of Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophical methodology as textually practiced in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Explicating the notion of exaggeration that I argue to be implicit in Adorno's conception of thinking, I emphasise the distinctly philosophical significance of exaggeration. My account seeks to avoid the perceived weaknesses of the two interpretive tendencies in the literature identified above – reading exaggeration too literally, collapsing the distinction between form and content altogether, or conversely, reading exaggeration too figuratively, divorcing form from content. Exaggerations and the aporias into which they tend to lead are neither the ultimate statements on a given matter, nor merely rhetorical devices that amplify the content of some underlying theory. They could not be interpretively dissolved without transmuting the epistemic and normative force of the concepts presented in the mode of exaggeration. Rather than a mere quirk, a weakness of Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophy – or its fatal flaw – exaggerations and aporias they tend to lead to are the secret of its strength, because they are more truthful to a social reality that conceals its own aporetic, self-contradictory character, and more responsive, however paradoxically, to the practical impulse of changing it.

The argument of the paper unfolds in three parts: in the first section, I develop the notion of exaggeration in the context of Adorno's concept of thinking. I reconstruct exaggeration as a form of thinking that uses

---

8   DE, 92.

concepts to 'identify' objects but exceeds the scope of ordinary forms of thinking in that its conceptual identification serves the consciousness of non-identity, i.e. the consciousness that concepts are not identical with their objects. This hinges on a distinction between appearance and essence, the concrete meaning of which I clarify, in the second section, with reference to Adorno's understanding of the 'essential' nature of capitalist social reality as an antagonistic, self-concealing totality. In the final section, I use these ideas to provide an interpretation of the role of exaggeration in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, arguing that the text's hyperbolic language is an inherently aporetic conceptual medium aimed at enabling an intellectual experience of a seemingly unfathomable, antagonistic social totality that both exists and doesn't quite exist – the absurdity of being ruled over by a socially produced appearance of 'nature' that is both an actuality *and* an illusion. This brings into relief the gestural or mimetic character of thinking as exaggeration, which I discuss with references to Kafka, Hegel and Homer's *Odyssey*.

I. Exaggeration as the Form of Cognition of Non-Identity

One may consider the question of exaggeration as staked in the relationship between thinking and linguistic form by studying, for example, Adorno's conception of rhetoric[9], in which the latter takes, 'contrary to the vulgar viewpoint, the side of content' rather than just form.[10] Or one may recover the conception of language and linguistic presentation operative in Adorno and Horkheimer's work more generally.[11] The direction I

9   See, for example, J. M. Bernstein, 'Mimetic Rationality and Material Inference: Adorno and Brandom', in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 58, no. 227 (2004): 7-23.

10 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 56. Henceforth cited as ND. Here and wherever else indicated, I have used the alternative English translation by Dennis Redmond (and preserving the Ashton pagination).

11 See especially Fabian Freyenhagen, 'The Linguistic Turn in the Early Frankfurt School: Horkheimer and Adorno', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 61, no. 1 (January 2023), which has deeply influenced the account offered here. See also Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 'The Concept of Language and Lin-

adopt below is influenced by such approaches but focusses on the other side of this relationship, seeking to explicate the idea of exaggeration through a reconstruction of Adorno's conception of thinking and conceptuality.

According to Adorno, 'to think means to identify'.[12] On this view, all thinking involves 'identification' of objects – relating a concept to a particular object to produce knowledge claims that may or may not be valid but are necessarily limited in epistemic scope and validity in some relevant way. What Adorno calls 'identity thinking' is thus a pleonastic way of describing the tendency – greatly exacerbated under capitalist relations of production – whereby potentially valid but necessarily limited knowledge lays claim to being *unlimited*. In its modern positivistic forms in particular, identity thinking is both more limited in its actual scope and validity *and* disguises a stronger, since conceptually implicit, claim to being cognitively unlimited. In this form, knowledge is limited – and in some sense limits *itself* – to the task of describing the present appearance of socio-historically produced phenomena, ordering them in formal classificatory systems and establishing abstract causal relationships between them. One is thereby deprived of the essential conceptual means necessary for grasping these phenomena *as* historically conditioned, for explaining the concrete process of their socio-historical formation and revealing their human meaning.[13] As the (self-)limitation in the scope of knowledge is wrongly taken to be absolute, merely partial knowledge – knowledge of appearance – is treated as the whole of knowledge, and is thereby also granted transhistorical, rather than merely historical, validity.

---

guistic Presentation in Horkheimer and Adorno', trans. James Crane, available online at https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/blog/2024/language/. On exaggeration in early Frankfurt School critical theory and elsewhere, my account is also obviously indebted to the work of Alexander García Düttmann, whose *Philosophy of Exaggeration* has become a standard reference in the area. See Alexander García Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration* trans. James Phillips (London: Continuum, 2007).

12   ND, 14, Redmond's translation used.

13   DE, 20.

Exaggeration derives from a tendency implicit in thinking itself, in accordance with which consciousness gains cognition that concepts in their current use do not exhaust their objects in the way that is implied within a given formation of identity thinking, or conversely that concepts contain implicit possibilities unrealised by objects in their current form, i.e. as grasped by identity thinking in a given formation. Such consciousness is realised in what Adorno calls cognition of the non-identical. This cognition is not non-conceptual. It does not imply attempting to bypass concepts and the identifying element in thinking. Rather, it entails a different *use* of concepts and also a different way of identifying objects through concepts – one that, as I argue below, attempts to drive concepts, through their identification, to the point where they *mis*identify, 'to unseal the nonconceptual with concepts, without making it their equal'.[14] As Adorno also puts it:

> the cognition of the non-identical is dialectical in that this very cognition identifies – in that it identifies to a greater extent and in a different way than identity thinking. It wishes to say what something is, while identity-thinking says what it falls under, what it is an example or representative of, what it consequently is not itself.[15]

In what sense does cognition of the non-identical itself identify, but 'to a greater extent and in a different way than' [*mehr und anders als*] identity thinking? This formulation denotes, in the first place, a difference in the scope and character of a form of thinking which does not aim at identifying some object as an instance or species of some universal kind, but rather attempts to identify that object in its own *essential* nature, as what distinguishes it from other things, and in how that essential nature manifests itself outwardly. Hence, to think non-identity means wishing 'to say what something is, while identity thinking says what it falls under, what it is an example or representative of, what it consequently is

---

14 ND, 10.

15 ND, 149, translation modified.

not itself'.[16] By itself, this is no more philosophically complicated than an invocation of the distinction between appearance and essence, except that it polemically implicates the positivist variant of identity thinking where that distinction is rendered invalid with the presupposition that knowledge as such is exhausted with the knowledge of appearances, i.e. with describing, classifying and organising immediately given facts about objects in the world. Thinking the non-identical thus describes a way of conceptual identification that necessarily *exceeds* the identifications of (positivist) identity thinking in scope – one might say, by 'over-identifying' the objects of cognition – by using concepts directed at what is *essential* in them. Essential is what distinguishes a phenomenon from other phenomena – by definition, this is not itself a fact, but manifests itself *in* facts and makes them into what they are, i.e. facts about *that* specific phenomenon rather than any other.

This enables us to draw a more direct conceptual link to the notion of exaggeration, which features directly in several places as a central moment in Adorno's concept of thinking. 'All thinking is exaggeration, in so far as every thought that is one at all goes beyond its confirmation by the given facts'.[17] Here exaggeration figures as a (necessary or non-accidental) element in thinking – indeed in some sense as synonymous with thinking as such – rather than merely as a rhetorical or psychological technique that may or may not serve in its aid. To exaggerate means to think – but to think 'to a greater extent' and 'in a different way' than identity thinking.

This conception is in no way supposed to unhinge thinking from its necessary relation to facts.[18] Going beyond 'confirmation by the given facts'

---

16 ND, 149, Redmond's translation used.

17 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Opinion Delusion Society', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005a), 108.

18 See ND, 27-29, Redmond's translation used: 'the speculative moment survives in such resistance: what does not allow itself to be governed by the given facts, transcends them even in the closes contact with objects and in the renunciation of sacrosanct transcendence'.

implies not a flight from facts somewhere beyond or behind them, but the recognition that since facts are never *just* facts, factual confirmation cannot be the sole criterion and absolute limit for thinking. It refers to the idea that the scope of thinking encompasses, but also reaches *beyond* the aims of formulating theories that may be confirmed or disconfirmed by supposedly certain, immediately given facts. However cogent such theorising, thinking is pushed to surpass it by reflecting on the supposed certainty of such facts themselves – grasping them not as immediately given but as mediated, conditioned moments of a larger social and historical context and process. Thinking that ventures out beyond the factical does not transcend the facts so much as redefine the terms of its relationship to them – necessarily, at the risk of falling into error in how it does so, but with the consciousness that the fear of error in using concepts not immediately backed up by fact may just be the error itself.[19] Failing such reflection, in a paradigmatic example that may help elucidate Adorno's conception of thinking, classical political economy produced valid theories of the determination of the value of commodities by human labour, but never called into question the very fact that human labour should express itself in the form of value, construing that fact, the product of historically specific social relations, as a transhistorical given.[20]

To see exaggeration as a moment of thinking is to have performed a cognitive reorientation which Adorno describes as a 'second Copernican turn'.[21] This demands that subjectivity not only recognise its own necessary role in producing cognition, as in the first Copernican turn, but also take active responsibility for that role – indeed, Adorno sometimes refers to this as the 'morality of thinking'.[22] The cognising subject can, and in-

19 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 47.

20 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 173-174.

21 Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Subject and Object', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005a), 249.

22 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Ed-

deed should, own up to its cognitive responsibility, as it is only through a certain kind of active intervention that thinking can help the objects of cognition unfold their cognitive potential more fully than they do in various forms of identity thinking. Or else thinking can fail to live up to its responsibility and persist in the subjective limitations on the objects of cognition that *it* imposes or unreflectively legitimates – as in positivism, by resigning itself to establishing or clarifying matters of fact and merely reproducing the world as it appears. Thus in the former case subjectivity takes an active role in the cognitive process in order to give 'priority to the object', and in the latter it disavows its own active role, effectively masking a latent, but all the more inflated subjectivism standing in the way of achieving the very objectivity in cognition professed by such thinking. Hence we can make sense of the following, more well-known passage from *Minima Moralia* that centres the idea of exaggeration in opposition to positivist identity thinking:

> Cowed into wanting to be no more than a provisional abbreviation for the factual matter beneath it, thought loses not only its autonomy in the face of reality, but with it the power to penetrate reality. Only at a remove from life can mental life exist, and thereby engage the empirical. While thought relates to facts and moves by criticising them, its movement depends no less on the maintenance of distance. It expresses exactly what is, precisely because what is is never quite as thought expresses it. Essential to it is an element of exaggeration, of over-shooting the object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual, so that instead of merely reproducing being it can, at once rigorous and free, determine it.[23]

In sum, the need for exaggeration derives from a tendency implicit in thinking itself, whereby thinking exceeds the scope of its own conceptual identifications to gain cognition of the non-identical – it entails using concepts to gain the consciousness that concepts are not perfectly identi-

---

mund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 73 (aphorism 46, 'On the morality of thinking'), see also Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Life Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 49.

23 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 126 (aphorism 82, 'Keeping one's distance').

cal with their objects, that when a certain form of identity thinking says what something 'is', this 'is never quite as thought expresses it'. Though wider in scope than identity thinking, the thinking of non-identity is subject to the same constraints – it too is necessarily fallible, and only conditionally valid.[24] In using concepts to set the immediate facts about a phenomenon in their proper social and historical context and thus grasp them in relation to the essence of that phenomenon, this 'essence' too is 'never quite as thought expresses it' – it both *is* and *is not* essence. What this means will become clearer in the following section.

II. Appearance and (Non-)Essence of the Antagonistic Totality

In Adorno's work, 'essence' and the 'essential' refer to the fundamental structure or law governing the movement of capitalist society as a whole, the process of producing exchange value as this structures society's 'appearance', i.e. the form in which this process appears to individuals, their beliefs about society, and the institutions that arise on the basis of the social process. The 'essence' of capitalist society has no independent reality, it is nothing 'in itself' apart from its realisation in an intrinsically contradictory, antagonistic relationship to social appearances, i.e. insofar as it 'appears in them and conceals itself in them'.[25] The laws of society's 'essence' – above all, the law of value – cannot be talked about without contradiction because they refer to phenomena that are simultaneously 'quasi existent and yet not-existent',[26] objectively valid and yet illusory. Such social 'essence' [*Wesen*] is not the law of a truly rational human organisation but really a 'non-essence', 'fatal mischief [*Unwesen*] of a world arranged so as to degrade men to means of their *sese conservare*, a world that curtails and threatens their life by reproducing it and making them

---

24 Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 89-90.

25 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Introduction', *in The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisbey (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1976a), 37.

26 ND, 168 (Redmond's translation used)

believe that it has this character so as to satisfy their needs'.[27] Value is the product of a relationship masked in its own contradiction – it realises equivalent exchange only by screening out the non-equivalence of the things exchanged. In reducing things to equivalent quantities of abstract labour, value thus appears in the form of a natural, objective property inhering in individual things, even though it is only a social relationship.

Yet such appearance is no mere illusion but an objective illusion – within capitalist society, 'this illusion is what is most real'[28] – or in a Nietzschean vein, such illusion is the most efficacious reality.[29] Value as a thing in itself, as the socially necessary appearance of 'nature' is not a metaphor, it describes the economic law of motion of a society that really decides the fate of individuals over whose heads such law asserts itself with objective, nature-like necessity – and which, for all this, is no immutable law of nature, relying for its continual validation on the very same subjects from whose actions it springs. This is not yet a human society but an unconscious, antagonistic totality standing in opposition to its own members and reducing them to mere 'character masks' of their own social functions, and yet for all this, lacking any reality *sui generis*, surviving 'only through the unity of the functions which its members fulfil'.[30]

The social process embodies a real, objective contradiction – capitalist society both *is* and *isn't* a totality. It *is* a totality insofar as it reproduces the life of its members only by reducing them to mechanistic functions of the social whole, asserting its laws over their heads with the necessity

---

27 ND, 167.

28 '[…] nothing is more powerful than the conceptual mediation which conjures up before human beings the being-for-another as an in-itself, and prevents them from becoming conscious of the conditions under which they live'. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Sociology and Empirical Research, *in The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisbey (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1976b), 80-81.

29 Gillian Rose, 'How is Critical Theory Possible? Theodor W. Adorno and Concept Formation in Sociology', *Political Studies* XXW, no.1 (1976): 81.

30 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Society', trans. Fredric Jameson, *Salmagundi*, 3 nos. 10-11 (1969): 145.

of what appears to be organic nature or blind fate. At the same time, the totality formed by capitalist society is not any stable, coherent, autonomous entity or *sui generis* reality – it is only as real as the continuous reproduction of the same antagonistic principles which both validate society as totality and continuously tear that society and its living members apart. It is an antagonistic totality first in the sense that the very forces of integration through which society maintains its unity, cohesion and continuous survival *as* a totality are at the same time forces of disintegration that threaten the survival of that society and its members. It coheres human beings into a totality for the purpose of preserving and reproducing their life yet fulfills this purpose only in a form that systematically degrades and destroys life by turning human beings into the victims of exploitation, economic crises, environmental destruction, rising social tensions and imperialistic wars.

But the totality is antagonistic also in the sense that it appears in a form antagonistic to human consciousness. The social process conceals its own antagonistic, coercive character in the appearance of invariable nature, and thus coerces human beings twice over, as it were – both objectively, 'over their heads', by means of the social functions to which they are reduced, and subjectively, '*through* them', with their own impulsive, preconscious and sometimes conscious, approval.[31] Under the pressure of a preponderant reality that contradicts their rational interests but which they are powerless to change individually, human beings are forced to accept and to adapt to society in its immediately given historical form of appearance – not only social institutions in their present mode of functioning, but also the ideas about the individual as a free and autonomous subject which necessarily arise on the basis of the social process of production and which are thereby adopted by human beings in their actual conduct and understanding of themselves. In this way, consciousness becomes increasingly capable of only knowing society in its appearance as if it were 'nature', an invariable thing in

---

31 Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 25, 27. Henceforth cited as HF.

itself – and thus to accept as its own the 'constant illusion that reconcil-iation is a reality'.[32]

III. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Exaggeration as Overidentification and Gesture

It is in the context of this conception of the social process as an antago-nistic, self-concealing totality that a more adequate philosophical under-standing of exaggeration and its critical-theoretical function in Adorno (and Horkheimer's) writing may be developed – and in particular, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Exaggeration is not simply a tool the critical theorist picks up on his breaks from being a sober-minded social phi-losopher, or, as one commentator has recently put it, a diversion from a 'faithful description of actual conditions' for the purposes of identifying 'emerging features of social reality that may soon metastasise into the universal if they are permitted to continue … a warning about the world that is still coming into being'.[33] That world has already come into be-ing. It is our own world. Adorno and Horkheimer's exaggerations do not refer to some hypothetical future dystopia. They are indeed addressed as warnings to the future, but the force of their theoretical eloquence is drawn from the present, as well as the recent and remote past seen in the light of the present – less Huxley than the *Angelus Novus*. The tendencies the exaggerations of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* give conceptual shape to are already universally actualised and necessitated by contemporary so-cial reality – not in an absolute sense but in the form of an antagonism, as an objective illusion that rules over and through social subjects.

The attempt by social subjects to name such objective illusions is not a flight from empirical reality. It is no less fallible but potentially more faithful to such reality than any factual description or testable hypothesis which – shorn of a theoretical outlook on society as a whole – conceals its antagonistic tendencies. Such tendencies made themselves directly manifest in the real catastrophe Adorno and Horkheimer had the for-

---

32 HF, 72.

33 Gordon, *A Precarious Happiness*, 28-29.

tune to survive. The concrete empirical 'proof' for many of their claims was therefore supplied not in simulated experimental conditions but by the real historical experience of catastrophe, present as well as past. Their exaggerations in words bore testimony to a real catastrophe, the fateful 'exaggeration' of class history itself, the 'state of emergency' which is 'not the exception but the rule' and is thus only apparently an exaggeration or emergency – as Walter Benjamin, for whom such apparent emergency proved deadly, taught the authors of the *Dialectic*.[34] In this sense, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* effectively rearticulates a Marxist theorisation of capitalist crisis as the most immediate, direct manifestation of the antagonistic dynamics of capitalist social development, as they come more fully and fatefully into view than in times of relative stability.[35]

When Adorno and Horkheimer speak of 'totalitarian Enlightenment', 'total society', the 'antireason of totalitarian capitalism', the individual 'entirely nullified in the face of the economic powers', and the 'context of delusion',[36] they are not all of a sudden lapsing into a merely rhetorical or metaphorical way of speaking. Rather, the hyperbolic language of totality is the medium for a mode of thinking that self-consciously resists limiting itself to cataloguing aspects of society's appearance and attempts to say what society *essentially* is. Exaggeration is thus, in the first place, a tool of social-theoretical cognition – it enables a conceptualisation of capitalist society as a quasi-natural, seemingly self-maintaining whole, an 'organic totality' that reproduces itself over and through the heads of its members. It is in this same vein that Adorno would later defend a 'naturalistic' and 'scientistic' approach in sociology of the sort typified by Emile Durkheim's work, as opposed

---

34 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).

35 See Simon Clarke, *Marx's Theory of Crisis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971 [1923]), 74-75, and Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 23.

36 DE, 243.

to a more 'humanistic' sociology that conceives the study of society as a 'cultural science'.[37] Adorno holds that Durkheim's conception of society as an overpowering organic totality, a subjectless whole into which the power of social individuals is alienated, is an empirically accurate description of the quasi-natural character of the social process.[38] Durkheim's scientistic methodology prevents him from relating this description to a historically specific mode of production and thereby from theoretically grasping its historically transitory character. Notwithstanding this, Adorno argues that Durkheim's conception of society as an organic totality is still more empirically faithful to the actual quasi-natural character of capitalist social reality than a 'humanistic' approach which explains social action as the expression of the free will of social individuals and thereby only *obscures* from view the underlying social process and the actually reified character of capitalist social institutions in their real primacy over human beings.[39]

In his lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Alexandre Kojève comments that the only flaw of Spinoza's otherwise perfect philosophical system of the totality of God as substance is that no human being could have written it. Spinoza 'must *be* God from all eternity in order to be able to think and write the *Ethics* … and this, obviously, is the height of absurdity: to

---

37 'Sociology is not a cultural science (*Geisteswissenschaft*). Insofar as the obduracy of society continually reduces human beings to objects and transforms their condition into 'second nature', methods which find it guilty of doing just this are not sacrilegious. The lack of freedom in the methods serves freedom by attesting wordlessly to the predominant lack of freedom', in Adorno, 'Sociology and Empirical Research', 74.

38 Arvi Särkelä (2020), 'Negative Organicism: Adorno, Emerson, and the Idea of a Disclosing Critique of Society.' *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* 21 no. 3 (2020), 222-239. See also Särkelä's contribution in the present volume.

39 Adorno, 'Sociology and Empirical Research', 73-74, and Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science* (London: Verso, 1978), 103, 131. Adorno criticised Weber's 'sociological subjectivism' on such grounds. In a similar vein, he compares Simmel's culturalist sociology with Hegel's idealist theory of the objective nature of history, and argues that this latter 'has a far greater realism than Simmel's in the sense that this objectivity has a far greater validity in actuality', in Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 22.

take Spinoza seriously is actually to be – or to become – mad'.[40] If we took Adorno and Horkheimer's claims seriously, does this not also commit us to madness? Only insofar as a genuinely critical thinking would need to reflect within its own conceptual movement the madness of the social reality which it is trying to expose, the absurdity of an antagonistic, self-concealing, topsy-turvy world. As I argued in the first section: exaggeration, like all thinking, uses concepts to 'identify' objects, to predicate something of them, but it drives concepts to the point of extreme identification with objects, it 'over-identifies' them with their concepts in order to demonstrate that the more the object is itself, the more it is ultimately *not* itself, forcing the object to reveal its antagonistic, disavowed dependency on what it resists and excludes. As a distinct type of conceptual practice, exaggeration demonstrates the way in which identification *mis*-identifies.

With this in mind we may begin to see why and how many of Adorno and Horkheimer's claims should function as exaggerations in the way just outlined. Describing capitalist society as an organic, quasi-natural totality allows a realistic diagnosis of the real, functional primacy the social process has over human beings. But if this primacy were *absolute* – if the laws of social motion dominated social institutions and individual behaviour to such an extent as to prevent any cognition of them other than in their current 'appearance', i.e. in their present mode of functioning – this could not be known by any consciousness nor communicated in language.[41] To that extent, by the theory's own lights, so long as we can still talk about it, so long as the words to describe the predicament are not entirely lacking, the reification of society and consciousness cannot be total.[42] If the diagnosis of the totality is understood in a literal sense then its very statement amounts to a performative contradiction. Habermas rightly pointed this out, but he was right for the wrong rea-

---

40 Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980 [1947]), 120.

41 Rose, *The Melancholy Science*.

42 Freyenhagen, 'The Linguistic Turn'.

sons – putting the emphasis on the contradiction rather than on its philo-
sophical performance – and therefore ultimately quite wrong.[43] Reading
literally, however, is necessary to an extent, because the contradiction
such reading performs is inseparable from Adorno and Horkheimer's
thinking as exaggeration – a thinking of non-identity that aims at provid-
ing an account of how identification *mis*identifies. As Adorno was to put
it in *Minima Moralia*, 'the dialectic advances by way of extremes, driving
thoughts with the utmost consequentiality to the point where they turn
back on themselves, instead of qualifying them'.[44]

In and through the very speech act of exaggerating that drives the
thought of society as a totality into performative contradiction with it-
self, forcing that thought turn back on itself, thinking as exaggeration
not only provides a conception of society as totality, but simultaneously
demonstrates that this totality is not total but antagonistic, self-contra-
dictory, full of necessarily irresolvable conflicts, unbridgeable inconsis-
tencies, unhealable wounds. It demonstrates that while the totality is
real and not merely metaphorical, its primacy over human subjects is
not absolute but historically conditioned through their very own actions,
that its law is not immutably natural but 'only' the socially constituted,
objective illusion of nature. Adorno and Horkheimer's claims are neither
set in stone nor as fickle as the wind. They are the articulated, conceptu-
ally rigorous expression of a self-contradictory reality. As esoteric as it
sounds, it is in the form of a performative self-contradiction, an internal-
ly aporetic conceptual construct, that thinking as exaggeration may be
able to faithfully convey the phantom-like 'essence' of the social process
that can only manifest itself in a self-contradictory form, as the objective
illusion of a social 'nature' that is both quasi-existent and non-existent,
'both an actuality and at the same time a socially necessary illusion'.[45]

Does doing justice to an aporetic philosophy not require an aporetic

---

43 Fabian Freyenhagen, F, 'Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on Di-
    alectic of Enlightenment', *Res Philosophica,* 101 no. 2: 245-269.

44 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 86 (Aphorism 51 'Memento).

45 HF, 118.

approach to reading? The history of the reception of the *Dialectic* makes
it plain to see this hasn't been quite so self-evident as a reading strategy.
Adorno once remarked that 'dialectical knowledge is taken all too liter-
ally by its opponents'.[46] Friends of the dialectic should not fall into the
no less misleading temptation of reading too figuratively, either. Gillian
Rose briefly drew attention to this in her discussion of Adorno's philos-
ophy as a search for style – if someone is asking us not to take him too
literally, we should presumably 'not take the advice to take him liter-
ally, literally'.[47] There are no *a priori* rules to consult in deciding when
to read what part of a text literally and when not, but indirect signs are
almost always present in the language, either through the way a specific
hyperbolic utterance sabotages itself, or through other clues in the text.
Nevertheless, to take the exaggerations of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seri-
ously and to an extent, literally, does not mean to read them as the con-
clusive statements of a first (or last) philosophy. The point is that by tak-
ing Adorno and Horkheimer's claims literally, one allows the concepts
and meanings already designated in them to undermine themselves and
unlock their own secret ambiguities in the most emphatic manner – by
themselves. This might just be what enables that 'fallible yet immedi-
ate intellectual experience of the essential and inessential'.[48] A reading
disposition enabling such an intellectual experience entails an openness
and receptivity, following the text's movement of misidentifying ove-
ridentification and not letting it be cut short by the traditional habits of a
philosophical understanding accustomed to see in conceptual ambiguity
and contradiction either the mark of poor thinking or mere metaphor. In
line with the idea that 'philosophy is the most serious of things, but then
again it is not all that serious', such a reading would be aporetic in its
own movement – serious but ultimately not all that serious, neither too
literal nor too figurative.[49]

---

46 Adorno, 'Introduction', in *The Positivist Dispute*, 35.

47 Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 22.

48 ND, 169, Redmond's translation used.

49 ND, 14.

In his reading of Kafka, Adorno comes close to articulating the idea for such aporetic self-divestiture of language as an explicit hermeneutic principle. Against the temptation to read every ambiguity in Kafka as a symbol of metaphysical depth that turns out eventually to be rather too shallow, Adorno argues that Kafka sought to construct a form of literary expression which produces ambiguity not by symbolism but through the disenchanted literalness of language. In Kafka, 'each sentence is literal and each signifies'.[50] And yet, it is through this very literal, coldly signifying language that Kafka lays bare the failure of signification to hit its target, resulting in an art that is 'constantly obscuring and revoking itself'.[51] To unlock the subversive power of such a language in opposition to itself, the rule is that we 'take everything literally, cover up nothing with concepts invoked from above'.[52] The insistence on the principle of literalness is supposed to invert the 'historical relation of concept and gesture' in the experience of reading – language driven to the limits of conceptual signification thereby transpires in its gestural function, uncovering gestures as 'the traces of experiences covered over by signification'.[53] In this way, a literal reading follows a conceptual movement as this unlocks layers of experience incommensurable to conceptuality within the given conceptual formation[54] – using the very gesture of thinking as exaggeration, of performing the misidentification of identity, to show what the concept is resistant to saying. Adorno also put much stock in Hegel's idea of philosophy as 'pure onlooking' from the introduction to the *Phenomenology*, and expanded it into a criterion for how to read dialectical philosophy that would not be out of place when approaching the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 'one must read Hegel by describing along with him the curves of his intellectual movement, by playing his ideas

---

50 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983), 246.

51 Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 247.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 249.

54 Roger Foster, 'Adorno on Kafka: Interpreting the Grimace on the Face of Truth', *New German Critique* 118, Vol. 40, No.1 (Winter 2013): 186.

with the speculative ear as though they were musical notes'.[55] This way, one may be able to experience the 'significative character' of dialectical writing as this 'recedes in favour of a mimetic one, a kind of gestural or curvilinear writing strangely at odds with the solemn claims of reason that Hegel inherited from Kant and the Enlightenment.'.[56]

We are now in a position to clarify in what sense thinking as exaggeration not only identifies 'to a greater extent' but also 'in a different way' than identity thinking – namely, in helping language fulfil its ineliminable mimetic or gestural function which identity thinking, particularly within capitalist relations of production, tends systematically but vainly to expunge from language by reducing language to its classificatory, signifying function.[57] Such 'mimesis', or as Adorno also calls it, 'affinity' is not limited to art and is not to be construed as something non-conceptual. Rather than an attempt to get rid of predicative judgment and 'aestheticize' philosophy, the concrete meaning of mimesis or affinity in this context is determinate negation. As Adorno puts it, '[a]ffinity is not a remnant which cognition hands us after the identifying schemata of the categorial machinery have been eliminated. Rather, affinity is the determinate negation of those schemata'.[58] Mimesis or affinity, the 'element of identification *with* the thing itself – as opposed to identification *of* the thing itself',[59] amounts to the attempt to 'give an account of what reason is *like*', and in the course of so doing, determinately negate it by showing how conceptual identification misidentifies.[60]

55 Theodor W. Adorno, '*Skoteinos*, or How to Read Hegel', in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. S. W. Nicholsen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993), 123.

56 Adorno, '*Skoteinos*', 122.

57 In the words of Horkheimer '[p]hilosophy helps man to allay his fears by helping language to fulfil its genuine mimetic function, its mission of mirroring the natural tendencies'. Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London: Bloombsury, 2013), 127. This part of the argument is also influenced particularly by Freyenhagen's 'The Linguistic Turn'.

58 ND, 178.

59 Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 92.

60 Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998),

The gestural or mimetic dimension of Adorno and Horkheimer's exaggerations could be philosophised about in various ways. One is Särkelä's idea of an exemplary disclosure that, in the very same act of exposing the organic character of the social process, draws attention back to the social critic and 'her exemplary way of letting herself be affected by society and of channelling that affect back against it in a circular gesture', and thus, by means of exaggeration, 'seeks to transform "the affect of powerlessness" into conscious resistance to reified second nature'.[61] In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the prototypical figure for such exemplary transformation of powerlessness into conscious resistance to 'nature' is the first rational subject, Homer's Odysseus. The cunning of Odysseus in his struggle with myth (and in an equivalent sense, that of Homer) can thus be read as a concrete micrological model for the concept of thinking as exaggeration I have been developing in this paper.

For Odysseus, exaggeration was no luxury but a matter of self-preservation. Adorno and Horkheimer mention that the figure of the sea adventurer was likely modelled on the ancient merchant capitalist at a time of merely episodic commodity exchange.[62] According to Marx, the economic behaviour of the merchant capitalist consists in mediating between producer and consumer, comparing prices and pocketing the difference, establishing equivalence via bodily movement – 'originally, merely the mediating movement between extremes which it does not control and between premises it does not create'.[63] From an economic point of view, Odysseus's adventurous behaviour of venturing outside the domestic economy bears a fundamentally irrational aspect in the face of the prevailing traditional economic forms. This real historical struggle is reinterpreted by Adorno and Horkheimer back into the *Odyssey* as the struggle between a frail, (physically) weak self as it is confronted by an overpowering pre-ex-

179.

61 Särkelä, 'Negative Organicism', 232.

62 DE, 48.

63 Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, vol. III* (London: Penguin, 1992), 447.

isting context of mythical, fateful inevitability.[64] In the context of such un-equal struggle, the 'rational universality' represented by the self can only preserve itself from the forces that bear down upon it in a form that ap-pears irrational from the point of view of the dominant rationality of myth – as an exception to the mythic law.[65] Thus Odysseus 'satisfies the legal statutes, but in such a way that by conceding its power, he deprives them of it'.[66] This is the formula of Odysseus's cunning in his struggle against myth – the mind, 'by submissively embracing nature, renders to nature what is hers and thereby cheats her'.[67] Cunning entails a behaviour of mimesis or mimicry. Odysseus recognises the irrationality of the dominant social form, the 'stupidity of ritual', but being unable to change it, 'he has to accept as a given reality the sacrificial ceremony in which he is repeated-ly caught up'.[68] Odysseus's behaviour is intelligible as a form of exagger-ation. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, who affirm the primacy of the social totality through exaggeration, only in order to undermine it more effec-tively, so also Odysseus' submissive, mimetic embrace of myth imitates its rigidity and 'admits defeat in advance', but only in order to reflect back on the senselessness of myth – 'The ritual remains accepted, its letter is strictly observed. But its now senseless judgment refutes itself'.[69]

Conclusion

If, unlike Spinoza, thinking is to account for its own conditions of possi-bility within the totality of the world, take seriously the idea that it too is part of that world and 'reflect on its own guilt' in reproducing it,[70] then it may find itself deprived of ordinary ways of using concepts and words.[71]

---

64 DE, 45-47.

65 DE, 46.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 45.

68 Ibid., 44.

69 Ibid., 45, 44.

70 Ibid., xvi.

71 DE., xv: '[I]f public life has reached a state in which thought is being turned inescapably into a commodity and language into celebration of the commod-

For such thinking, as I have argued in this paper, exaggeration is a way of using language that gives intellectual expression to the 'objectivity that weighs upon the subject,[72] and simultaneously protests such objectivity by calling its metaphysical necessity into question. Since the world is no ontological substance, but an antagonistic social whole that survives in and through the very antagonisms it is unable to resolve, it always leaves open cracks and pores.

Thus, even in a text as apparently bleak as the *Dialectic*, there is no lack of words and concepts that speak directly about the non-identity of the world with what it appears and claims to be, and about the possibility of a different world. Instances of this are scattered throughout the text, starting from the crucial remarks about the practical necessity of enlightenment's reflection on its own self-destructive character from the 1944/1947 Preface, right until the promissory ending of the last completed chapter, which clams that '[e]nlightenment itself, having mastered itself, and assumed its own power, could break through the limits of enlightenment'.[73] This includes a substantive, if little discussed section at the end of the first chapter that expounds the idea of the capitalist social totality as a historical, inherently transformable formation, whose primacy over social subjects is a 'logical consequence of industrial society'.[74] and yet such 'logical necessity is not conclusive' but 'remans tied to domination',[75] it is only necessary for reproducing those same historical

---

ity, the attempt to trace the sources of this degradation must refuse obedience to the current linguistic and intellectual demands before it is rendered entirely futile by the consequence of those demands for world history … In reflecting on its own guilt, therefore, thought finds itself deprived not only of the affirmative reference to science and everyday phenomena but also of the conceptual language of opposition. No terms are available which do not tend toward complicity with the prevailing intellectual trends, and what threadbare language cannot achieve on its own is precisely made good by the social machinery'

72 ND, 17-18.

73 DE, 172.

74 DE, 29.

75 Ibid.

relationships of domination and antagonism that make up the totality.[76] Such remarks serve as clues for how to read Adorno and Horkheimer's exaggerations.

Exaggerated thoughts are sharp enough to pierce holes through the façade of the social totality, but even and especially at their most extreme, theirs is the sharpness of what is broken down and shattered into pieces. Adorno and Horkheimer therefore completed the *Philosophische Fragmente* by assembling their exaggerations as fragments into a montage – or as Adorno once wrote in a letter to Horkheimer, as a 'gesture composed of concepts'.[77] Their cunning gesture of overidentification with the social totality for the sake of convicting it of its own untruth doesn't call for a much more elaborate cryptography than did the straight-faced irony of Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. But if Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophical language is less accessible to us, this is not simply because the passage of time has blunted its expressive force. It is also a problem of a history of poor interpretations that take for granted unwarranted assumptions about how we are supposed to write and read. Our own world increasingly resembles the world in which Adorno and Horkheimer wrote – indeed, it never essentially changed. This is a good time to learn how to read them anew.[78]

---

76 Other explicit clues include references to enlightenment's 'anti-authoritarian tendency, which communicates, if only subterraneously, with the utopia contained in the concept of reason' (DE, 172) and – particularly significant for the reading proposed here, their arguments about the originally dialectical character of language and concepts being used to express that something is 'at the same time itself and something other than itself, identical and not identical' (DE, 11).

77 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel [Correspondence],* volume 2 (1938-1944) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 200. See also Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, trans. James Phillips (London: Continuum, 2004), 15-28. On *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a form of philosophical montage, see the contribution by Särkelä in this volume.

78 I wish to thank Fabian Freyenhagen, Chris Fisher, Matteo Falomi, Henri Böschen and the participants in the '*Dialectic of Enlightenment* at 80 Seminar Series' for the comments they made on an earlier draft of this article or during its drafting. It draws in part on arguments I first presented in my doctoral thesis, "Outwitting Enlightenment with Words: Philosophical Style, Critique

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. (1969), 'Society', trans. Fredric Jameson. *Salmagundi*, 3 (10-11): 144-153.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1973), *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Edwin B. Ashton. London: Routledge.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1976a), 'Introduction', in Adorno Theodor W. et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, Trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby, 1-68. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1976b), 'Sociology and Empirical Research' in Adorno Theodor W. et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby, 68-87. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1983), 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber, 243-271. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1993), 'Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel', in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Samuel W. Nicholsen, 89-148. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. (2005a), *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. (2005b), *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso.

Adorno, Theodor W. (2006), *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. (2008), *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. and Horkheimer, Max (2004). *Briefwechsel* [Correspondence], volume 2 (1938-1944). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Benjamin, Walter (1996), 'On the Concept of History', in M. Bullock and

M. W. Jennings (eds.) *Selected Writings. Volume 4: 1938-1940*, 389-400. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Bernstein, Jay M. (2004), 'Mimetic Rationality and Material Inference: Adorno and Brandom'. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 58, no. 227: 7-23.

Clarke, Simon (1994), *Marx's Theory of Crisis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foster, Richard (2013), 'Adorno on Kafka: Interpreting the Grimace on the Face of Truth', *New German Critique*, 40 (1): 175-198.

Düttmann, Alexander G. (2007), *Philosophy of Exaggeration*. Translated by James Phillips. London: Continuum.

Freyenhagen, Fabian (2013), *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Life Less Wrongly*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Freyenhagen, Fabian (2023), 'The Linguistic Turn in the Early Frankfurt School: Horkheimer and Adorno', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (1): 127-148.

Freyenhagen, Fabian (2024), 'Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on Dialectic of Enlightenment', *Res Philosophica*, vol. 101 (2): 245-269.

Gordon, Peter (2023), *A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1987), 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, 106-130. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1982), 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading Dialectic of Enlightenment', *New German Critique*, no. 26, Critical Theory and Modernity (Spring - Summer 1982): 13-30.

Habermas, Jürgen (1984 [1963]), 'Theodor W. Adorno: Ein philosophierender Intellektueller', in *Philosophisch–politische Profile*, 160-166. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1977), *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. (2002 [1944/1947]), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund F. N. Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Honneth, Axel (2000), 'The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism', *Constellations* 7 (1): 116-127.

Jarvis, Simon (1998), *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kojève, Alexandre (1980 [1947]), *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Lukács, Georg (1971 [1923]), *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Marx, Karl (1990), *Capital*, Vol I, trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin.

Marx, Karl (1992), *Capital*, vol. III, trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin.

Rose, Gillian (1976), 'How is Critical Theory Possible? Theodor W. Adorno and Concept Formation in Sociology', in *Political Studies*, Vol. XXIV, (1): 69-85.

Rose, Gillian (1978), *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. London: Verso.

Schweppenhäuser, Hartmut (1986), 'The Concept of Language and Linguistic Presentation in Horkheimer and Adorno', trans. James Crane, available online at https://ctwgwebsite.github.io/blog/2024/language/.

Särkelä, Arvi (2020), 'Negative Organicism: Adorno, Emerson, and the Idea of a Disclosing Critique of Society', *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* 21 (3): 222-239.

Resisting Resistance
Reflexivity and Therapy in Adorno's
The Essay as Form [1]

Matteo Falomi[2]

Abstract. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is often presented as a second reflection on Enlightenment thinking in a specific textual form: deploying a constellation of essays. What if anything makes the essay suitable for the task of critical (self-) reflection? The article investigates this by working through a paradox arising from Adorno's approach in one of his later texts, 'The Essay as Form' (1958). In this text, Adorno claims that we have an intellectual resistance to the essay form: we dismiss the essay as a vehicle for serious thinking. Adorno's attempt to reha-bilitate the essay, however, itself takes the form of an essay. But then, how can his attempt succeed? It seems that Adorno's approach is likely to intensify the resistance it wishes to dispel. I tackle this paradox, first of all, by reconstructing Adorno's diagnosis of our resistance towards the essay, arguing that its roots lie in Enlightenment thinking. For this reason, Adorno's solution cannot lie in show-

2   Matteo Falomi is Assegnista di Ricerca (Senior Research Officer) at Sapienza Università di Roma, where he is working in the context of the PRIN research project *Towards the History of the Heterodox Tradition in Analytic Philosophy*. He has previously held post-doctoral appointments at Oxford and the Universi-ty of Essex, where he has also worked as Associate Lecturer. He has written extensively on Wittgenstein and on Cavell, publishing articles on Moral Per-fectionism, on the relation between Wittgenstein and ethics, on the concept of rationality, on democratic theory, on philosophy and literature, and on the history of analytic philosophy. He is currently working on Cavell's account of self-determination and on the relationship between Marxism and Moral Perfectionism.

ing that the essay is respectable from the perspective of available intellectual canons: this would only have the effect of validating the sources of the resistance. Adorno cannot, on the other hand, simply position himself outside these canons, as that would also leave the resistance untouched. If Adorno cannot overcome resistance against the essay either from outside, or from inside, Enlightenment thinking, how can this resistance be overcome at all? In the second half of my essay, I suggest that Adorno's therapeutic approach relies on mobilizing the readers' resistance against themselves. The self-referential presentation adopted by Adorno is, I argue, functional to this approach: the fact that Adorno is writing an essay about the essay form will provoke resistance to his own text; but this very fact will also enable the content of Adorno's essay to double down as a set of instructions to the reader, thus enabling the reorientation of the resistance. I illustrate this point through a reading of Adorno's discussion of overinterpretation.

1. Introduction

There is an air of paradox about Adorno's *The Essay as Form*.[3] The text, as is sometimes noted, is an essay about the essay form: Adorno is not only talking about the form, but exemplifying it or illustrating it.[4] On the other hand, Adorno remarks that there is a "resistance" (p. 152) against the essay form, and his talk of resistance suggests that we have an interest in overcoming it. But, then, how can Adorno's text contribute to this overcoming? If we have a resistance against essays, how can this resistance be defused by *reading* an essay? Wouldn't this strategy simply intensify the resistance? It might seem that, if we struggle to take the essay form seriously to begin with, then we will, *a fortiori*, struggle to take seriously Adorno's essayistic defense of the essay form.[5]

---

3 All in-text page numbers refer to T. W. Adorno, *The Essay as Form*, translated by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, in *New German Critique*, No. 32, pp. 151–171, 1984.

4 See, for instance, T. R. Kray, "More Dialectical than the Dialectic: Exemplarity in Theodor W. Adorno's The Essay as Form", in *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 144(1), pp. 30–45, 2018, and Antonia Birnbaum, "The Obscure Object of Transdisciplinarity", in *Radical Philosophy*, n. 198, July–August 2016, pp. 15–24.

5 This is a version of what Stanley Cavell has labelled "the paradox of reading" (see, for instance, S. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, pp. 115ff., and *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, pp. 57ff.). While I am not developing the connection with Cavell here, both the framing of the problem and the specific resolution I propose are

I propose, in what follows, to take this (apparent) paradox as a guide to reading Adorno's *The Essay as Form*. My claim will be that the text is fully aware of this paradox and that one of its burdens is to provide a way out of it: Adorno's text can be read as attempting to defuse the reader's resistance to the essay; and Adorno deploys, as a medium of this defusing, precisely the resistance that the essay is eliciting. I take it that this therapeutic ambition is outlined by Adorno when he writes: "The essay would like to cure thought of its arbitrariness by taking arbitrariness reflectively into its own procedure instead of masking it as spontaneity" (p. 166). If the resistance against the essay is arbitrary, then the suggestion is that Adorno – by writing an essay – is curing our thought by deploying this arbitrary resistance against itself.

One might be sceptical about this suggestion. A source of scepticism will perhaps lie in the sense that the paradox I have outlined is not really a compelling one. If I dislike, say, sci-fi, it is not obvious that being exposed to more sci-fi novels will intensify my dislike: perhaps I just didn't encounter good instances of the genre? Similarly, one might think, our dislike of the essay form might be mellowed, rather than exacerbated, by the essay Adorno is producing. This objection prompts me to specify that Adorno's talk of "resistance" does not refer, in my reading, to a mere distaste for the essay form. The resistance manifests itself, rather, as an unwillingness to take the essay seriously as a vehicle for thought. We might, accordingly, enjoy essays well enough: but we resist (hence, somehow entertain) the sense that the essay's procedures might constitute a mode of thinking. As Adorno puts the point: "the academic guild only has patience for philosophy that dresses itself up with the nobility of the universal, the everlasting, and today – when possible – with the primal" (p. 151); but since the essay form works against these expectations, then the genre is "classed among the oddities" (p. 152). Now, if the problem is that we struggle to take the essay seriously, it is unclear how reading Adorno's *essay* might make us change our mind. After all,

---

deeply indebted to Cavell's handling of the "paradox of reading" in the context of his work on Moral Perfectionism.

we would need to take seriously Adorno's claim that the essay ought to be taken seriously: but if this claim is defended through procedures that are themselves essayistic, how we can take this claim to seriousness seriously? In this sense, I am suggesting, the attempt to write an essay to dislodge a resistance against the essay is, at least *prima facie*, paradoxical.

Scepticism might, at this stage, shift from my suggestion that Adorno's approach is paradoxical to my claim that this paradoxical approach is really called for. That is, even if I am right about the nature of the resistance Adorno is describing, one might feel that Adorno is needlessly courting a paradox by writing an *essay* about this resistance. If this resistance is, as Adorno suggests, arbitrary, wouldn't it make better sense to show why it is arbitrary in a more argumentative, or anyway intellectually palatable, form? The sensible approach here would be to step back from this resistance and assess whether we have good reasons to entertain it: if Adorno could write a respectable argument in support of the conclusion that the essay ought to be taken seriously, then surely there wouldn't be any problem in taking *Adorno*'s argument seriously. Why opting instead for "taking arbitrariness reflectively into [one's] own procedure" – i.e. for mobilizing arbitrariness as part of one's method? Why running the risk of inciting, in this way, precisely the dismissal one is trying to defuse?

In order to see why Adorno's approach is fitting, we will need to say more about the source of the resistance against the essay form Adorno is locating: we will need, in other words, to spell out in a bit more in detail Adorno's diagnosis of the roots of our dismissal of the essay. In what follows, I will start by tackling this "diagnostic question" first. This will also help us to clarify why the question of the essay matters at all. The issue, as it will emerge, is not merely to rehabilitate the intellectual standing of a specific literary form: on the contrary, the essay illustrates a mode of thinking that runs counter to the Enlightenment's drive towards totality and domination; in this sense, our resistance to the essay is symptomatic of this fundamental orientation. Once Adorno's diagnosis is in view, I will move to address the "therapeutic question": if it is true that one of Adorno's aims is to dispel the reader's "re-

sistance" against the essay, then how is this aim achieved? As I said, my suggestion will be that the self-referential nature of Adorno's attempt is not a hindrance to but a catalyst of the therapeutic procedure envisaged in *The Essay as Form*. Adorno can defuse our resistance to the essay precisely *by* writing an essay: the fact that Adorno's own text elicits the resistance it is trying to defuse is an essential aspect of its attempt to undo them. This suggestion will be substantiated through a close reading of a representative passage – namely, Adorno's discussion of the problematic of "overinterpreting" in the context of the essay form. I will not try, however, to provide a general interpretation of *The Essay as Form*, or to locate my sketches more systematically into the wider context of Adorno's philosophy. My hope is simply to outline a blueprint for a more sustained reading of the text's therapeutic aims.

2. The Diagnostic Question

Adorno mentions the notion of resistance explicitly only once in *The Essay as Form*. However, I will assume that the concept (in something like the underanalyzed form that I have outlined above) plays a pervasive role in Adorno's characterizations of the essay. To give a sense of how the concept looms large in the text, here is a list of some of the "offspring of resentment" (p. 153) located by Adorno:

1. The essay is a "hybrid" (p. 151): it illustrates (in Lukács's words) a "primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics, and art" (p. 151). It mixes "aesthetic autonomy" and a "claim to truth free from aesthetic semblance" (p. 153). In this sense, it neither "achieves something scientifically" nor "creates something artistically" (p. 152).

2. The essay focuses on "specific, culturally determined objects", instead of articulating on "the universal, the everlasting, and […] the primal" (p. 151). Its starting point is, accordingly, arbitrary or "random" (p. 159).

3. The essay does not attempt a systematic account of its object, but proposes a "fragmentary" (p. 159) understanding of its (already contingent) subject matter. There is, for this reason, arbitrariness both at the level of starting point and at the level of ending point: "its concepts are

neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle" (p. 152).

4. The essay evokes, in this sense, a form of "childlike freedom" (p. 152): its procedure seems whimsical or irresponsible, based on "luck and play" (p. 152).

5. The essay "overinterprets" its objects: for instance, it tends to go beyond the author's intentions in reading a text (p. 153).

6. The essay makes the form essential to the content, and to the extent it goes against the positivist approach that insist on their separation: "Presentation should be conventional, not demanded by the matter itself. Every impulse of expression – as far as the instinct of scientific purism is concerned – endangers an objectivity that is said to spring forth after the subtraction of the subject" (p. 153).

7. For the same reason, the essay also fails as an art form: it acquires "an aesthetic autonomy that is easily criticized as simply borrowed from art" (p. 153).

8. The essay "rescues a sophistic element", by making pleasure and happiness relevant in the search for truth (pp. 168–169).

9. The essay makes both "individual experience" and "history" essential to the search for truth, i.e. by making our concepts depend on factual considerations (pp. 156–7).

This is, of course, merely a list, and as such fails to do justice to one of Adorno's most insistent characterizations of the essay form: namely, that it works by juxtaposition ("it co-ordinates elements, rather than subordinating them", p. 170). For this reason, rather than considering these themes in isolation, one should attend to the ways in which they are interwoven (as with motifs in a carpet; p. 160). As far as lists go, this one is also hardly exhaustive. It might, at any rate, enable us to make a few observations about the quality and origin of the resistance Adorno is diagnosing here.

Scepticism towards the essay, as anticipated, takes the form of disqualifying the essay's intellectual credentials. The dismissal is invited by the sense that the essay form seems, illegitimately, to claim some power

to disclose the truth (it is because of its insistence on its own philosophical standing that the essay cannot qualify as a *bona fide* art form either). This rejection does not come from specific cultural quarters. Every established intellectual tradition, on the contrary, seems to find its own reason for marginalizing the essay form: the essay is not systematic (thus, it does not fit the canon of seriousness of the tradition of German idealism); it is not argumentative (thus, it does not seem rigorous from the "positivist" perspective of the budding analytic philosophy); it is not interested in the "primal" but dwells on the surface of cultural phenomena (thus, it does not speak the language of Heideggerian phenomenology); it does not aim to provide serious textual exegesis but "overinterprets" (hence, it is bound to irk hermeneutical sensibilities); and so forth. Furthermore, as one would expect from Adorno, the repression of the essay is not merely a cultural phenomenon but a manifestation of "false sociality" (p. 159): whatever inspires the dismissal of the essay, it is not confined to the intellectual sphere but has pervaded the whole fabric of social organization.

These two points, taken together, would suggest that the resistance harks back, again unsurprisingly, to the totalizing process that Adorno and Horkheimer call the "Enlightenment". The interpretation would be confirmed by a cursory look at the specific content of the resistance. The essay hits a nerve, because it seems to go against the grain of the tendency towards disenchantment that, for Adorno and Horkheimer, characterizes enlightened thinking.[6] The essay seems, indeed, to recommend our subjective modes of response (what Wittgenstein would call our "forms of life") as providing a path to truth.[7] The essay's procedures

---

6 Compare the opening paragraph of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge" (T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, p. 1).

7 On the idea of separation between reason and "forms of life", see, in particular, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 70–71. I am implicitly relying here on Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life (see, for instance, S. Cavell, "Declining Decline" in his *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990). See also, on the recurrence of these themes in Adorno's account of the essay, Simon Jarvis, *Adorno. A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, New York, 1988,

are dictated, as Adorno emphasizes, by whatever catches one's attention – our senses of pleasure, surprise, indignation, salience, anxiety, humor, fascination, etc. are essential to compose or understand an essay. It is because the essay presents similar perceptions as enabling a disclosure of how things are that the essay form disturbs Enlightenment thinking[8]. This mode of thinking requires these responses to be carefully expunged from one's assessment of reality as sources of subjective distortion: this "anthropomorphism"[9] can only interfere with the project of a complete and systematic domination of nature (in this sense, as Adorno puts it in *The Essay as Form*, the "praxis" of "society's false sociality" is to "eliminate" "nature", p. 159). The essay's reliance on responses that appear whimsical, subjective or improvisatory stands in sharp contrast with the Enlightenment's desire to present the possibilities of thought as a closed, fully controllable, totality. The essay form, in this sense, is bound to appear upsetting to a mode of thought aimed at such domination.[10]

---

pp. 137–140.

8   The tension between the essay form and Enlightenment thinking raises the question of why the genre emerges during the Enlightenment period and becomes the preferred vehicle for key Enlightenment figures. This question is foreshadowed by Adorno himself, who notes that Bacon is an "essayist" despite his reliance on "method" (p. 157).

9   Compare *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 4: "Enlightenment has always regarded anthropomorphism, the projection of subjective properties onto nature, as the basis of myth".

10   This feature of Adorno's account implicitly contrasts with the account of the essay recently defended by Raymond Geuss in his "Montaigne and the Essay" (in his *Seeing Double*, Polity, Cambridge, 2024). Geuss argues that the aim of the essay (as the genre emerges in the writings of Montaigne) is self-knowledge (see pp. 10ff.); this self-knowledge, in Geuss's account, does not afford any universal insight about human nature, but rather has the function of enabling me to "become a friend to myself" (p. 26). For this reason, Geuss finds the aim of the essay (at least as far as the form remains faithful to Montaigne's conception) to be questionable on Adornian grounds: for Adorno, "it is part of morality *not* to feel at home in the world as it now is, and that presumably also means that we stand now under a moral demand not to be too comfortable a friend to ourselves" (p. 31). But in the reading of Adorno outlined here, the essay does not aim merely at self-knowledge (with a view of becoming comfortable with oneself): on the contrary, the genre's reliance on personal experience enters in competition with Enlightenment thinking in its ambition to disclose how things are.

With this in mind, we can go back to the question I raised earlier, about whether Adorno's seemingly paradoxical procedures are really called for: shouldn't Adorno try to dislodge our resistance by relying on arguments, or on whatever intellectually reputable methods to which his audience is more likely to respond positively? If the root of the essay's dismissal is, ultimately, Enlightenment thinking, then one can see how the attempt to play into the audience's expectations might be counterproductive. Adorno's interest in the essay lies, precisely, in its aversiveness – in the fact that it runs against the grain of Enlightenment thought. But then presenting the essay's mode of thinking as, ultimately, accommodable within our available standards of intellectual seriousness would undermine the very motivation of Adorno's intervention: this would only go to show how Enlightenment thinking can integrate everything; Adorno would provide, to that extent, only a further episode in this ever-expanding domination campaign. In other words: if the Enlightenment really is a totalizing process of rationalization, then it follows that by providing (whatever we now see as) rational grounds for accepting the essay form, we are simply showing that the essay form can be co-opted within this mode of thinking: but this is the opposite of what Adorno wishes his readers to see.

Perhaps one might think at this point that the right response would simply be to dismiss the audience that dismisses the essay: if any attempt to convince this audience is going to be self-defeating, then maybe one should simply resign oneself to esotericism, and insist that the essay illustrates a mode of knowledge which will be, by necessity, found whimsical by those who are under the Enlightenment's spell. From this perspective, there would be neither hope nor need for therapeutic interventions. The right attitude would be to simply embrace the essay's oddness, and speak only to those who resonate with it; the chosen few who, somehow,

---

In this perspective, the essay possesses a critical potential that is not in view if one construes the genre along the lines sketched by Geuss. In the closing paragraph of his text, Geuss asks whether the essay's interest in self-knowledge can be decoupled from its quietistic implications (see p. 33). One might read Adorno's discussion of the essay as substantiating this possibility.

are still able to think outside the strictures of the Enlightenment will see what one means.

It is important to note, here, that mere insistence on the essay's aversiveness would also not do from Adorno's perspective: harping on some vision of a radical outside, a mode of thinking somehow spared from the process of disenchantment Adorno is tracking, would itself be a spasm of Enlightenment thinking.[11] One might think, for instance, that the essay is one last preserve of an auroral mode of thought in which "science and art", "image and sign", "perception and concept" (p. 154) still form a unity.[12] This harking back to the primordial, however, would only play into the hands of the same totalizing process which it hopes to escape. As Adorno puts the point: the essay "does not concern itself with any supposed primeval condition in order to contravene society's false sociality, which, just because it tolerates nothing not stamped by it, ultimately tolerates nothing indicative of its own omnipresence and necessarily cites, as its ideological complement, that nature which its own praxis eliminates" (p. 159).

Adorno, thus, can adopt neither an esoteric nor an exoteric approach: both the attempt to prove the essay's seriousness by relying on available intellectual canons, and the attempt to simply accentuate (for the benefit of those who have ears to hear) the essay's extravagance, are bound to re-

---

11 See, for instance, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xv: "thought finds itself deprived not only of the affirmative reference to science and everyday phenomena but also of the conceptual language of opposition. No terms are available which do not tend toward complicity." See also pp. 3–4: "Any intellectual resistance [the Enlightenment] encounters merely increases its strength. The reason is that enlightenment also recognizes itself in the old myths. No matter which myths are invoked against it, by being used as arguments they are made to acknowledge the very principle of corrosive rationality of which enlightenment stands accused. Enlightenment is totalitarian."

12 Compare Lukács: "In primitive, as yet undifferentiated epochs, science and art (and religion and ethics and politics) are integrated, they form a single whole; but as soon as science has become separate and independent, everything that has led up to it loses its value. Only when something has dissolved all its content in form, and thus become pure art, can it no longer become superfluous; but then its previous scientific nature is altogether forgotten and emptied of meaning" ("On the Nature and Form of the Essay", in *Soul and Form*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, p. 18).

iterate the mode of thinking Adorno is interested in dislodging. But then, how can this dislodgment happen? The solution cannot lie, here, in either softening or hardening the audience's resistances, but in transforming them or reorienting them – in particular, as I will argue, in reorienting them against themselves. I will now to turn to how this therapeutic task is performed in *The Essay as Form*. This will hopefully explain why, after all, writing an essay about the essay form is a fitting method for extricating oneself from the predicament we have described.

3. The Therapeutic Question

The paradox we have outlined raises a question about the possibility of reading Adorno's text. If it is true, as Adorno says, that we don't take the essay seriously, how can reading this essay by Adorno change this? If Adorno is right, then we will not take *his* essay seriously. Is there any way of breaking out of this circle?

The immediate intellectual environment of the concept of resistance is, of course, Freudian psychoanalysis. While I do not wish to suggest that Adorno works exactly with this notion, an analogy with the Freudian account might illuminate Adorno's handling of the paradox.[13]

In Freud's case, resistance – which presents itself immediately as defensiveness against the attempt of the therapist to remove a repression – is discovered to be not only a hindrance to the therapeutic process but also one of its essential resources: since the psychological forces at work in resistance and repression are the same, the therapist can, by self-consciously transferring the resistance onto herself, analyze it and prevent its repetition. *Mutatis mutandis*, I want to suggest that something like this structure applies also to Adorno's approach in *The Essay as Form*. For Adorno as well, the reader's defences against the essay might be seen not merely as an obstacle but as a tool for overcoming the obstacle. This will involve, as it does in the psychoanalytical case, transferring the re-

---

13 It is worth noting that Adorno's word for "resistance" is not "Widerstand" but "Abwher" (p. 152), usually translated in a psychoanalytical context as "defence". See J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Karnac Books, London, 1973 (1988), pp. 1099–1107.

sistance on to the very text Adorno is producing: it is only to the extent to which the relevant resistance can play out in our reading of *The Essay as Form* that the text can redirect them. In this sense, writing an essay about the essay might fulfil a therapeutic role.[14]

In what follows, I will focus on a specific passage, in the hope of substantiating the reading I have just outlined. The passage, which appears early in the text, reflects on the idea of overinterpretation. This stretch of Adorno's essay, in the context of the problem we are addressing, is bound to stand out as topical. The problem, as I have suggested, is a problem about the very possibility of reading Adorno's text – that is, of convincing a reader who is not already inclined to take his apology for the essay seriously. The passage we will consider deals, however, with how essays ought to be read. It is natural to look in this direction, accordingly, to find some sort of instruction on how to navigate the problem that Adorno's *mise en abyme* has created.

Adorno's immediate concern is the allegation that the essay "overinterprets" its objects (this is, as we have seen, one of the avenues of resistance toward the essay form Adorno is locating). Let's look at the relevant passage in full:

> [The essay's] interpretations are not philologically hardened
> and sober, rather – according to the predictable verdict of that

---

14 Compare Erin Plunkett's suggestion that "the reflexivity that is characteristic of the essay [...] serves to rebut the fiction of neutrality – either a neutral form of discourse or a 'view from nowhere'. It is a form of writing that expresses the 'how' of truth by making the conditions of experience a factor for thought" (*A Philosophy of the Essay*, Bloomsbury, London, 2018, p. 14). Plunkett's idea (which she frames in Cavellian terms) is that the essay's self-referential strategies are meant to draw attention to "their own context and circumstances of production" (p. 163), and hence more generally to the fact that our statements receive their meaning within contexts of ordinary use. Adorno's problem, as I have described it, is that this harkening for context and personal experience is what stands in the way of our taking the essay seriously – hence, *a fortiori*, of our taking seriously whatever "rebuttal" of the "view from nowhere" its self-referential methods could achieve (Cavell's discussion of "conformity" in the context of his reading of Emersonian Perfectionism can be interpreted as making a parallel point). For this reason, the role I am attributing to self-referentiality in Adorno's text precedes the task Plunkett outlines: its function is to undo the resistance against the type of acknowledgment she draws attention to.

vigilant calculating reason that hires itself out to stupidity as a guard against intelligence – it overinterprets. Due to a fear of negativity *per se*, the subject's effort to break through what masks itself as objectivity is branded as idleness. Everything is supposedly much simpler. The person who interprets instead of unquestioningly accepting and categorizing is slapped with the charge of intellectualizing as if with a yellow star; his misled and decadent intelligence is said to subtilize and project meaning where there is nothing to interpret. Technician or dreamer, those are the alternatives. Once one lets oneself be terrorized by the prohibition of going beyond the intended meaning of a certain text, one becomes the dupe of the false intentionality that men and things harbor of themselves. Understanding then amounts to nothing more than unwrapping what the author wanted to say, or, if need be, tracking down the individual psychological reactions that the phenomenon indicates. But just as it is scarcely possible to figure out what someone at a certain time and place felt and thought, such insights could not hope to gain anything essential. The author's impulses are extinguished in the objective substance they grasp. The objective abundance of significations encapsulated within each spiritual phenomenon, if it is to reveal itself, requires from the person receiving them precisely that spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is chastised in the name of objective discipline. Nothing can be interpreted out of a work without at the same time being interpreted into it (pp. 152–153).

Let's try, first of all, to give a direct reading of this passage, and to bracket any metatextual implication. On the face of it, the passage seems to contain an argument along these lines: the accusation of overinterpretation is problematic, because the notion of "author's intentions", as a standard against which the limit between legitimate reading and overreading can be assessed, is both philosophically confused and ideologically charged. This is because – we are told – every "spiritual phenomenon" is marked by an "objective abundance of significations", that transcend the author's intention. For this reason, if one looks at the author's intentions in order to understand the meaning of a text, one is looking in the wrong place.

If this is an argument, then it all rests on understanding what "objective abundance of signification" might mean. Adorno's gloss on that no-

tion is, however, obscure. He doesn't explain how the notion should be interpreted but offers instead a rather puzzling hint as to how to access this multiplicity of meaning: we are told that, in order to "reveal" it, we need to rely on "that spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is chastised in the name of objective discipline". This is likely to multiply questions: isn't Adorno himself warning against "spontaneity" (as opposed to "taking arbitrariness reflectively" into one's procedure)? And how can the unleashing of our "subjective" fantasies about a text lead us to understand meanings that are allegedly "objective"? Adorno seems to invite us to engage in a purely projective reading, marked by a blissful neglect of what is actually there in the text. In this perspective, the line with which Adorno wraps the passage – "nothing can be interpreted out of a work without at the same time being interpreted into it" – seems indeed to recommend that we treat texts as Rorschach tests.[15]

What can one make of this? Adorno is here inviting a certain mode of reading – one that, roughly, tries to extract arguments in support of specific theses. And yet, if we read the passage in this way, we are likely to be baffled. The argument is truncated right where it should deliver, and we are left wondering what Adorno could have meant by things such as "objective abundance of signification" and "spontaneity of subjective fantasy". The content of these formulations could, of course, be fleshed out in many ways. The most natural direction will be, here, to look further into Adorno's corpus, which after all contains ample discussions of intentionalism in art and literature. Is he recommending a version of "reader-response" theory? Is his emphasis on overinterpretation, perhaps, connected with his interest in exaggeration as a path to truth? But we should first of all note that, if we venture into this investigation, we are indeed asking ourselves *what Adorno meant* by "objective abundance of signification" and the like. We are, in other words, asking about *this* author's intentions.

_____

15 It is important to emphasize that in this paragraph I am merely reporting the kinds of responses one might expect from the implied reader of Adorno's text. Adorno himself would, of course, be critical of the naive contrast between "objective" and "subjective" on which these responses rely.

There is, it seems, some sort of performative self-contradiction between what the text says and what the text does. What the text does here is to raise the question of the author's intentions. And yet, the text's professed claim is that such intentions do not matter. Maybe this is just a flaw of Adorno's discussion (that Adorno is prone to performative self-contradictions is, after all, often repeated by those who, like Habermas or Apel, are unimpressed by the sweeping critique of reason upon which Adorno insists). But we must remember that Adorno is explicitly addressing an audience which, as he notes, will resist the essayistic form – hence, the style of this very text. Could the self-contradiction serve the aim of loosening these blockages? Is there a "procedure" in the apparent "arbitrariness" of Adorno's way of writing?

Let's imagine the responsible reader who, as Adorno says, will be put off by the essay's intellectual recklessness. Adorno's strategy, from this perspective, is to provide this reader with a liminal object. The passage does not entirely sound like the unleashing of childlike freedom Adorno is celebrating: it is, on the contrary, regimented enough to make us suspect that there is argument buried in there somewhere. And yet, Adorno's elusive handling of his concepts will leave this reader wondering about the author's intention: what is Adorno really committing to here? And on what basis, exactly? Is he giving us an argument at all?

It is at this stage that self-referential mode of Adorno's presentation becomes vital. This mode is made salient, in the passage, by the fact that Adorno is not merely talking about overinterpretation but also, it seems, engaging in it: what should one make, for instance, of Adorno's comparison of the reader concerned with authorial intentions with the Nazis? Isn't Adorno overinterpreting the intentions of the intentionalist? But the exaggeration, here, might be a way of reminding us that whatever Adorno is claiming about the essay's tendency towards overinterpretation is true of his own text. In this perspective, Adorno is not simply providing a theoretical account, but also instructing us on how to read the passage which is now before our eyes: his half-baked theory of authorial intention doubles down as a direction for reading the very passage in which

the theory is couched. Read this way, the passage is inviting the "vigi-lant" and "sober" reader not to care about authorial intentions, and to focus instead on the subjective impulses she tends to repress when she is "terrorized by the prohibition of going beyond the intended meaning of a certain text". *This* is how Adorno intends to be read.

But then, Adorno has created a textual predicament in which to care about the author's intentions means precisely to give up on the search for these intentions. What might look, from a theoretical point of view, like a performative self-contradiction, turns out to be, from a therapeutic point of view, an attempt to deploy the mechanism of resistance against itself.[16] The point is not to convince us, without any clear argument, of some theoretical claim about author's intentions and textual meanings. The point is rather to address the specific plight of a reader who feels compelled to look for an author's intentions (such a reader might even be sympathetic to the gist of Adorno's passage) and to marshal this require-ment against itself: to give in to that is to give up on that. Much as Marx aims to establish a peculiar state, whose very point is its withering away once it is established, so Adorno's intentions are meant to be left behind once they are grasped[17].

---

16 Compare Anders Johansson, "The Necessity of Over-interpretation: Adorno, the Es-say, and the Gesture of Aesthetic Experience" (*Estetika: The Central European Jour-nal of Aesthetics*, L/VI, 2013, No. 2, pp. 149–168). In Johansson's reading, the sig-nificance of overinterpretation depends on the consideration that the essay re-enacts, rather than interpreting, the enigmatic quality of the objects it reads. While I don't deny the significance of these concerns, I am here suggesting that Adorno is just as interested in the idea of making this enigmatic, "gestural", quality available – hence, in finding ways to circumvent the reader's resistance towards it. In this perspective, a mere reiteration of the "enigma" would reproduce whatever resistance we had to-wards the original object. My account of overinterpretation in *The Essay as Form*, accordingly, emphasizes its role *vis-a-vis* this latter problem.

17 It is important to emphasize that the interpretation sketched here does not portray Adorno as free from the impulses he is diagnosing in the reader. On the contrary, this reading is compatible with the suggestion that Adorno himself may have struggled with the very resistance he describes. He might, for instance, have both wished to defend his account of authorial intention in the essay theoretically, and recognized, at the same time, that this account would undermine such a theoretical defense. From this perspective, Adorno may have simply sought to represent this tension faithfully

This is the sense, then, in which Adorno's essay is "taking arbitrariness reflectively into its own procedure, instead of masking it as spontaneity". The apparent arbitrariness of Adorno's procedure – his reliance, in this case, of assertion where arguments seem called for – is part of Adorno's method, which requires (if I am right) inciting a perception of arbitrariness in order to mobilize against itself. This is also why, I take it, Adorno writes that "the essay is more dialectical than the dialectic as it articulates itself" and that it "takes Hegelian logic at its word" (p. 166). Instead of describing a dialectical process from a supposedly superior, or retrospective, viewpoint, the essay enacts this dialectical process in its very form: it exemplifies, rather than taking stock of, a movement of self-overcoming.

One might feel, at this point, that this is very far-fetched. Surely, Adorno is simply writing, as is his wont, in a sibylline manner – but that does not mean that he is activating resistances, or giving metatextual instructions, or any of the things that I have projected on to the text on a very slender evidentiary basis. That is just his style. My sense is that, if one is struck by this feeling, it would be very hard to miss how the passage we have just read addresses it directly. Aren't we implying that "everything is supposedly much simpler"? Isn't the reading being accused of "[subtilizing] and [projecting] meaning where there is nothing to interpret"? Let's suppose these are, indeed, my "subjective fantasies". Am I not being faithful to Adorno's intentions in voicing them? Of course, none of this means that my specific interpretation is correct: it is quite possible that some subjective fantasies are mere whims, and they do not disclose any "objective abundance of signification". But, then, who or what is authoritative over this question? My general claim has been that Adorno's text is designed to elicit this sort of anxiety, and that it has (for instance, in the passage we have considered) established some devices to think it through.

in his writing, as an illustration of how the resistance he describes plays out in his own thinking. The writing would thus be confessional in its approach, and primarily in the mode of self-critique. The therapeutic intervention I am describing, from this perspective, would depend on the sharing of these temptations and resistances, rather than on their deliberate manipulation.

4. Conclusion

The account presented here has clear limitations, the most evident being my focus on a single passage. What I have provided here does not aspire, accordingly, to be an exhaustive account of Adorno's therapeutic strategy in *The Essay as Form*. I hope, however, to have at least gathered some raw materials from which such an account could be constructed. I have emphasized, in this connection, the theme of the intellectual dismissal of the essay – a dismissal which is symptomatic, as I have suggested, of the grip that the Enlightenment has on our thinking. This makes the discussion of the essay form a study of a wider, and recurring, problem of Adorno's philosophy: if the Enlightenment really is a pervasive mode of thinking, how can one extricate oneself from it? How can one, in the case at hand, come to take seriously as thinking what is bound to strike us as odd, childish, irresponsible?

Adorno's response cannot be, as I have suggested, either esoteric or exoteric. An exoteric approach would try to overcome the resistance from *inside* Enlightenment thinking – that is, by using its intellectual tools. In the exoteric mode, the aim would be to show that the essay fits, after all, our present conception of respectable thinking. This would help the essay's reputation, but it would also leave Adorno's target ultimately untouched: we would still be endorsing, in this way, the Enlightenment picture of what count as respectable thinking (indeed, such a co-option might have the effect of vindicating this picture, showing its power to annex seemingly recalcitrant forms of thought).

The esoteric response, by contrast, would try to overcome the resistance from *outside* Enlightenment thinking – that is, by appealing to altogether different tools. This mode of reading would paint the essay as a radical alternative to our current mode of thinking, in the hope it eventually resonates with someone. But if that is at all possible, the Enlightenment thinking is not so pervasive after all, and there is no need to postulate any radical outside. The radical outside, as Adorno suggests, turns out to be a figure of the inside.

How, then, can one overcome the resistance to the essay, if one cannot overcome it either from inside, or from outside, the mode of thought that generates it? Adorno's insight, as I have suggested, is that the resistance can overcome itself by itself: the way out consists, here, in short-circuiting the resistance so that it becomes self-directed. It is this kind of self-overcoming, I take it, that Adorno has in view when he writes about "the domination of a discursive logic which cannot be circumvented, but may be outwitted in its own form by the force of an intruding subjective expression" (p. 169): the outwitting, here, consists in redeploying the same defensive means of the "discursive logic" in order to disrupt its domination.

As Adorno emphasizes here, the outwitting happens at the level of "form". My suggestion has been that the self-overcoming of intellectual resistance to the essay demands, specifically, a certain *form of writing*. What is needed, as I have argued, is a textual device that incites resistance in order to redirect it: the text must, in other words, invite the projection it wants to dislodge. It is for this reason that self-referentiality is essential to Adorno's method: the fact that Adorno is writing an essay is what provokes the resistance; the fact that Adorno is writing an essay about the essay form is what enables the content of Adorno's essay to double down as a set of instructions to the reader – hence, it is what ultimately enables the reorientation of the resistance. In this sense, writing an essay about the essay, so as to defuse resistance to the essay, is not to engage in a needlessly paradoxical endeavor: it is, rather, a way of thinking through a paradox that, if Adorno is right about what he calls "Enlightenment", we cannot really avoid.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W., "The Essay as Form", translated by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, in *New German Critique*, No. 32, pp. 151–171, 1984.

Adorno, Theodor W., and Horkheimer, Max, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002.

Birnbaum, Antonia, "The Obscure Object of Transdisciplinarity", in *Radical Philosophy*, n. 198, July–August 2016, pp. 15–24.

Cavell, Stanley, "Declining Decline", in his *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990.

Cavell, Stanley, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990.

Cavell, Stanley, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988.

Geuss, Raymond, "Montaigne and the Essay", in his *Seeing Double*, Polity, Cambridge, 2024.

Jarvis, Simon, *Adorno. A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, New York, 1988.

Johansson, Anders, "The Necessity of Over-interpretation: Adorno, the Essay, and the Gesture of Aesthetic Experience", *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, L/VI, No. 2, pp. 149–68, 2013.

Kray, T. R., "More Dialectical than the dialectic: Exemplarity in Theodor W. Adorno's *The* Essay as Form", in *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 144(1), pp. 30–45, 2018.

Laplanche, Jean, and Pontalis, Jean-Bertrand, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Karnac Books, London, 1973 (1988).

Lukács, Gyorgy, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay", in *Soul and Form*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010.

Plunkett, Erin, *A Philosophy of the Essay*, Bloomsbury, London, 2018.

The Subject's Remains: Fragment as Form of Presentation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

William Ross[1]

Abstract: The fragmented composition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is no mere stylistic ornament. In a text where conceptual unity gives way to rupture, form becomes content: fragmentation itself stages a crisis in philosophical presentation. This article argues that such a crisis transforms *Darstellung*—the philosophical form of self-presentation—after the unity it once staged has been fractured by alienation and repression. I proceed in four steps. First, I sketch a genealogy of *Darstellung* from Kant to Adorno, exposing its claim to totality and its limits. Second, I revisit Adorno's reading of Homer's *Odyssey* as a proto-novel, showing how the poem conjures totality only as semblance. Third, on the diegetic plane, I trace how Odysseus's celebrated cunning depends on acts of self-relinquishment—sacrificial moments without which self-assertion collapses. Fourth, I turn to the narrator's particles, pauses, and caesurae, where language momentarily relinquishes mastery and a second, reflexive subject surfaces. Taken together, these formal breaks show that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not merely diagnose reason's self-undoing—it performs it. In the fragment, it preserves a diminished yet still possible subject, and with it, the fragile conditions of critique.

*D*ialectic of Enlightenment (*DE*) is often described as a text about the self-destruction of reason—how Enlightenment reverts to myth, how rationality breeds domination. But such summaries risk reducing the book to its conceptual content and overlook how its *form*—discontinuous, fragmented, riddled with interruption—does not just reflect but *performs* the crisis of Enlightenment. Recent scholarship has highlighted this formal dimension, interpreting the text's rhetoric as therapeutic,[2] po-

---

1   William Ross is a guest fellow at the Institut für Sozialforschung and president of the Association for Adorno Studies. His research bridges epistemology and critical social theory, focusing on 'Darstellung' in German philosophy. He is developing a materialist theory of presentation based on Benjamin and Adorno, within a reconstruction of Frankfurt School theory of society.

2   Freyenhagen, "Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *Res Philosophica* 101, no. 2 (2024): 262–64.

litically catalytic,[3] or staging "collisions of layers of meaning."[4] Yet what remains less explored is how these strategies transform a deeper structure: the very form of presentation—*Darstellung*—through which philosophy can move critique from description to transformation.

In German philosophy, "*Darstellung*" stages the presentation of the subject to itself—a scene where the subject comes into view, affirms its unity, and posits its autonomy. This scene is tied to the history of the modern bourgeois subject and carries the tensions that define its emergence. The subject secures its coherence through the act of appearing—but this coherence is not without cost. As the historical conditions that sustain this possibility develop, presentation is revealed to be bound up with alienation and repression. It displays the contradiction it has borne. What once passed as unity is now legible as fracture.

Rather than retreat from this fracture, *DE* attempts to present it—formally. It stages a scene in which the subject appears not only through self-affirmation, but also through self-relinquishment. This is the text's central wager: that what classical philosophy could not present—loss, dispossession, failed identification—might be legible if the form of presentation is transformed, and self-relinquishment proves as constitutive of subjectivity as affirmative activity.

This article reconstructs how *DE* enacts this transformation. First, I trace the philosophical history of *Darstellung* as the scene of subjective appearance, from Kant to Adorno. Second, I examine Adorno's strategic reading of Homer's *Odyssey*, which displaces the epic's claim to totality in order to exhibit its inner fragmentation. Third, I analyse how this displacement operates at the level of the epic's subject: Odysseus, whose self-presentation as a cunning agent of survival relies on moments of self-erasure, sacrifice, and disidentification. Fourth, I turn to the narrator of the *Odyssey*, whose hesitations, rhetorical caesurae, and meaningless particles disrupt narra-

---

3   Honneth, *Disrespect; The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Polity, 2007), 57–61.

4   Hansteen, "Adornos philosophische Rhetorik oder »Wie zu lesen sei«," *Zeitschrift für kritische Theorie* 16 (2010): 110.

tive continuity and reveal self-relinquishment to be more than a ruse. In this new register, subjectivity presents itself not through mastery over its object, but by yielding to something non-identical and lend it expression.

1. *Darstellung*: A Brief History

Darstellung (presentation) escapes simple definition: its performance is both theoretical and practical—epistemological and poetic. What follows restricts the inquiry, treating presentation as the reflexive act that opens the scene where the subject appears to itself—and, in appearing, constitutes itself. The form of such appearance is never neutral: every act of self-presentation doubles as self-affirmation; turning presentation into the ritual that secures the subject's claim to unified experience.

For Kant, "*Darstellung*"[5] names the act through which a concept is given intuitive content and substantiated as real.[6] Kant reminds us that "to demonstrate the reality of our concepts, intuitions are always required."[7] To move from perception to experience—or from intuition to concepts— one must *present* the concept's content, without which cognition remains impossible. *Darstellung* is the intuitive exhibition (*Versinnlichung*) that lends a concept sensible flesh and validates its claim to reality.

From the start, then, presentation mediates sensibility and understanding—and this mediation is already reflexive: presenting one's experience is a "reflective accomplishment"[8] because it relates

---

5   *Darstellung* is not synonymous to *Vorstellung*. "Kant's own use of the term […] *Vorstellung* derives from the Latin *repraesentatio*. [For Kant,] *Vorstellung* functions […] as a generic term [including] both intuitions and concepts. [He makes] use of the verb *darstellen* to designate (the act of) the effective realization of a concept." Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 91–92.

6   This applies to the usage Kant makes of *Darstellung* in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement.* For an account of its use in the *Critique of Pure Reason* see: Schubbach, "Kants Konzeption der geometrischen Darstellung," *Kant Studien* 108, no. 1 (2017b).

7   Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), §59, 225. (5:351)

8   Schubbach, "Leben und Darstellung in Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft. Zwischen Ästhetik, Epistemologie und Ethik," in *Belebungskünste: Praktiken leben-*

concepts to the subject. Arno Schubbach underscores the point: "With the aesthetic forms of presentation, Kant is [dealing] with self-referential forms of experience which, although they take perception as their starting point, ultimately confront us with ourselves."[9] Martha Helfer echoes this insight, writing that "*Darstellung* is a crucial component of one's cognitive process, one's self-intuition."[10] The reflectivity of presentation is a performance of self-positing, in which the subject presents itself through thinking. In Kant, however, this reflectivity is implicit, since the subject is given *a priori*—presentation aims to secure the unity of experience.[11]

Fichte pushes this logic further. What was a self-assurance gained through presentation becomes, in Fichte, self-presentation. As F. Scott Scribner remarks, Fichte's theory "offered a self-positing self, [which] described the self-creative, self-referential self in terms of *Darstellung*."[12]

A second level of presentation's reflectivity appears in Friedrich Schlegel, who defines the task of criticism as "presenting the presentation anew, [to] once again form what is already formed."[13] In this Romantic view, critique is not chiefly the judgement on a work of art; it is "the method of its completion (*Vollendung*)."[14] Presentation is immanent to the joint unfolding of subject and object: the subject can present itself only by

---

diger Darstellung in Literatur, Kunst und Wissenschaft um 1800, ed. Gess, *et al.* (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2019), 204.

9   *Ibid.*, 206f.

10 Helfer, *The Retreat of Representation: The Concept of Darstellung in German Critical Discourse* (State University of New York Press, 1996), 10.

11 In §59 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant uses *Darstellung* to symbolically connect sensuous experience and practical reason. See: Gasché, *The Idea of Form*, 89–118, 202–218; Ross, "Kant's Hypotyposis as Rhetorical and Poetical Presentation," in *Kant and the Space of Feelings*, ed. Fabbianelli and Fadulto (de Gruyter, 2025). (Forthcoming)

12 Scribner, *Matters of Spirit: J. G. Fichte and the Technological Imagination* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 46.

13 Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1958ff.), vol. 2, 140.

14 Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (Belknap Press, 2004–2006), vol. 1, 153.

mediating the objective content of its experience, while the object—as its medium—is transfigured. The encounter discloses meaning within the object, and presentation must render that meaning.

In Hegel's speculative philosophy, *Darstellung* is no longer merely reflexive—it is also totalizing. Presentation must account for the entire process in which thought, concept, and world are mediated. As he puts it in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, in "the presentation of the system itself, everything hangs on apprehending and expressing the truth not merely as substance but also equally as subject."[15] The system presents the actualization of truth in its own self-movement: the subject "as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself."[16] Hegel's point is simple: presentation is the system's own motion. It must expose both the concepts *and* the tensions that drive them beyond themselves.

This very motion is actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), which Hegel describes as the unity of essence and appearance. The process of making the essence present—its passage into appearance—is itself a process of presentation. As Schubbach explains, "actuality can only show itself in presentation insofar as the presenting (*das Darstellen*) itself is part of actuality and takes place within it [and] reflects on it."[17] It is in this emphatic sense that Adorno writes: the "presentation is not a matter of indifference or external to philosophy, but immanent to its idea."[18]

With Freud and Marx, however, the link between subjective unity and the actualization of essence comes under critical pressure. Marx shows that under capitalism, the proletariat is estranged from the unity of its

---

15 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 9–10 (§17).

16 *Ibid.*, 10 (§18).

17 Schubbach, "Der ‚Begriff der Sache'. Kants und Hegels Konzeptionen der Darstellung zwischen Philosophie, geometrischer Konstruktion und chemischem Experiment," *Hegel Studien* 51 (2017a): pp. 155-156.

18 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik/Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (Suhrkamp, 1973), 29.(Hereafter cited as ND) (All translation in English are from: Dennis Redmond non-commercial edition of *Negative Dialectics* [2021], bibliographical information listed in references.)

own experience: labour's product "confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer."[19] The proletariat thus inhabits an actuality it cannot present as unity—its experience is fragmented by structural alienation, which interrupts unified self-presentation. Freud, for his part, shows that the ego's unity is not simply the result of a synthetic activity of the subject, but rather rests on repression. What appears as self-presentation is already shaped by denial and negation; the subject's unity is based on selection and exclusion.

In other words, Marx and Freud expose structural conditions—alienation and repression—that block the subject's capacity to present its experience as a whole. In this light, the philosophical form that once mediated this unity—*Darstellung*—faces renewed scrutiny. For Adorno, the rupture is not merely psychological or social; it marks a formal and epistemic crisis, one that touches the very possibility of presenting truth in thought.

In his inaugural lecture, "The Actuality of Philosophy," Adorno qualifies as illusion traditional philosophy's claim that "the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of actuality."[20] He formulates this in historical—not ontological—terms: "the adequacy of thinking to being as totality has disintegrated."[21] As a result, actuality no longer appears as a coherent whole but as a fragmented reality. The subject thus faces the impossibility of presenting experience as unified, and the fragmentation of actuality carries into language: "Today the philosopher confronts disintegrated language."[22] Yet Adorno does not lament this: "The ruins of words are his material, to which history binds him; his freedom is solely the possibility of their configuration according to the force of truth in them."[23]

---

19 Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* (Lawrence Wishart, 1975–2004), vol. 3, 272.

20 Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. O'Connor (Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 24.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Adorno, "Theses on the Language of the Philosopher," in *Adorno and the Need in Thinking*, ed. Burke, *et al.* (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 37.

23 *Ibid.*

In this sense, the "philosophical fragments" of *DE* respond to the systemic, totalizing form of German philosophy.[24] The fragment's breaks and discontinuities do more than rupture the argument; they disclose aspects of experience that refuse to be coherently integrated—something the form of totality cannot achieve.[25] At the formal level, the fragment points back to the socio-historical condition of subjectivity itself: only through fragments can a subject appear to itself once the illusion of a totalizing self-presentation has vanished. These textual interruptions are not mere gaps; they mirror the moment when conscious activity yields— exposing its own limitations. In the negative space of fragmentation, the text preserves a trace of its limits, opening the possibility for reflection. Yet the fragment is never an isolated shard: it remains in tension with the totality from which it splinters. As a remain, the fragment testifies of a crisis in meaning without itself carrying any specific meaning. To lend the fragment meaning, one must relate it with other fragments—not through the subordination it previously experienced within a totality, but through a new relation capable of producing new legibility between the phenomena and deliver a new meaning. This new legibility forms, for Walter Benjamin, a constellation; just like a constellation is reading

---

24 Forerunners of this use of fragmentation within the German philosophy include the German Romantics, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.

25 Totality knows the fragment only from the perspective of its own rupturing, when its constitutive parts no longer find their place and meaning through its mediation. Otherwise, totality organizes elements as parts that acquire meaning only through subordination within the whole. This subordination obtains in the identity between the positing subject—its self-othering with itself—and the posited object. This totality manifests structurally as subordination for two reasons. First, the subject posits the object by casting it under a concept, dictating what it must be. Second, the subject controls more than the object, but also the relation that obtain between them. This is a relation of totality: everything is either "I" or "non-I" as it is posited by the "I" itself. Therefore, totality is logically structured around the principle of the excluded third—("I" ∨ ¬"I")—and can only integrate or exclude. Thus, everything qualitatively divergent becomes contradictory. Fragmentation, therefore, appears as an alternative to third excluded by accepting that something non-identical (to the subject, or to the concept of the object) can challenge the established relation between them. See: Adorno, *ND*, 16–18.

meaning into an ensemble of stars without any of those stars carrying intrinsic meaning.[26] A constellation is constructed in a historical context which gives it the background on which its imagelike production can be read. Yet to manifest as a constellation, it must reveal an objective quality within the fragments it relates, even as the constellation itself remains discontinuous distinct from these phenomena: the idea presented by a constellation is discontinuous from the fragments themselves. Critique becomes possible in this act of seeking unity through discontinuity with the form of constellations, rather than renouncing the possibility of a unifying principle.[27]

Hence, the fragment is a formal innovation in *Darstellung*. Since Kant, presentation had displayed the subject's affirmative activity; now, it can present the instant that activity is interrupted. The interruption of con-

---

26 Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (Harvard University Press, 2019), 8–15.

27 Constellatory thinking, by contrast to totalizing thinking, wishes to present something non-identical not as a contradiction but as that which manifests in a play of difference between the concepts. In other words, constellations respect the particularity and intrinsic self-identity of the object by avoiding coercive conceptualization, allowing objects to appear in their difference without contradiction or forced assimilation. Constellations thus arise from the internal limitation of concepts: "The determinate failure of all concepts necessitates the citation of others; therein originate those constellations, into which alone something of the hope of the Name has passed." (Adorno, *ND*, 62.) Here, affinity rather than identity organizes fragments into a meaningful arrangement—a play of difference and similarity which introduces nuances without forcing the principle of third-excluded.
Constellatory thinking refers to its elements as fragments as to highlight their historical embeddedness, appearing as discrete elements bequeathed by history. Through affinity, constellations maintain the difference between the fragments, placing them in proximity without dissolving their discontinuity. Hence, the principle of constellation is thus communicative rather than subordinative: it generates meaning through relations that preserve rather than erase difference. The constellation does not subsume fragments into a higher unity but rather arranges them in expressive configurations that points beyond itself. Constellations thus provide historical legibility; they coalesce into images that illuminate possibilities of historical experience. Exposing an otherwise muted possibility is one of the primary aims of constellatory thinking. In the conclusion, I come back to this point.

sciousness is no longer external to philosophy—it becomes something philosophy can (formally) present. In what follows, I show that *DE* mobilizes the fragment to shift the focus of presentation from the subject's act of self-affirmation to its self-relinquishment.[28]

This displacement opens a deeper reflexivity *in presentation*: the subject registers where identification fails, where the object resists, and carries that resistance into experience—even if it eludes conceptual presentation. In this sense, presentation seeks to *present what resists presentation*, not by forcing it under ready-made categories, but by allowing the form of presentation to register a presence that "ultimately destroys the fabric of the narrative."[29] In the words of Benjamin, presentation aims to give expressivity to the "expressionless," that which "arrests […] semblance, […] and interrupts the harmony."[30] *Darstellung*, then, presents the threshold of both experience and language. In *DE,* Adorno probes that threshold at its most ancient literary site: Homer's *Odyssey.*

2. The Epic as Novel: Semblance of Totality and Fragmented Actuality

From the outset, the choice of the Homeric epic as the first excursus in *DE* is striking, given Lukács's famous claim that the epic "gives form to the extensive totality of life"[31]—a vision seemingly at odds with Adorno's insistence on the impossibility of grasping totality. Even more surprising is Adorno's use of Rudolf Borchardt's qualification of the epic as a novel. But while Borchardt aims to subsume "the Homeric poem under

---

28 Hegel recognized this dialectic when he defines spirit as negativity. For him, however, negativity is immediately turned into affirmation: "the movement of spirit […] proves to be absolute negativity, infinite self-affirmation." Adorno's focus on the interruption of activity seeks to show how the moment of self-relinquishment is in-and-for-itself, not merely for-another. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 13. (§381 Z.) (Trans mod.)

29 Adorno, *Notes to literature* (Columbia University Press, 1991), 26. (Hereafter: *NL*)

30 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 340.

31 Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (The MIT Press, 1971), 46.

the pejoratively applied label of the novel."[32] Adorno, by contrast, uses the term in reference to Lukács definition of the novel: "The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality."[33] In this framework, Adorno wishes to expose the anti-mythological tendencies in the epic by showing that the semblance of totality must be conjured in the form of the novel. Adorno reframes the epic not as a mythic origin but as a form whose presentation already bears the marks of fragmentation—thus preparing the ground for a transformed theory of *Darstellung*. In a nutshell: if Adorno can show that "the foundational text of European civilization"[34] is itself traversed by a fissure that undoes its totalizing appearance, then he can show that German idealism's system, too, constructs unity and totality as semblance—just as the *Odyssey* does through epic form.

The formal symmetry between the *Odyssey* and German idealism is matched by a thematic parallel: both have for object the subject's self-presentation. In the *Odyssey*, "the hero of the adventures turns out to be the prototype of the bourgeois individual, whose concept originates in the unwavering self-assertion of which the protagonist driven to wander the earth is the primeval model."[35] As James I. Porter notes, Adorno projects the question of self-presentation onto the epic:

> [For Adorno,] Homer represents the "precipitate" of archaic mythology, the mere unity of his plots standing for a wilful imposition of intentionality on their chaotic, massive sprawl. His heroes, in their very individuation (a Hegelian idea), represent the rise of the individual subject and of enlightened rationality against the background of seething and shapeless forces.[36]

---

32 Dornbach, *The Saving Line: Benjamin, Adorno and the Caesuras of Hope* (Northwestern University Press, 2021), 81.

33 Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 56.

34 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 37. (trans. adapted) (Hereafter: *DE*)

35 *Ibid.*, 34.

36 Porter, "Odysseus and the Wandering Jew: The Dialectic of Jewish Enlighten-

By reading the *Odyssey* as the scene on which the Western subject presents itself to itself, Adorno emphasizes that the scene of presentation is never neutral: it is historically codified, and the subject grapples with a specific task—in Homer, the emergence of historical individuality from mythical sameness—a task that structures its experience.

Adorno's interpretation of Odysseus's presentation yields a dual appreciation. On the one hand, Odysseus is the cunning, affirmative subject—the one who overcame the mythical realm. On the other, this affirmation is tied to a form of self-relinquishment: "Odysseus, like the heroes of all true novels throws himself away, so to speak, in order to win himself; he achieves his estrangement from nature by abandoning himself to nature."[37] Adorno further emphasizes that Odysseus's self-consciousness results from the "experience of diversity, distraction, disintegration" which deflect "the self from the path of its logic."[38] In other words, Adorno isolates a negative moment within self-presentation—a moment of self-relinquishment that must be presented in its own right.

This unfolds through a four-step journey. It begins with (1) the diegetic presentation in the *Odyssey*—Odysseus as the acting, self-constituting subject wrestling with the mythical world—a struggle that (2) culminates in the Sirens' episode, when he neutralizes their lure "as a mere object of contemplation, as art."[39] At this point, the *Odyssey* articulates its own condition of possibility: "The song of the Sirens must cease for a song about the Sirens to appear."[40] In other words, the *Odyssey*, as the scene of the subject's presentation, becomes possible only reflexively—as the human song that overcomes the siren's song. (3) This opens onto the extra-diegetic layer, since the reflexive perspective not only posits the diegetic scene but also displaces the question of presentation, as another subject comes into view: the narrator. (4) Finally, the narrator's

---

ment in Adorno and Horkheimer," *Cultural Critique*, no. 74 (2010): 202.

37 Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE*, 38.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, 27.

40 Todorov, *Poétique de la prose* (Seuil, 1971), 26.

self-presentation presents a new form of subjectivity—not grounded in mastery and domination but in a non-affirmative reflexivity.

3. Diegetic Presentation: Odysseus's Cunning

The *Odyssey* is unequivocally the tale of an individuated subject: "Tell me, O Muse, of that many-sided man."[41] Yet the much-cunning Odysseus whose story is told appears on a scene where individuation itself is the content seeking presentation. Adorno's reading of the *Odyssey* aims to expose the lie of the freely self-constituting subject. The setting of the *Odyssey* is a representation of the historical stages preceding the emergence of individuality. It is in this context that Adorno frames the question of Odysseus's cunning as emerging from sacrifice. In other words, the category of sacrifice is the placeholder for the prehistory of subjectivation.

In reconstituting the anthropological and ethnographical background of *DE*'s argument, Charles H. Clavey underlines that "Horkheimer and Adorno argued that these rites originated as the sacrifice of a god before evolving into worshipers' sacrifices to a god and, finally, self-sacrifice."[42] The genealogy from sacrifice to cunning, exposed in *DE*, reveals that individuation results from a dialectic of self-relinquishment and self-affirmation. This is legible in the "moment of fraud in sacrifice" which reveals sacrifice as taking the form of a contract enabling exchange.[43] Sacrificial exchange reverses its expected outcome: sacrifice "appears as a human contrivance intended to control the gods, who are overthrown precisely by the system created to honour them."[44] Exchange (*Tausch*) is deception (*Täuschung*): the sacrifice that seems like genuine self-relinquishment—humility toward nature and the gods, sacrifice as seeking favour in ex-

---

41 *Odyssey* I.1

42 Clavey, "Myth, sacrifice, and the critique of capitalism in dialectic of enlightenment," *History of European Ideas* 49 (2023): 1274.

43 See: *ibid.*, 1272–76.

44 Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE*, 40.

change for homage[45]—is deceptive because it serves not relinquishment itself but the self-affirmation of human purposes. This self-affirmation targets both external nature to ensure self-preservation, and internal nature to secure obedience and social control. Yet the sacrificial ruse will itself prove riven by deceit.

With sacrifice as the prehistory of the subject, Horkheimer and Adorno record that the performance of self-affirmation—liberation from nature—did not proceed solely as a gesture of rupture, but as a farewell to nature in nature: the empowerment of humankind passes through self-sacrifice. I argue that making this moment of self-relinquishment legible as constitutive of the subject's self-affirmation is one of the main goals of the excursus on Odysseus.

3.1 The Birth of the Subject

This dialectic of relinquishment and affirmation is first staged in the escape from Polyphemus's cave—the moment of the emergence of the individuated self wrestling with first nature. In this scene, some of Odysseus's crewmembers are eaten by the Cyclops, and survival depends on cunning: Odysseus and the remaining crew get the Cyclops drunk and blind him with a burning spear. Just before escaping, Odysseus reveals his name: "My name is Nobody (Οὖτις)."[46] This shift from Odysseus to Outis is the moment of the birth of the triumphant subject: "He declares allegiance to himself by disowning himself as Nobody; he saves his life by making himself disappear."[47] As in the logic of sacrifice, the *Odyssey* registers self-relinquishment in self-presentation as being in the service of self-affirmation: "his obedience to his name and his repudiation of it, are really the same thing."[48] The repudiation expresses a lapse back into indifference as a means of differentiation: "Odysseus, the subject, denies

45 See Clavey, "Myth, sacrifice, and the critique of capitalism in dialectic of enlightenment," 1275, 1278.

46 Odyssey IX.366

47 Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE*, 47–48.

48 *Ibid.*, 47.

his own identity, which makes him a subject, and preserves his life by mimicking the amorphous realm."[49] As Porter puts it, Odysseus is "a self constituted in loss (or at least in the appearance of loss)."[50] But what appears only as loss is registered, at a deeper level, revealing that the fraud in sacrifice runs further still.

Odysseus's repudiation involves language as well—the medium of presentation: "For by inserting his own intention into the name,[51] Odysseus has withdrawn it from the magical sphere."[52] This manipulation marks the separation of signifier and signified, a split that emerges through Odysseus's act of sacrifice. As Porter writes:

> In reducing himself to a nameless cipher, a Nobody, and in regressing, momentarily, to an empty, preverbal void (or nearly so), Odysseus pulls off the greatest trick of demystification possible: he breaks the chain of mimesis between names and essences, and thereby cunningly reinvests language with a purely rational and intentional content.[53]

This manipulation mirrors the performance of the subject itself: just as the subject must relinquish itself to nature to emerge from it, λόγος must pass through magic to ground its rationality. The name becomes the site of this passage. Adorno underscores the necessity of this manoeuvre: "The artful Odysseus cannot do otherwise."[54]

> As he flees […], he not only mocks Polyphemus but reveals to him his true name and origin, as if the primeval world still had such power over Odysseus […] that he would fear to become Nobody again if he did not reestablish his own identity by means of the magical word which rational identity had just superseded.[55]

---

49 *Ibid.*, 53.

50 Porter, "Odysseus and the Wandering Jew," 203.

51 Inserting the intention "nobody" in the name "Odysseus."

52 Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE*, 53.

53 Porter, "Odysseus and the Wandering Jew," 204.

54 Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE*, 53.

55 *Ibid.*

Two repurposings take place here: first, self-relinquishment is repurposed in the service of self-affirmation; second, magical-mimetic language is instrumentalized to ground rational identity. Both of them reveal that instrumental reason retains within itself the very moments it seeks to master. The form of the subject and language cannot sever themselves from this moment of cunning; their inability to present themselves as wholly self-grounded testifies to a remainder that resists totalization.

We can glimpse here that the moment of fraud in sacrifice is deceived. Self-affirmation must restrain itself in order to express itself; in doing so, it presupposes self-relinquishment as its condition of possibility. Yet this presupposition becomes visible only retrospectively, after the affirmative performance it made possible. This belated recognition gives rise to the misattribution by which the subject identifies with its act of self-assertion, appearing to itself as the author of its own emergence. But the trace of relinquishment remains: the subject is forced to internalize its own origin in loss as part of its constitution. This internalization, however, is never fully achieved and continually unsettles the totalization of self-affirmation. Self-relinquishment, then, is not merely an instrumental moment within the logic of enlightenment but its repressed presupposition. As Rebecca Comay writes, "Odysseus was a scarred man, but the scar would have found its uses. Odysseus's scar had been the very locus of self-identity."[56] Just as the gods are cheated out of sacrifice, the subject is cheated out of self-mastery.

Hence, as Adorno notes near the end of the *Odyssey* in Book XX, when Odysseus discovers the maidservants' nightly visits to Penelope's suitors, he hesitates: should he kill them immediately, or wait? The moment of reflection—where the subject appears to deliberate—is recorded by Homer not as an internal monologue, but as Odysseus addressing his own heart: "Patience, my heart!" [57] Quoting Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Adorno takes this as evidence of a still-fragmented subjectivity:

> The subject is not yet articulated to form a firm inner identity. Affects, courage, the "heart" still rise up independently. […] "Odysseus beats his breast, that is, his heart, and addresses

---

56 Comay, "Adorno's Siren Song," *New German Critique* No. 81 (2000): 30.

57 Odyssey XX.18

it. His heart beats violently; this part of his body is stirring against his will. That he speaks to it is not, therefore, a mere formal device." […] The subject, still split and forced to do violence to nature both within himself and outside, "punishes" his heart.[58]

Beating one's own chest is a gesture of repression—an attempt to dominate the inner nature the subject had disavowed. This inner nature, sealed behind a scar, threatens to resurface as a wound. That the subject must repeat the performance of self-affirmation against itself, for itself, reveals that repressed nature continues to speak, even if it appears expressionless to the subject.

In Adorno's reconstruction, the birth of the subject shows that its performance appears unitarian and totalizing, yet this unity is a *semblance*. It results from the erasure of self-relinquishment, the domination of nature, and the instrumentalization of language—all of which exposes the dialectic of enlightenment. Yet because the subject must repeat its affirmation, Adorno also points to the fact that something resists totalization. Presenting this remainder—which the subject never fully internalizes—requires the emergence of the aesthetic realm.

3.2 The Birth of Aesthetics

The Sirens episode prolongs the dialectic of self-relinquishment and self-affirmation. As Horkheimer and Adorno point out, self-preservation in the encounter with the Sirens requires self-relinquishment: either sensory deprivation—plugging one's ears—or bodily restraint—being tied up to resist the deadly charm of their song.[59] Both strategies resemble the Cyclops episode, enacting self-relinquishment in the service of self-preservation or self-affirmation. Yet they do not yield the same result. Odysseus fills his crewmembers' ears with wax, preventing them from experiencing the Sirens' threat, while he alone tests himself against the song, bound to the mast. The crewmembers survive by being forced to

---

58 Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE*, 259.

59 *Ibid.*, 26–27.

forgo the experience entirely. The strategy imposed upon them keeps the danger at bay, because it concedes to the Sirens' superiority. Odysseus, by contrast, challenges their power: his self-mastery extends beyond inner restraint to mythical nature itself—by reducing the Sirens' song to a harmless object, he disarms their spell.[60]

Odysseus's self-relinquishment as self-affirmation succeeds in putting mythical nature at a distance to dominate it. Yet it also creates the condition for a second self-relinquishment, which Albrecht Wellmer aptly identifies as the emergence of aesthetic contemplation. This turn is marked in the following passage:

> at that moment when Odysseus had stopped trying to untie himself and had begun to lose himself in the song of the Sirens, deriving a pleasure out of his "contemplative" listening which he did not know before, a pleasure contingent upon his taking an aesthetic distance toward the Sirens' song and forgetting his desire to merge literally and physically in the world of the Sirens.[61]

By relinquishing the urge to hurl himself into the Sirens' power, Odysseus opens himself to a new form of experience—made possible by the distance taken from the lure of mythical non-differentiation. Wellmer identifies this as the moment when "beauty first appeared on the scene […] as the correlate of a reflexive self"—the self-relinquishment of a "regressive desire for a state of unmediated wholeness" giving way to the "fearless affirmation of non-identity."[62]

However, Wellmer is unclear on the identity of this reflexive subject. At first, he applies it to Odysseus himself.[63] Yet he then introduces a second distance: Odysseus does not experience the Sirens' song as a work

---

60 For an interpretation of this deprivation in terms of aesthetic neutralisation see Wellmer, "The Death of the Sirens and the Origin of the Work of Art," *New German Critique* No. 81 (2000): 6–10. For an interpretation of this deprivation in terms of affirmation of sexual and gender differentiation see Comay, "Adorno's Siren Song," 23–27.

61 Wellmer, "The Death of the Sirens and the Origin of the Work of Art," 12.

62 *Ibid.,* 12–13.

63 *Ibid.,* 13.

of art. He is merely the placeholder for a reflexive subjectivity that has not yet appeared. This distance is what enables the *Odyssey* to function as the scene of subjectivity's presentation: "the transformation of the Sirens' song into a work of art does not really occur aboard Odysseus's ship, but through the very epic 'song' which sings about the Sirens' song and Odysseus's overcoming of its irresistible power."[64] Hence, the reflexive subject is not Odysseus, but the narrator of the *Odyssey*.

A complication arises, however, when we recall that books IX to XII of the *Odyssey*—which recount Odysseus's adventures from the Lotus-Eaters to Calypso's Island, including the episodes of the Cyclops and the Sirens—are narrated in flashback through Odysseus's own voice. Odysseus gains this reflexive capacity by receiving knowledge through the Sirens' song: "They have knowledge 'of all that has ever happened on this fruitful earth.'"[65] But this threshold is recorded in the poem as a narration within a narration: the subject's self-presentation through his own speech is the expression of an impossible experience: the "I" that narrates is a product of a break it cannot fully remember. Comay insightfully notes that Odysseus introduces his own heroic glory (κλέος) in the first person—a move in tension with the custom of invoking κλέος in the third person, typically after the hero's death. "The very compulsion to narrate would seem to transgress the bounds of what 'I' can say of myself, thus making the act of speech not only an act of mourning for the lost object but, indeed, a form of self-mourning, an impossible mourning for the lost subject."[66] In short, the first person κλέος exposes a paradoxical "I" that can only celebrate its exploits by confessing the irretrievable rupture that made them possible—an "I" that begins to speak only after passing through a figurative death: the Sirens give "each person back their life only in exchange for their full measure of time."[67]

---

64 *Ibid.*, 16.

65 Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE*, 25.

66 Comay, "Adorno's Siren Song," 24.

67 Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE*, 25–6.

This spectacular displacement testifies to the fact that Odysseus records his own self-relinquishment—or self-loss—as something that exceeds the possibility of presentation. The transgression of linguistic boundaries reveals that while the "I" may testify to its own self-affirmation, it cannot account for the loss of the prior form of subjectivity. Consequently, the subject's identification with the performance of self-affirmation generates the conditions for a crisis of presentation: to produce self-identity solely through affirmation is to repress the relinquishment that enabled its emergence. Presentation as affirmation thus fails to present the self in its unity and totality— repressing what it cannot absorb.

If self-presentation depends on a loss it cannot recover, the emergence of a reflexive self through aesthetic experience nonetheless creates the condition to reflect on it. Odysseus, as narrator of his deeds, renders this loss explicit: his κλέος takes the form of a self-mourning. Yet this remains a narration within a narration—an interruption of the *Odyssey's* narrator that allows Odysseus to become reflexive within his own story. Odysseus's self-presentation culminates in marking the site where the totalizing impulse fails to complete totality. This semantic 'place' is captured by the narrator of the epic, to whom we now turn.

4. Extradiegetic Presentation: Narration as a
Scene of Another Subjectivation

Adorno initiates the turn toward the interpretation of the poem's narrator in a short text entitled "On Epic Naiveté." Though published in *Notes to Literature,* this text originally belonged to the 1943 version of the excursus on Odysseus. In it, Adorno is concerned with the epic narrator whose task is to portray the uniqueness of the narrated event:

> The epic poem wants to report on something worth reporting on, something that is not the same as everything else, not exchangeable, something that deserves to be handed down for the sake of its name. Because, however, the narrator turns to

the world of myth for his material, his enterprise, now impossible, has always been contradictory.[68]

The attempt to present the singular event through a "communicative discourse, with its subsumptive logic that equalizes everything it reports"[69] embodies the contradiction of the epic enterprise. This is what Adorno calls "epic naïveté": presenting the non-exchangeable in a language built for interchangeability. Yet Adorno does not judge epic naïveté to be naïve. The narrator appears—however unintentionally—as a "knowing victim"[70] of his contradictory task: the poem keeps a trace of the tension between language and event.

Interpreted from the perspective of the narrator's task, a new scene emerges—one where the relation between presenting subject and presented object takes a different form. To narrate Odysseus's emergence as historical subject using the materials of mythical sameness is to attempt to present what resists presentation. The narrator here subjectivizes itself not through mastery over its content, but by presenting an object that resists its intentionality.

4.1 The Mute Objectality

Adorno locates the tension between language and event in what he calls the poem's "objectality":

> But as long as great epic poetry has existed, this contradiction has informed the narrator's modus operandi; it is the element in epic poetry commonly referred to as objectality (*Gegenständlichkeit*). In comparison, with the enlightened state of consciousness to which narrative discourse belongs, a state characterized by general concepts, this concrete or objective element always seems to be one of stupidity, lack of comprehension, ignorance, a stubborn clinging to the particular when it has already been dissolved into the universal.[71]

---

68 Adorno, *NL*, 24.

69 *Ibid.*, 25.

70 Porter, "'On Epic Naïveté': Adorno's Allegory of Philology," in *Pataphilology: An Irreader*, ed. Gurd and van Gerven Oei (Punctum Books, 2018), 105.

71 Adorno, *NL*, 25. (trans. adapted)

Objectality—the dimension toward which epic poetry is drawn while simultaneously held apart—operates within the poem. Adorno does not treat this presence as the result of an effort to translate the particular into the universal, but rather as an attempt to salvage the particular once it has been dissolved into the universal. Epic narration is conscious of this contradiction: it deliberately uses of communicative discourse against itself. As such, the presentation of the poem's objectality is not realized positively in the text but manifests only in negative form.

Adorno refers to this trace as the noise (*Rauschen*) of the epic. It marks a moment that is neither wholly linguistic nor non-linguistic, in which "what is solid and unequivocal comes together with what is ambiguous and flowing; only to immediately part again."[72] Here, noise signals the moment in which the event lets itself be heard through mythical language. It does not render the event present in language, but records it negatively—as language detaches from meaning, and poetry becomes noise. As Porter explains:

> By noise Adorno has in mind whatever blocks the transmission of rational discourse from within language. Whenever language discovers its non-rational and non-verbal resources and becomes imagistic, object-oriented, and impossible to translate back into language again, […], and instead becomes mute and opaque, itself object-like.[73]

In other words, noise manifests when language breaks from its role as a "meaning bearer" and exposes itself "stripped bare of meaning"[74]; when words revert to their materiality and appear as nothing but noise.

Adorno isolates a single particle in Book XXIV of the *Odyssey* that makes the noise audible:

> In the last book of the Odyssey, in the second nekyia, or descent to the underworld, when the shade of the suitor Amphimedon tells that of Agamemnon in Hades about the revenge of Odysseus and his son, we read: "These two, / after compacting

---

72 *Ibid.*, 24.

73 Porter, "'On Epic Naïveté': Adorno's Allegory of Philology," 99.

74 *Ibid.*, 114.

their plot of a foul death for the suitors, / made their way to the glorious town. Namely Odysseus / came afterwards; Telemachus led the way…" The word "namely" maintains the logical form, whether of explanation or of affirmation, for the sake of cohesion, while the content of the sentence, a purely descriptive statement, does not stand in any such connection to what precedes it.[75]

A great deal rests on this coordinating particle, "namely." Granted, it creates a *non sequitur* with what precedes it,[76] and it introduces a *hysteron proteron*. But Adorno sees something else at play. "Namely" functions as both hinge and hesitation: it promises an explanation, but delivers a pause. It neither completes the judgement nor breaks it off. It is the syntactic equivalent of non-identity. In other words, Adorno reads "namely" as presenting something precisely because it functions as a meaningless particle that, within the diegetic narrative, presents nothing.

In Homeric dialect, the word translated as "namely" is the particle "ἦ." Its function at the beginning of a sentence is to lend it the force of strong affirmation.[77] Phonetically, however, it is more breath than word: a voiceless glottal fricative, closer to exhalation than to articulation. Adorno identifies here a scene of collision: "In the minimal meaninglessness of this coordinating particle the spirit of logical-intentional narrative language collides with the spirit of the wordless presentation (*Darstellung*) that the former is preoccupied with."[78] The contradictory deed of the epic's narrator finds, in such collision, the moment of its presentation in language—of something that resists meaningful integration into language.

The "namely" functions as a trace of language's totalizing deed—its refusal to halt before what cannot be said—and simultaneously as a mark of the impossibility of full closure. The discursive narrative of the epic seeks to salvage the singularity of the event, and the "namely," as a

---

75 Adorno, *NL*, 27. (trans. adapted)

76 Porter, "'On Epic Naïveté': Adorno's Allegory of Philology," 112.

77 Monro, *A Grammar of the Homeric Dialect* (Clarendon Press, 1891), 308.

78 Adorno, *NL*, 27.

coordination particle, participates in this discursive impulse. It misses—yet also hits its target. It misses because it forcibly links two clauses that do not belong together. It hits because it brings language "to the place where the relationship of syntax and material dissolves and the material affirms its superiority by belying the syntactic form that attempts to encompass it."[79] At this point, *form becomes content*: syntax testifies to what it cannot subsume.

The subject that subjectivizes itself in such a presentation reveals the dialectic of Enlightenment. It presents itself both by maintaining its narrating activity and by relinquishing language as a bearer of meaning. Its self-affirmation exceeds self-mastery: the subject becomes a placeholder for the content of an experience that defies presentation. In abandoning meaning, it preserves it as the trace of something non-identical. In this gesture, the subject yields to the object it seeks to present. Self-relinquishment is not an abandonment to pre-existing power—nature, myth, etc.—but a surrender to what is powerless. This reveals the limit of presentation as the limit of a form of subjectivity. What is presented is the interruption of intentionality—a testimony that something arrests the semblance of meaning:

> It is the objective transformation of pure presentation (*Darstellung*), detached from meaning, into the allegory of history that becomes visible in the logical disintegration of epic language […] It is only by abandoning meaning that epic discourse comes to resemble the image, a figure of objective meaning emerging from the negation of subjectively rational meaning.[80]

In other words, the subject presents itself as the witness of a trace—a trace of excess, of something that the rationality guiding the epic narrator cannot absorb. It gestures toward that which transcends a historically determined structure of experience, and in doing so, it exposes the mythic logic of eternal sameness as transient.

The narrator, as a subject, is not devoid of an affirmative moment. Yet

---

79 *Ibid.*

80 *Ibid.*, 29.

the example of the "namely" makes clear that self-relinquishment should not be interpreted simply as a means of self-affirmation. Here, objective mediation comes into view: the subject relinquishes itself in relation to a specific objectality that manifests at the threshold of experience and presentation. This threshold points to the possibility of another mode of affirmation—not one grounded in the mastery over the object, but in the attempt to lend it expression. This possibility will become more legible in Adorno's reading of the Homeric caesura.

4.2 Caesura: Affirmation as Disidentification

In the final pages of the excursus on Odysseus in *DE*, Adorno turns to the brutal episode in Book XXII of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus and Telemachus enact pitiless violence against the suitors and the maidservants. This episode marks the apex of the narrative of the self-affirmative subject. The suitors have stolen property, abused hospitality, and dishonoured Odysseus—an affront that symbolically wounds the heroic subject. To reestablish his unshakeable domination, Odysseus has no choice but to annihilate those who have diminished the power of his name. Here, the totalizing logic of the epic's presentation seems to culminate in a necessary deed. Yet it is precisely at this moment—when the narrator ends the description of the maidservants' hanging—that Adorno identifies a caesura in the epic poem: "For a little while their feet kicked out—but not for very long."[81] The caesura lies before the clause "but not for very long," which Gilbert Murray described as a "saving line,"[82] added when the *Odyssey* was formed as a canonical text in the third century BCE.[83] According to Murray, this addition was moral: the epic's violence—especially against women—had already begun to

---

81 Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE*, 61.

82 Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic* (Oxford University Press, 1934), 127.

83 Murray's interpretation is contested. Nonetheless, it is the basis of Adorno's reading of this passage.

For a more recent account of these verses: Russo, Fernandez-Galiano and Heubeck, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*, vol 3 (Oxford University Press, 1992), 303–04.

appear "unworthy of Homer."[84] As Márton Dornbach summarizes: "what Adorno terms a caesura is the trace of a literary censorship of sorts that here takes the form of a mitigating addition dictated by a change in sensibilities."[85] The caesura appears as a silence between the narration of the violent act by the anonymous Ionian bard and the consoling line introduced by the "Homeric spirit"[86] —a figure that, for Adorno, stands in for the historical process by which the *Odyssey* became a canonical text.

The silence in the caesura is rich in content: it expresses simultaneously the silence of death, the muteness of humans reduced to animal nature, and the narrative's refusal to depict the agony of the maidservants. For Adorno, this silence is not merely thematic—it marks a shift in the narrator's stance. The caesura, he argues, signals a moment of self-reflection, where the narrator disidentifies from the diegetic content of the narration:

> It is not in the content of the deeds reported that civilization transcends that world. It is in the self-reflection which causes violence to pause at the moment of narrating such deeds. […] But when speech pauses, the caesura allows the events narrated to be transformed into something long past, and causes to flash up a semblance of freedom that civilization has been unable wholly to extinguish ever since.[87]

The caesura, as a pause, is the fragmenting moment that prevents the totalizing impulse of the epic from reaching full closure. What it renders legible is the transition from myth to history: the epic narrator's fidelity to mythical discourse gives way to the novel narrator's judgement upon the deed. The distance manifested in language attests to a historical distance— one made possible through the rhetorical device of the caesura. The very fact that speech can pause without collapsing suggests a historical surplus. If language can refuse, even momentarily, to continue the chain of domination, then a different configuration of praxis remains thinkable.

---

84 Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, 123.

85 Dornbach, *The Saving Line*, 92.

86 Horkheimer and Adorno, *DE*, 35.

87 *Ibid.*, 61.

Unlike the "namely," which bore witness to the subject's loss of mastery over the medium of language, the distance articulated in the caesura must be understood as a form of subjective self-affirmation. An ambiguous one, no doubt—but one in which the subject manifests itself through disidentification, and then consumes this distance by passing judgement on the narrated deed. This reflexive judgement is not convincing: "But after the words 'not for long' the inner flow of the narrative comes to rest. 'Not for long?' the narrator asks by this device, giving the lie to his own composure."[88] The subject who seeks to place the disturbing act at a distance and assert inner mastery through composure enacts precisely the opposite: it presents itself as torn between its judgement of the narrated content's unacceptability and the narrative necessity it performs—a necessity revealed as mere contingency that nonetheless resists immediate transformation.

The narrator's ambiguous self-affirmation is, surprisingly, commensurate with his objective situation: "In being brought to a standstill, the report is prevented from forgetting the victims of the execution and lays bare the unspeakably endless torment of the single second in which the maids fought against death.[89]" It is by distancing itself from the narrated deeds that the narration enforces remembrance and records these women as victims of Odysseus's enlightened subjectivity. This remembrance reveals a historical continuity between our present and the mythical past. Civilization has not overcome its violent self-affirmation, yet it expresses unease when confronted with the violence of its origin. The narrator's moral discomfort reveals that a historical distancing has taken place. As Adorno concludes the excursus on Odysseus: "in the report of the infamous deed, hope lies in the fact that it is long past. Over the raveled skein of prehistory, barbarism, and culture, Homer passes the soothing hand of remembrance, bringing the solace of 'once upon a time.' Only as the novel is the epic transmuted into fairy tale."[90] The "soothing hand"

---

88 *Ibid.*, 62.

89 *Ibid.*

90 *Ibid.*

is double-edged: it anaesthetizes, yet it also holds memory just long enough for critique to act upon it. The caesura is hopeful precisely because it is not redemptive. It is the experiential proof that language can interrupt its own spell and points to the fact that critique is structurally always possible.

The caesura reveals the narrator not as a redeemer, but as a reflexive subject who uses language—the medium of presentation—to interrupt the spell of totalizing self-affirmation and expose the dialectic of self-relinquishment and self-affirmation to be constitutive of such reflectivity. The objectality it seeks to present is the historical task of a dual process: remembrance and conjuration—both of which pressure the present to consume its rupture with domination.

5. Conclusion

Too often, *DE* is read solely as a thesis about Enlightenment's self-betrayal. But its central insight cuts both ways: if Enlightenment becomes myth, then myth—which is already Enlightenment—must expose the moment of hope: namely, its objectality. Through a transformed mode of *Darstellung*, Adorno glimpses this reversal—not as redemption, but as reflexive caesura.

Adorno's excursus on Odysseus, exposes that every attempt to totalize—whether epic narration, or subjective self-presentation—necessarily fails. Neither the subject's origin,[91] nor the closure of its narrative[92] can be fully internalized, leaving totality subjected to a process of fragmentation.[93] By tracing the line of this fragmentation in the *Odyssey*—the mo-

---

91 Odysseus's Outis, or its first person κλέος.

92 The "namely" which pursues the narration while interrupting meaning. Or the caesura which puts the apparent necessity of the violent deeds at distance and reveals that speech can pause without collapsing.

93 From a Critical Theory perspective, constellation and totality are not two options offered on the epistemological market that one would be at liberty to choose. The standpoint of the constellation deciphers in all totalizing attempt something resisting totalization. Constellatory philosophy reveals totalities as constellations and forces them to relinquish the structure of domination they aspire to.

ment of deceit in sacrifice, the structural role of self-relinquishment, the appearance of aesthetic reflectivity, the poem's objectality, and finally the caesura—Adorno draws a constellation expressing a historically un-realized possibility: a form of subjectivity not subordinated to the spell of totalizing unity.

In this sense, constellatory thinking can be read as the attempt to pres-ent something which transcends the actual socio-historical state of af-fairs. As he says in *Minima Moralia*:

> What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory sees itself relegated to transverse, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic.[94]

Adorno's interpretation of the Homeric narrator presents a potentiality expressed by Hellenic society, a possibility that has not been developed as a historical form of subjectivity but was pushed into the position of what "did not fit properly into the laws of the historical movement." The "anachronistic quality" of Adorno's reading of the caesura as "unassimilated material" reveals how the outcasted possibility is not "wholly obsolete": it points in the direction of a not yet existing subjectivity, one that does not manifest through the self-affirming mastery over its object but who seeks to express itself through the liberation of the expressivity of the experienced object. Through this dispositive, Adorno is able to present a possibility not positively given in actuality, but a possibility that can nonetheless be presented, albeit negatively, through the construction of constellations. In this situation, presentation becomes genuinely generative—confirming presentation as the scene on which subjectivity appears.

Because constellations through which fragments gain meaning seek to present what transcends actuality, neither can be a monad closed

---

94 Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (Verso, 2005b), 151. (trans. adapted)

upon itself; it is structurally that they point beyond themselves. In other words, a self-referential constellation reverts to meaninglessness. By virtue of the communicative principle through which the constellations are formed, they do not seek closure or self-referentiality but rather the possibility to express the play of identity-in-difference that obtains through communication rather than subordination. In the text "On Subject and Object," Adorno describes, in a rare moment of positive speculation, the form of the relation that could obtain through the "state of reconciliation":

> Were speculation concerning the state of reconciliation allowed, then it would be impossible to conceive that state as either the undifferentiated unity of subject and object or their hostile antithesis: rather it would be the communication of what is differentiated. Only then would the concept of communication, as an objective concept, come into its own. […] In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their other. Peace is the state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.[95]

To actualize such a possibility, a new form of subjectivity needs to take hold historically, itself dependent upon new social configurations capable of producing and supporting it. What is possible, here and now, is to reflect on how to present the traces pointing toward the actualization of the possibility of the state of reconciliation. This is the contribution made by *DE* toward a new theory of presentation: The reflexive subject that emerges in the narrator of the epic is the effect of an aesthetic (reflexive) subjectivity first traced in the episode of the Sirens. It enacts the possibility of reflection through aesthetic distance, manifesting a subject that withdraws from its own affirmative impulse. In doing so, it becomes capable of grasping self-relinquishment not solely as a means of self-affirmation, but as a constitutive moment of subjectivity in its own right.

---

95 Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (Columbia University Press, 2005a), 247.

From this vantage point, the discontinuous elements of experience no longer threaten the unity of the subject; they become its very condition. What appears as dissonance or loss from the standpoint of identity is revealed as the material of a new kind of presentation—one that neither excludes nor totalizes, but *presents the failure of presentation as intrinsic to subjectivity itself*.

Adorno's wager is that the ideal of the unity of subjectivity need not be abandoned—nor falsely completed—but can be critically preserved through its own reflection. Unlike approaches that dissolve the subject into fragmentation or undecidability, Adorno's dialectical critique insists on preserving the subject's ideal without assimilating what resists it. He walks the faultline of the dialectic of Enlightenment: not merely registering its collapse into myth but intensifying it until a different relation to Enlightenment becomes thinkable.

Bibliography

Adorno, T.W. 1973. *Negative Dialektik/Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.

Adorno, T.W. 1991. *Notes to literature*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Adorno, T.W. 2000. The Actuality of Philosophy. *In:* O'Connor, B. (ed.) *The Adorno Reader.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Adorno, T.W. 2005a. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Adorno, T.W. 2005b. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, London, Verso.

Adorno, T.W. 2007. Theses on the Language of the Philosopher. *In:* Burke, D.A., Campbell, C.J., Kiloh, K., Palamarek, M.K., *et al.* (eds.) *Adorno and the Need in Thinking.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Adorno, T.W. 2021. *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Dennis Redmond, Non-Commercial Edition.

Benjamin, W. 2004–2006. *Selected Writings*, Cambridge, Belknap Press.

Benjamin, W. 2019. *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

Clavey, C.H. 2023. Myth, sacrifice, and the critique of capitalism in dialectic of enlightenment. *History of European Ideas,* 49**,** 1268–1285.

Comay, R. 2000. Adorno's Siren Song. *New German Critique,* No. 81**,** 21–48.

Dornbach, M. 2021. *The Saving Line: Benjamin, Adorno and the Caesuras of Hope,* Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press.

Freyenhagen, F. 2024. Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. *Res Philosophica,* 101**,** 245–269.

Gasché, R. 2003. *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics,* Stanford, Stanford University Press.

Hansteen, H.M. 2010. Adornos philosophische Rhetorik oder »Wie zu lesen sei«. *Zeitschrift für kritische Theorie,* 16**,** 97–124.

Hegel, G.W.F. 1977. *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Hegel, G.W.F. 2007. *Philosophy of Mind,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Helfer, M.B. 1996. *The Retreat of Representation: The Concept of Darstellung in German Critical Discourse,* Albany, State University of New York Press.

Honneth, A. 2007. *Disrespect; The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory,* Cambridge, Polity.

Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T.W. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments,* Stanford, Stanford University Press.

Kant, I. 2002. *Critique of the Power of Judgment,* Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.

Lukács, G. 1971. *The Theory of the Novel,* Cambridge, The MIT Press.

Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1975–2004. *Collected Works,* London, Lawrence Wishart.

Monro, D.B. 1891. *A Grammar of the Homeric Dialect,* Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Murray, G. 1934. *The Rise of the Greek Epic,* London, Oxford University Press.

Porter, J.I. 2010. Odysseus and the Wandering Jew: The Dialectic of Jewish Enlightenment in Adorno and Horkheimer. *Cultural Critique***,** 200–213.

Porter, J.I. 2018. 'On Epic Naïveté': Adorno's Allegory of Philology. *In:*

Gurd, S. & van Gerven Oei, V.W.J. (eds.) *Pataphilology: An Irreader.* Goleta: Punctum Books.

Ross, W. 2025. Kant's Hypotyposis as Rhetorical and Poetical Presentation. *In:* Fabbianelli, F. & Fadulto, A. (eds.) *Kant and the Space of Feelings.* Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter.

Russo, J., Fernandez-Galiano, M. & Heubeck, A. 1992. *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Schlegel, F. 1958ff. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe,* Paderborn, Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh.

Schubbach, A. 2017a. Der ‚Begriff der Sache'. Kants und Hegels Konzeptionen der Darstellung zwischen Philosophie, geometrischer Konstruktion und chemischem Experiment. *Hegel Studien,* 51**,** 121-162.

Schubbach, A. 2017b. Kants Konzeption der geometrischen Darstellung. *Kant Studien,* 108**,** 19-54.

Schubbach, A. 2019. Leben und Darstellung in Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft. Zwischen Ästhetik, Epistemologie und Ethik. *In:* Gess, N., Hoffman, A. & Kappeler, A. (eds.) *Belebungskünste: Praktiken lebendiger Darstellung in Literatur, Kunst und Wissenschaft um 1800.* Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.

Scribner, F.S. 2010. *Matters of Spirit: J. G. Fichte and the Technological Imagination,* University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Todorov, T. 1971. *Poétique de la prose,* Paris, Seuil.

Wellmer, A. 2000. The Death of the Sirens and the Origin of the Work of Art. *New German Critique,* No. 81.

The lively voice of Critical Theory

The Berlin Journal of Critical Theory (BJCT) is a peer-reviewed journal published in both electronic and print formats by Xenomoi Verlag in Berlin. Our mission is to spotlight the critical theory developed by the first generation of the Frankfurt School while extending its insights to address contemporary issues. Regrettably, the concerns and theories of this pioneering generation are often overlooked by the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School.

We assert that the early Frankfurt School's theories remain highly relevant for explaining the social, cultural, and political challenges of today. However, these theories sometimes require revision to address the realities of the modern world. For instance, Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry emphasized the unidirectional influence of mass media. Today, the media landscape has evolved to enable greater interactivity, allowing audiences to respond to or create content. Nevertheless, cultural domination through media persists, albeit through new mechanisms. Revisiting and updating the theory of the culture industry is essential for understanding these emerging forms of control.

The BJCT aims to bridge the foundational ideas of the first-generation Frankfurt School with the challenges of the contemporary world. To achieve this, we have assembled a distinguished editorial board of leading scholars in critical theory, dedicated to selecting and publishing original, high-quality articles.

www.bjct.de

Xenomoi