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# CONSTELLATIONS OF ADORNIAN THEORY AND FILM

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*Readings of Adorno with  
Tarkovsky and Haneke*

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Doctor of Philosophy

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*January 2011*

## Declaration

I, Simon Mussell, hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

**Signature** ..... **Date** .....

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

CONSTELLATIONS OF ADORNIAN THEORY AND FILM:  
READINGS OF ADORNO WITH TARKOVSKY AND HANEKE

SUMMARY

This thesis engages in analysis and interpretation of certain ideas within the critical theory of Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969). These analyses are placed into a constellational relationship with some filmic works of Andrei Tarkovsky and Michael Haneke. In doing so, I aim to highlight the ongoing relevance and validity of at least some core elements of Adornian theory in a contemporary context.

The thesis consists of four substantive chapters. The first chapter functions as an extended introduction to and justification for the thesis as a whole, and it provides the theoretical background to the project before explicating the idea of a *constellational* method. The second chapter explores the notion of *mimesis* in Adorno's thought and Tarkovsky's films as a crucial rejoinder to the prevailing 'communicative' paradigm instituted in large part by Jürgen Habermas' work. The third chapter considers the importance of *marginality* to the task of social critique by analyzing Adorno's theoretical reflections on the matter and how these can be related to and supported by Haneke's filmic work. The fourth and final chapter examines the relationship between *humanity and nature* within two preeminent ecological discourses, in contrast to Adorno's critical theory and some of Tarkovsky's films, with the intention of showing how the latter offer a more nuanced and dialectical understanding of this relation.

Throughout the analyses herein, I defend and demonstrate the fertility and pertinence of Adornian theory, for both the interpretation of film and robust criticism of extant social and political conditions. The thesis shows that by constellating Adorno's critical theory with film one may bring out important insights that enhance and enable people's capacity to critically respond to the woefully inadequate status quo.

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### *Abbreviations*

- AP Adorno, T. W. (1977 [1931]) 'The Actuality of Philosophy' [trans. B. Snow] *Telos* 31 (Spring), 120-133
- INH Adorno, T. W. (1984 [1932]) 'The Idea of Natural History' [trans. R. Hullot-Kentor] *Telos* 60 (Summer), 111-124
- DE Adorno, T. W. and Horkheimer, M. (1997 [1944]) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [trans. E. Jephcott] London: Verso
- MM Adorno, T. W. (2005 [1951]) *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* [trans. E. Jephcott] London: Verso
- SP1 Adorno, T. W. (1967 [1955]) 'Sociology and Psychology' (Part 1) *New Left Review* I/46, 67-80
- SP2 Adorno, T. W. (1968 [1955]) 'Sociology and Psychology' (Part 2) *New Left Review* I/47, 79-97
- KCPR Adorno, T. W. (2001 [1959]) *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* [trans. R. Livingstone] Stanford: Stanford University Press
- ND Adorno, T. W. (1973 [1966]) *Negative Dialectics* [trans. E. B. Ashton] New York: Continuum
- TF Adorno, T. W. (1981 [1966]) 'Transparencies on Film' [trans. T. Y. Levin] *New German Critique* 24/25, 199-205
- S Adorno, T. W. (1969-1970 [1966]) 'Society' [trans. F. Jameson] *Salmagundi* 3(10-11), 144-153
- P Adorno, T. W. (1981 [1967]) *Prisms* [trans. S. & S. Weber] Massachusetts: MIT Press
- EAA Adorno, T. W. (1998 [1967]) 'Education After Auschwitz' [trans. H. W. Pickford] in T. W. Adorno & H. W. Pickford (ed.) *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* New York: Columbia University Press (191-204)
- SO Adorno, T. W. (1998 [1969]) 'On Subject and Object' [trans. H. W. Pickford] in T. W. Adorno & H. W. Pickford (ed.) *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* New York: Columbia University Press (245-258)
- MTP Adorno, T. W. (1998 [1969]) 'Marginalia to Theory and Praxis' [trans. H. W. Pickford] in T. W. Adorno & H. W. Pickford (ed.) *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* New York: Columbia University Press (259-278)

AT     Adorno, T. W. (2004 [1970]) *Aesthetic Theory* [trans. R. Hullot-Kentor] London:  
Continuum

# INTRODUCTION

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The point from which I set out to write this thesis appears simultaneously distal and proximal. In terms of temporality and topic, the origin feels distant, since the project has undergone a number of major changes over an extended period of time. Yet, in terms of its final configuration and content, the thesis feels absolutely proximal, as if its varied mutations were but a natural outgrowth of its origin and could not have been otherwise. Despite this ostensible reconciliation of origin and outcome, it is, nonetheless, worthwhile explaining some of the developments that have resulted in the thesis taking its present form. The initial point of departure and scheduled destination have proven to be markedly unfixed and ungraspable, like tiny fragments immersed in water, flitting about unpredictably as one tries repeatedly in vain to capture them. My project began with the idea of examining some of the problems involved in the theory and practice of social critique, with a view of advocating a form of critical social theory that went beyond the malaise of postmodernist discourse and its related political impasse. But, having passed through the countless vistas that connect such diverse people, objects and ideas (such as I have been fortunate enough to experience along the way), my initial aims were continually refocused and refined before ultimately taking shape in the form offered herein. What may look to be a radical shift in direction and focus is rather nothing but an uncoerced and, one might even say, 'natural' progression of thought. At the core of my thinking is the desire to seek out the potential of critical consciousness, wherever it might be found, with a view to better understanding the woefully imperfect social world in which we live. I take it as read that in recounting such a desire an entire history of critical thought is

invoked. Within this rich history there has been no single predominant approach towards the goal of achieving socio-critical insight, and I believe this to be a reflection of the contextual dynamics that drive and force critical thought to ever new vantage points.

Since my first substantive encounters with the critical theory of Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), I have found myself drawing upon certain of his ideas in responding critically to the social world. In reiterating and refreshing one of Adorno's own theoretical claims, I would argue that today it is not only valuable but absolutely necessary that we look towards artworks (and, in particular, the perpetually evolving medium of *film*) as providing a potential foothold from which we may surmount the formidable face of rarefied political discourse, push-button political activism, cynicism, irony, distanciation, ubiquitous media spin, and the insidious general propensity for judging people and ideas solely or primarily on the basis of brute quantification and, as the current egregious vernacular ceaselessly insists, 'impact'.

In times such as these, I believe it appropriate, if not indeed a matter of *principle*, to call into question such myopic practices and try to expand the possible avenues for thinking and acting in ethically and politically responsible ways. For just such reasons, this project will not take the form of a traditional political or sociological treatise. Instead, I undertake to analyze particular concepts within the critical theory of Adorno and relate (and *constellate*) these concepts to filmic artworks, in a manner which, I hope, can provoke socially critical insights and interpretations. The analyses herein aim to operate dialectically, inasmuch as not only will they attempt to show how Adornian theory can aid the practice of film interpretation, but also how certain filmic artworks may enact and illuminate important elements of Adornian theory. Thus, the analytical process should move in both directions, from Adorno to film and vice versa.

The scope of the thesis is necessarily limited. Adorno's philosophical concerns are extraordinarily wide-ranging and it would be impossible to examine them with anything like the requisite detail in a single work. However, this evident impossibility does not pose as great a problem as it may at first appear. For, despite his somewhat perplexing claim that in a philosophical text "all the propositions ought to be equally close to the centre" (MM, §44, p. 71), there are particular concepts in Adorno's works that, if not occupying a more central position as such, at least are treated more frequently and rigorously than others. Moreover, since critical theory (and the interpretation thereof) is an actively historicist pursuit, to the extent that thought and its presentation must be considered in concrete socio-historical contexts, one should not hesitate in discarding certain of Adorno's arguments that, for the present time at least, retain negligible relevance or truth-content. For instance, while this thesis will be engaging with cultural artefacts (films), I will not be retreading the well-worn paths of Adorno's influential 'culture industry' thesis, since the thesis is, in my view, less socially and politically significant than the concepts on which I have chosen to focus. The concepts to be explored, interpreted and ultimately defended here have been selected on account of what I take to be their critical potential amid the contemporary social, cultural, economic and political climate. The structure of the thesis will take the following form.

In the opening chapter, I seek to situate my project within the current theoretical climate. The chapter commences with an overview of some of the typical approaches to contemporary Adornian studies, as well as their potential limitations (section 1.1). I then move on to consider the ways in which Adorno's critical theory has been ignored in the recent disciplinary stalemate between political economy and cultural studies, respectively, and attempt to address this costly oversight (section 1.2). The chapter then acknowledges the problematic and dismissive views on film expressed throughout Adorno's corpus, before

defending the validity of and value in exploring filmic works with and through Adornian theory – in other words, deploying Adorno's critically potent concepts against or in spite of himself (section 1.3). The chapter concludes with an outline of the underlying methodology of the thesis, which I refer to as the 'constellational method' (section 1.4). This approach is elucidated with recourse to the work of Walter Benjamin and Adorno's (qualified) appropriation of his friend's ideas.

Chapter II explores the complex concept of *mimesis* by constellating the theoretical work of Adorno and the filmic work of Tarkovsky, in a bid to offer a much needed counterweight to the prevalent communicative paradigm instituted by one of Adorno's junior Frankfurt colleagues, Jürgen Habermas. The latter's self-defined move from the 'philosophy of consciousness' to 'linguistic philosophy' has, in the process, almost completely eradicated *mimesis* as a critical concept. My argument here will be that *mimesis* is an indispensable and timely alternative to the leading conceptions of rationality, namely, *instrumental* and *communicative*. The chapter begins with an exploration of the early uses of *mimesis* in Adorno's thinking (section 1), before moving on to consider Habermas' 'communicative turn' (section 2). I also map the further development of Adorno's conception of *mimesis* and contrast this to the unduly dismissive Habermasian reading with a view to rescuing *mimesis* from critical-theoretical oblivion. The final part of the chapter (section 3) looks to Tarkovsky's films as an aesthetic complement to and enactment of an Adornian understanding of *mimesis*.

Chapter III examines the social critique at work in Adorno's thought and Haneke's films, and argues for the importance of *marginality* for both the theory and practice of effective criticism. The first section considers the macro-level critique of Adornian theory and makes the case for reading both Adorno and

Haneke as anti-psychological social critics (sections 1.1 and 1.2). This argument precedes a discussion of the apparent absence of a collective revolutionary subject and the implications this has for a critical social theory (section 1.3). The second half of the chapter is dedicated to developing the idea of what I refer to as *marginal subjectivity*. The first of two subsections defends the legitimacy of estrangement as part of such marginal subjectivity (section 2.1), while the second explores the dialectic of 'bourgeois coldness' and analyzes the ways in which this functions as a crucial catalyst for critique in both Adorno's social theory and Haneke's films (section 2.2).

Chapter IV concerns the mediation of humanity and nature. The chapter commences with an overview of the core tenets of two influential ecological discourses, namely, 'deep ecology' (section 1.1) and 'social ecology' (section 1.2). Despite having in common the aim of altering human interactions with the natural world, the relationship between the discourses of deep ecology and social ecology has been greatly hostile and antagonistic. After rehearsing some of their central arguments, I offer some criticisms of each in turn (section 1.3), before exploring Adorno's complex invocations of nature in his critical theory (section 2). Having presented and defended an Adornian understanding of the dialectic between humanity and nature, I conclude the chapter by constellating this reading with the film aesthetics of Tarkovsky (section 3).

# CHAPTER I

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## ADORNO, FILM, AND CONSTELLATIONS

### INTRODUCTION

In this opening chapter, I will present the rationale behind the thesis – in terms of its particular structure, content and method – as well as the contribution I hope it will make to the existing literature on Theodor W. Adorno. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first (1.1) provides a review of some of the Anglophone commentary on and reception of Adorno's work. The second (1.2) examines the various ways in which Adornian theory has been neglected in the recent disciplinary standoff that has emerged between cultural studies, on the one side, and political economy, on the other. In the third section (1.3), I offer some reflections on Adorno's relationship to film and give reasons for my decision to bring the two together, since the plausibility and desirability of making this link are not self-evident. In the final section (1.4), I explain the manner in which I will use Adornian theory and film, in other words, the methodological approach of the thesis. This will entail an explanation and defence of, what I will call, a 'constellational method', which, on my reading, offers an interpretive, provocative and speculative approach to the critical analysis of cultural objects – indeed, a method which, in my view, moves cultural theory beyond the aforementioned theoretical stalemate between political economy and cultural studies.



## 1. WHY ADORNO AND FILM?

There are many reasons that draw (or return) one to Adorno's thought. Whether it is the inimitable style and form of his often bristly prose, or the virtuosity exhibited in his interpretations and appropriations of the most varied cultural artefacts, or the bracing breeze arising from the pages of his austere negativity, Adorno's critical theory is without doubt a most fertile ground for philosophical reflection, social critique and aesthetic interpretation. His works not only span but actively flout disciplinary boundaries as a matter of routine, in a way that acknowledges the dialectics of the fragment and totality, the individual and society, the particular and the general, the subject and object, immanence and transcendence. Adorno's reflections frequently betray the precise gaze of a specialist combined with a panoramic vision for social and political criticism. Yet, it is perhaps this combination of perspectives – reading the fragment *through* the totality, and the totality *out of* the fragment – that has caused an under-appreciation of the unbreakable connection between Adorno's cultural analyses and his philosophical ideas. There are seldom any existing works on Adorno's critical theory that seek to draw upon his substantive social philosophy and relate this to cultural forms (let alone *film*). Instead, a number of competing 'Adornos' appear, and in and through these variations certain influences, leanings and projects are emphasized or downplayed, depending largely on the person doing the interpreting. I do not suppose that this present work will be entirely free of such 'subjective' projections in its readings of Adorno, but I do hope that, in what follows, I can demonstrate the continuing relevance of particular aspects of Adorno's critical theory not only on their own terms but also in constellation with existing cultural forms (specifically, the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Michael Haneke).

In this opening chapter, then, I will first consider some trends and possible limitations of the existing literature on, and interpretations of, Adorno, before examining the debilitating disciplinary divide that has been erected between political economy and cultural studies. I will also argue the case for utilizing film as a valid object of study, particularly in relation to Adorno whose views of the medium are frequently disparaging. Finally, I will outline the underlying methodology of the thesis, which can be said to be constellational. In doing so, I aim to highlight the necessity for further scholarly investment in Adorno's corpus, and in particular the ways in which his philosophical reflections should be read through, or at least linked more closely with, culture and aesthetics. The latter phenomena demand greater social and political emphasis and, in my view, cannot be simply lobbed off, as it were, from Adorno's critical theory lest much of the critical and political intent of his thought be diminished.

### *1.1 Rendering Adorno*

When dealing with a writer whose interests and ideas extend far beyond the usual boundaries of disciplinary segregation, the threat of projecting into the work one's own perspectives and desires is almost unavoidable. Adorno's critical theory flouts such scholarly conventions and disciplinary lines so freely as to make the very act of reading and interpreting it feel like, despite one's best efforts, a coercive and violent act of reductionism. The constellation of influences that feed into Adorno's thought is richly varied and, while this makes his texts intriguing to read, it also confounds the task of interpretation. A list of influences would include (though not exhaustively) Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Weber, Lukács, Kracauer, Horkheimer and Benjamin. One could add here the names of numerous thinkers with whom Adorno profoundly disagreed – such as Husserl, Heidegger, Mannheim, Popper, to name but a few – to the extent that these authors also played a significant part

in the development of Adorno's critical theory, if only by way of negation or confrontation. In acknowledging the sheer breadth of these intellectual influences, and the fact that their presence can be detected in the various texts of Adorno's oeuvre, it appears that the works themselves are highly conducive to just the kind of projection and selective emphasis that have come to characterize much of the secondary literature. Espen Hammer makes reference to this plethora of emphases and influences in posing the following questions:

Is Adorno a kind of Nietzschean Marxist? Or is he a modified Hegelian with a Kantian sense of finitude and limitation? How pervasive is the influence of Lukács and Weber? And what effect does the Judaic impulse, mediated by Rosenzweig and Benjamin, actually have? (2006, p. 4)

These kinds of questions perpetually circle the mind of Adorno's readers and interpreters, particularly those who exist within the highly specialized confines of academia. This mild obsession with categorization – aptly symptomatic of what Adorno refers to as 'identity-thinking' – is reflected in existing commentaries, which are replete with readings that routinely shift emphasis, usually with the aim of constructing a coherent 'Adorno', while in the process seeking to iron out ostensible contradictions and resolve undesirable paradoxes. Later, I will explain why this kind of rendering of Adorno is understandable but problematic. For now though, it is worth giving an overview of some such 'selective' readings.

Simon Jarvis' critical introduction, though utterly indispensable for Adornian studies, plays its part in propagating the divided approaches to Adorno's work that move along diverse and often conflicting paths. As David Ayers notes in his review of the book, Jarvis gives an almost exclusively *philosophical* rendering of Adorno's thought, with a particularly keen focus on Kant. This reading contributes significantly towards the sidelining of other major facets of the critical theorist's corpus – most notably, the continual and complex interrelation

with the thought of Walter Benjamin, and Adorno's dialectical cultural criticism (Ayers, 1999, p. 38). While certain aspects of Adornian theory are well introduced and explicated for an interested but not necessarily expert reader, the author's desire to produce a provocative philosophical account of Adorno's thought eventually exceeds and subsumes these broader aims of what is, after all, supposed to be an 'introductory' text. Jarvis also, on the very first page, refers to what he sees as the "startling inner coherence of [Adorno's] thought" (1998, p. 1).<sup>1</sup> Yet, a couple of pages later, he duly notes that, in light of the expansiveness of Adorno's concerns, thoughts and interests, any exposition of his work entails "doing some violence to it" (ibid., p. 3). While these two claims are not necessarily contradictory, they do, however, point to a potential problem: for might it be the case that the supposed 'inner coherence' of Adorno's thought can only be rendered precisely by 'doing some violence to it'? In other words, the theoretical coherence Jarvis identifies may only appear after the interpreter's influence has been imparted.

Following the belief that "True thoughts are those alone which do not understand themselves" (MM, p. 192), my reading of Adorno attempts to draw upon the coherence of certain ideas in his critical theory, rather than supposing there to be a consistent totality of thought.<sup>2</sup> As a staunchly anti-systematic thinker, it would seem to be appropriate to read Adorno in such a fragmentary and constellative form, brushing up against the unsmoothed edges of his thought as opposed to overzealously sanding them down to fit into a pre-existing frame. I will have more to say on the constellational method (see

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<sup>1</sup> See also: "[All of Adorno's arguments] share a philosophical idiom which gives his work its internal coherence" (1998, p. 3).

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, just prior to completing this thesis, I discovered that Adorno followed just such an interpretive procedure during his readings of Kant: "I, on the contrary, am much more interested in the inconsistencies, the contradictions in Kant. I regard these inconsistencies and contradictions as providing far more compelling evidence of Kant's greatness than any harmonious system. This is because they express the life of truth, whereas smoothing over the contradictions and creating a superficial synthesis is an easy task" (KCPR, p. 80).

section 1.4). For now, let us consider other secondary works on Adorno and their potential limitations.

In contrast to the idea of their being multiple Adornos, it may be more telling to note the different subgenres of Adornian scholarship that have emerged recently. A provisional typology of these subdivisions might include: ethical readings; poststructuralist readings; aesthetic readings; historical readings; cultural readings; political readings. Of course, the boundaries between some of these approaches are porous and allow for some crossover. For example, many political readings draw out the ethical implications of Adorno's thought, while poststructuralist appropriations often also engage Adorno's aesthetics. Furthermore, despite the general air of neutrality and objectivity one finds in historical approaches to Adorno's work, such efforts must always be understood as (at least in part) constituting a political intervention.<sup>3</sup> It is not necessary here to go into great detail with regard to existing literature, since my aim is to avoid producing a reading of Adorno that comfortably fits in to these existing typologies. However, it will be worthwhile acknowledging the variety of positions and how they have construed and constructed Adorno's critical theory along very different interpretive lines.

The most significant contributions to the development of an ethical Adorno come from Jay Bernstein. Over the past two decades, Bernstein has produced three notable book-length studies that deal with, firstly, Adorno's aesthetic modernism as an ethical critique of instrumental reason that, on Bernstein's account, is lacking in deconstructionism (Bernstein, 1992), secondly, the

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<sup>3</sup> See the recent biographies of Adorno by Detlev Claussen (2008 [2003]) and Stefan Müller-Doohm (2009 [2003]), as well as the mainstay historical studies of the Frankfurt School undertaken by Martin Jay (1973) and Rolf Wiggershaus (1995). See also Jay (1984b), which combines biographical details with all too brief introductory remarks on Adornian theoretical concepts: the inadequacies of Jay's prefatory text in combination with Jarvis' idiosyncratic introduction have given due cause for more measured and standard, if less thought-provoking, entry-level assessments of Adorno (see, for example, Cook, 2008; Thomson, 2006).

shortcomings of Habermasian discourse ethics (Bernstein, 1995), and thirdly, the task of sketching out a normative ethical theory from Adorno's work (Bernstein, 2001). This latter text is the single most substantial attempt at bringing Adorno's ethics out into the open. From a poststructuralist angle, Drucilla Cornell (1992) has also examined the fruitfulness of an Adornian understanding of non-identity and its contribution to an ethical form of deconstruction. She reads Adorno with Derrida and Levinas in an attempt to theorize the positing of 'limits', and suggests how a deconstructionist ethics can do justice to the excluded other, the inevitable 'beyond' of any posited limit. In her appropriation of Adorno, Cornell sides with other poststructuralists in accentuating Adorno's critique of Western reason, logocentrism, progress, teleology, the myth of coherent subjecthood, and so forth (see Nägele, 1986). Peter Dews (1989) offers an important tempering of this influential deconstructive trend in Adornian interpretation.

In a more political vein, the likes of Robert Hullot-Kentor (2006) and Fredric Jameson (1990) have attempted to defend (elements of) Adorno's critical theory as an authentic and timely development in the course of Marxist thought that exhibits a profound pertinence for contemporary social and political critique. While Hullot-Kentor remains positively aloof to the categories of postmodernism and instead defends the dialectical and materialist thinking of Adorno, Jameson is more accepting of the ostensible 'postmodern turn' but upholds the legitimacy and aptness of Adorno's theory for the postmodern epoch. Both accounts (re)insert Marx firmly at the heart of Adorno's thinking and follow the general historical trajectory of Western Marxism.

There is little doubt that the work of Jürgen Habermas has done more than most to shape – some might say *disfigure* – the legacy of Adorno's critical theory. For nearly three decades now, Habermas' version of critical theory has

held a privileged position amid the critical-theoretical imagination, producing *en route* a caricatured, outdated and irrationalist image of Adorno. Habermas' critiques of Adorno in the 1980s played a pivotal role in preparing the way for the significant paradigm shift towards 'communicative action'. Habermas aligns Adorno (and Horkheimer) with 'irrationalist' thinkers like Sade and Nietzsche, claiming that such totalizing social critique is untenable, unhelpful and outdated. In its place Habermas calls for greater faith in the resilient and self-reflective reason, which through language and discourse ethics moves towards enlightened emancipation. As a counterweight to the deconstructive readings, the communicative turn takes a reconstructive and rational approach to critical theory, viewing modernity and enlightenment as an 'unfinished project'. Influential junior colleagues of Habermas, namely, Axel Honneth and Albrecht Wellmer, also continue this reconstructive line of defence. Despite offering more balanced readings of Adorno and first-generation critical theory generally, Honneth and Wellmer still follow Habermas' call for a move beyond Adorno.

Alongside the paradigmatic Habermasian critique, cultural studies readings of Adorno are extremely prominent within the contemporary academic context. In such readings, Adorno is cast in the depressingly familiar light of an elitist mandarin with nothing but disdain for popular culture and an anachronistic belief in the ideals of (high) modernism. Jim Collins' (1987) work is one of the shrillest dismissals of Adorno's critical theory in general and the culture industry thesis in particular, seeing in it a typical case of Marxist economic reductionism and misplaced romanticism that are, so the argument goes, simply inappropriate for and inadequate to the diversity of cultural forms within our contemporary postmodern landscape. A similar line of attack is taken by John Thompson who – following most readings of Adorno in media and cultural studies – centres his critique on the culture industry thesis,

charging it with overemphasizing cultural production and overestimating “the extent to which individuals have been integrated into the existing social order” (1990, p. 108). Tania Modleski (1986), Douglas Kellner (1989; 1995), Robert Miklitsch (1998) and Robert Witkin (2003) also adopt a cultural studies approach to Adorno’s thought, yet these commentators at least manage to avoid falling into a one-sided dismissal of a caricatured Adorno and instead try salvaging something from his work.

The fecundity of Adorno’s corpus clearly provides ample seeds from which a variety of specialist readings and interpretations can grow. Yet, the risk may be that in rendering Adorno in a specific singular light – be it ethical, political, philosophical, aesthetic, cultural, and so on – one fails to appreciate the interconnectedness of his core concepts. While I will organize my research around three themes – (1) mimesis; (2) marginality and critique; (3) nature and humanity – in choosing to constellate these themes from Adorno’s critical theory with filmic artworks, it is my aim to avoid singling out concepts and considering them in isolation, since, as Adorno controversially puts it, “in a philosophical text all the propositions ought to be equally close to the centre” (MM, §41, p. 71). In this regard, approaching Adorno’s work can at times feel like partaking in a game of theoretical *Kerplunk*. In trying to concentrate on and subsequently extract a single conceptual ‘straw’, at each turn we risk collapsing the whole lot, since each concept rests upon and feeds into the others. The integrity of critical thought, on Adorno’s account, relies upon the overlaying and intertwining of concepts, not in their abstract separation. For these reasons, as will be evident throughout the thesis, my rendering of Adorno will try to respect and uphold the anti-systematic and non-hierarchical forms of his own thinking by moving into and between philosophical, aesthetic, sociological, cultural and political themes without necessarily being reducible to any one of



these approaches. This is also part and parcel of what I will later call the constellational method.

In addition, while the existing approaches to Adorno's work are worth pursuing – since in trying to reconstruct a consistent theory or theorist we can better uncover certain conflicts or tensions within Adorno's thought – I believe that in trying to render a coherent body of thought out of Adorno's voluminous output such readings are in danger of ossifying or stultifying the *movement* that is characteristic of his dialectical thinking. That ideas are dynamic and store up (or have sedimented within them) historical meanings, transitions, suffering even, is in part what guarantees the future of thought itself. Without allowing Adorno's ideas to speak to us anew at different times and in different contexts, we run the risk of reducing the critical potential of his varied theoretical reflections and making of them a mere museum piece, a relic of intellectual history, gazed upon with nothing more than a passing curiosity and a reassuring curatorial guide.

In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno notes how “we” (which, in this passage at least, appears to refer to intellectuals, although its use is rather ambiguous) forget the art of “reading a text from Jean Paul as it must have been read in his time” (MM, p. 27). This point may seem redundant or even trite to today's intellectual historians, for whom the task of contextual reading is so well entrenched as to have become second nature. Yet, in a sense, this is precisely part of the problem with existing readings of Adorno. Excessive attention to biographical details and personal idiosyncrasies tends to empty the work of its political intentions, neutralizing it within and tethering it to a particular time and place, namely, that of its origin. In Adorno's case, since the political intent of his work serves to provoke further thought and change, not only at the time of its writing but in

ever new contexts, it is better to avoid a simplistic historical appreciation and instead return to or actualize certain ideas in relation to our present conditions.

One should bear in mind Adorno's own pronouncements on socio-historical context and its relation to philosophy. The temporality of thinking cannot be reduced to the either/or dichotomies of future-past, progression-regression; instead, Adorno's thinking might be best understood along the lines of Benjamin's well-known interpretation of Klee's *Angelus Novus*. Moving helplessly forward yet all the while facing backwards, surveying the ruins of the past as they mount ever higher. Adorno's philosophy lives on in anticipation of a future redemption, yet such redemption can only come by way of making amends for the suffering, pain and destruction of the past: "The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past" (DE, p. xv). This complex temporality within philosophy itself marks an interesting distinction between Adorno's critical theory and more recent trends in Continental thought, most notably, poststructuralism, which deals routinely in futural notions (for example, deferral, the not-yet, democracy-to-come, constant becoming, post-humanism, and so on). Even when Adorno seems to invoke similarly futural phrases (for example, 'messages in a bottle', an 'imagined witness', and 'one day in the messianic light'), important differences remain. These Adornian phrases all exhibit the backward-looking perspective mentioned previously with reference to Klee's angel. Messages in a bottle, while set in motion originally in the hope of finding a future recipient, are actualized, if at all, by their historically sedimented content and a retrospective reader whose task is to decipher the meaning(s) of the message, in relation to either the conditions of its original creation or the present. Moreover, the imagined witness and futural messianic light are also backward-looking critical tools, for they do not concretely prefigure a future state of perfection, but instead seek to distance us from and negate our present

reality through the imagined witness of another time, looking back to the (soon-to-be) ruins of our present. The redemptive light does not lead us *towards* a utopian future, but rather emanates from an unspecifiable non-place (a literal utopia) in the future *back to* our present, revealing the latter's extant injustices and failures:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption (MM, §153, p. 247)

In addition, another key difference between poststructuralism and Adornian philosophy, respectively, exists in the form of affirmation and celebration, on the one hand, and negation and lamentation, on the other. Where poststructuralism (gleefully) excels in its role of bringing forward the future possibilities of humanity almost to within touching distance, Adorno's philosophy is, by contrast, melancholic<sup>4</sup> and focused more on the missed opportunities and untimely survivals of the past than on imagining a fantastical future. Adornian thought often evokes a sense of belatedness and a concern for that which is passing away before our very eyes, without having yet enjoyed any substantive or meaningful existence at all. Rather than a premonition of a new and fulfilled life to come, Adorno's work marks a lament over wasted or 'wrong' life, that is to say, the life that is efficiently asphyxiated under the weight of the existent.

It is not simply a matter of reading Adorno's texts as they would have been read in his time, though doubtlessly interesting such readings can be. Rather, the dual tasks of reading and interpreting are to be continually taken up anew in diverse but not wholly unrelated social and political situations. For these

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<sup>4</sup> Adorno himself famously uses this adjective in the Dedication in *Minima Moralia*: "The melancholy science from which I make this offering [. . .]" (MM, p. 15). This phrase was also used by Gillian Rose in her introductory study of Adorno (see Rose, 1978).

reasons, in this thesis I will give less attention to trying to render a singular 'Adorno'. Instead, I will explore and utilize some theoretical ideas of his that in the present time deserve our attention, since when constellated with certain filmic artworks, these ideas attest to the potential for critical insight into the woefully inadequate status quo. Before outlining the relation between Adorno and film, it will be useful to further situate my use of Adornian theory in contradistinction to a pervasive and, in my view, unhelpful disciplinary division that has arisen between political economy and cultural studies.

## ***1.2 Beyond the Divide: Political Economy versus Cultural Studies***

While composing notes and ideas for this project, one of the initial impetuses for returning to Adorno's work came via recognition of the conspicuous absence of critical theory within contemporary cultural studies. On further investigation, the sense of this absence was confirmed and accounted for in the disciplinary division that has developed between *political economy* and *cultural studies*, respectively, over the course of the past couple of decades or so. The main battle lines between the two camps stem from both methodological and theoretical differences, but it is the latter which have proven to be most divisive if not irreconcilable.

Between its establishment in 1964 and its administratively-enforced closure amid widespread controversy in 2002, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University was at the forefront of socio-cultural analysis as well as audience- and text-based research. Originally under the aegis of Richard Hoggart and later Stuart Hall, what came to be known as the 'Birmingham School', while ostensibly drawing from a (neo) Marxist heritage and broadly Leftist political stance, ushered in an age of domination for 'reception studies'. Such studies included empirically based audience research,

which sought to quantitatively and qualitatively analyze the behaviour of cultural consumers and the (supposedly) manifold and active ways in which they receive, interpret and experience culture in its various forms. Drawing on the then ultra fashionable poststructuralist ideas emanating from France – primarily engaging with thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes – the Birmingham School were also at pains to show the polysemic content of cultural products, in addition to the fragmented, malleable and even *oppositional* nature of the individual recipient. Indeed, Stuart Hall's pithy assertion that "Ordinary people are not cultural dopes" (1981, p. 232) can be seen not only as a guiding principle of the British cultural studies movement but also as a backhanded criticism of the (rarely mentioned) Frankfurt School.

The Birmingham school's approach was seen to serve as an antidote to the crude and overly materialistic accounts of culture so common to (Marxist) theorists of political economy, as well as the lamenting and scornful derisions of perceived decadence so prevalent in conservative cultural criticism. In contrast to these approaches, cultural studies view the economic as but one factor amid a complex myriad of social determinants for contemporary identity in the West (factors such as race, gender, power, religion, etc.). In addition to deemphasizing the economy, cultural studies – following its interest in and taking influence from poststructuralism – signal a shift in focus, now centring round the notion of *signification*. Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, cultural studies practitioners counter what they regard as reductionist accounts of culture (based upon limited and limiting categories such as 'class', 'mass', 'economy', and so forth), instead opting to insist on the inherently malleable nature of language and meaning, and the complex processes of consumption which produce symbolic meaning and significations in and through diverse cultural 'texts'. This focus on individual agency and the polysemic meaning of cultural texts is in direct contrast to the approach of political economy, since the

latter looks to the productive processes and organization of media ownership that contribute to the creation, distribution and control over the reception of cultural objects. Political economy examines culture in relation to its wider context – that is to say, society and its market economy – and aims to show how cultural artefacts operate within this context, while cultural studies looks to individual artefacts, creators, and consumers, in its analyses of culture and everyday life. The political economy-cultural studies dualism is marked by argumentative circularity, in a manner that bears some resemblance to the somewhat crude readings of the conflict between Hegelian idealism and Marxist materialism. In both cases, one side privileges consciousness over material, the other *vice versa*. Political economy gives precedence to material factors – such as the forces, conditions and relations of production, ownership and organization, physical labour, and so on – deeming other elements designated as ‘cultural’, ‘symbolic’ and ‘mental’ to be merely dependent and secondary phenomena. Meanwhile, cultural studies invert this perspective and prioritize the cultural, symbolic and mental aspects of culture over and above material economic factors.

The place of Adorno’s work amid the theoretical chasm between the two research programmes remains largely uncharted. This is surprising given the considerable amount of work Adorno contributed to the field of cultural theory and research, not to mention critical theory’s rigorous engagement with Marxist thought – the latter also constituting an important and openly avowed influence in both political economy and cultural studies. On closer inspection, however, possible explanations as to this relative lack of attention to or engagement with Adorno’s work begin to emerge.

Firstly, in relation to political economy, after examining some of the arguments arising from one of the field’s leading exponents, Nicholas Garnham, it appears

as if the charge of economic reductionism is not unfounded. In its strict adherence to Marx's base/superstructure dichotomy, as well as its privileging of the economy and imparting of agency to the market (and/or capitalism) in its ability to determine and subordinate all other human activity, the political economy approach simply cannot adequately theorize culture and its relation to complex signifying practices.<sup>5</sup> Political economy reduces culture to a mere epiphenomenon of the market. As Garnham puts it, the "structure of social [that is, material and productive] collaboration is the form through which individual social agents are shaped and relate to one another" (1995, p. 64). The link between the base and superstructure, to which Garnham explicitly refers (*ibid.*), is constituted by the "material interest" dictated by relations of production. On the political economic view, it is this material interest which also shapes consciousness.

Secondly, with regard to cultural studies, indicative of the failure thus far to engage with Adorno's work is the fact that, to my knowledge, only one paper examining the relevance of critical theory to culture has ever been produced under the banner of the CCCS. The paper, authored by Phil Slater and entitled 'The Aesthetic Theory of the Frankfurt School' (1974), contains a cursory dismissal of Adorno, making the (by now commonplace) claim that the latter's overly deterministic view of the manipulated masses at the whim of an omnipotent culture industry signals the irrelevance of his critical theory. Indeed, in broader terms, the level of meaningful engagement with the works of the Frankfurt School in the development of cultural studies is decidedly low in quality. At times, critical theory appears as nothing but a historical footnote in the story of cultural studies' formation, while at other times it is presented in shorthand or caricatured form in order to speedily dismiss its (again)

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Lawrence Grossberg (a leading cultural studies theorist) has also fallen into the reductionist trap of construing the economy and capitalism as having agency and autonomy of their own. At one point he even employs the phrase, "the agency of capitalism" (1992, p. 356).

‘pessimistic’ and politically paralyzing conclusions. In any case, such severe oversights and misreadings are regrettable, for they not only forestall the possibility for an effective dialogue between critical theory and cultural studies, but they also contribute greatly to the ongoing theoretical standoff between political economy and cultural studies.

What both disciplines – political economy and cultural studies – have in common is a tendency to hypostatize the categories of ‘economy’ and ‘culture’, resulting in a recurrent and stagnant debate in which each side reinforces the binary split between the two categories. In both approaches, the economy is posited as the arena of material activity, while culture is designated as the idealist scene of meaning-making and signification. Within this dichotomy there is no overlap or interaction between the two realms. That is to say, both disciplines assert that the economy is material (and not signifying), and culture signifying (and not material). The limited horizons of each approach already begin to point towards possible reasons as to why Adorno hardly features in the ongoing debate. In light of the arguments put forth by Garnham, it becomes less surprising that the wealth of resources in Adorno’s work has remained untapped by political economic theorists of culture, for such a reductive view of culture is nowhere to be found in the Frankfurter’s voluminous output. Rather than dismiss culture out-of-hand as nothing more than grist to the capitalists’ mill, Adorno takes seriously not only the context and relations of its production but also the integral character of the cultural object itself, the potential ideological or pacifying effects it may contain or transmit, as well as the social conditions of its distribution and reception.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Adorno also remains aware of the conspicuous and problematic position of the critic in relation to culture and refuses to simplify his analyses for the sake of easy comprehension.

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<sup>6</sup> Such issues can only have grown in importance amid the rapid technological innovations that have taken place over the past couple of decades and beyond.



The resulting theoretical complexity is not only appropriate to the object of study but is also absent from accounts of culture that merely take their cue from either political economy or cultural studies. Adorno's work can be seen to transcend the disciplinary divide, inasmuch as it neither reduces culture to a mere function of the economy, nor holds culture to be nothing but a site for meaning-construction and signification. His theoretical work can be seen as an attempt at *dialectical* cultural criticism. The concept of dialectical criticism is, admittedly, not easily elucidated and no direct definitions will be found in Adorno's writing. However, some initial impressions can be gleaned from the 'Cultural Criticism and Society' essay.

The dialectical critic must simultaneously participate and not participate in the object of study (i.e. culture). This dialectic of participation becomes clearer if we relate it to the dualism of political economy and cultural studies. In political economy, there is a total negation of participation on the part of the critic, since cultural objects are read as nothing but commodities like everything else, created according to the predominant market forces and exchanged as things. Meanwhile, in cultural studies, one finds a complete immersion and participation in culture, in all its many forms, languages, interpretations, significations, and so forth. Yet, both approaches will prove inadequate to the demands of a more substantive cultural criticism, for neither can theorize the mediation(s) between participation and non-participation, individual and society, subject and object, the material and the symbolic, economy and culture. Dealing only with their respective areas of interest, theorists working either side of the self-erected fencing that separates political economy and cultural studies exhibit and reinforce symptoms of the division of labour characteristic of so much scholarly work.<sup>7</sup> In an effort to challenge and move beyond such

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, when political economy theorist Garnham asks where in cultural studies today one might find any analysis of cultural producers, organizational sites and practices, the exercising of corporative power,

unhelpful divisions, on Adorno's account, the *dialectical* critic of culture must situate himself [sic] in the position of such mediations – subject-object, individual-society, economy-culture, and so forth – for “[o]nly then does he do justice to his object and to himself” (P, p. 33).

In contrast to the alleged totalizing and undifferentiated critique contained in the culture industry thesis, Adorno calls for a more detailed, dialectical and sociological approach to culture. The twin tendencies of, on the one hand, simply equating culture with ideology (false consciousness, justification for the existent, and so on), and, on the other, affirming culture as resistant to the dominance of exchange, should be avoided. This is not to detract from the seriousness of Adorno's criticisms of the culture industry, for it is clear that he does view the majority of culture as nothing but ideological support for the status quo. Yet, tempering such overarching claims is the following important recognition:

[T]o act radically in accordance with this principle [construing culture as pure ideology] would be to extirpate, with the false, all that was true also, all that, however impotently, strives to escape the confines of universal practice [. . .] To identify culture with lies is more fateful than ever, now that the former is really becoming totally absorbed by the latter, and eagerly invites such identification in order to compromise every opposing thought (MM, §22, p. 44)

In other words, the necessary task facing the contemporary theorist involves active engagement with culture but not strictly on its own terms, that is, not in a passive or affirmative sense but remaining critical and negative throughout our cultural interaction.<sup>8</sup> Criticism must aim to shed light on the relation between an individual cultural artefact and the social, political and organizational

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and suchlike, cultural studies theorist Grossberg replies by simply reinforcing the extant disciplinary division of labour: “I’m tempted to answer that they are in political economy; that is, after all, what political economists do and why should they want cultural studies to do it?” (1995, p. 72).

<sup>8</sup> Jameson follows this Adornian line of thinking when he argues that we must denounce culture while we continue to perpetuate it, and perpetuate it while continuing to relentlessly denounce it (1990, pp. 47-48).

context of its production, dissemination and reception, giving due attention to not only the object's form and content but also the social trends and practices sedimented within it. As Adorno writes, the task of criticism must be

not so much to search for the particular interest-groups to which cultural phenomena are to be assigned, but rather to decipher the general social tendencies which are expressed in these phenomena and through which the most powerful interests realize themselves. Cultural criticism must become social physiognomy (P, p. 30)

Such dialectical criticism is unlikely to be achieved within the limited analytical frameworks provided by the reductive models of political economy and cultural studies, respectively.

In addition, a dialectical cultural criticism would not only dissect, describe and criticize the particular object, but would also enact a self-constituting moment that would be situated in the mediation between critic (as subject) and cultural commodity (as object). While there is clearly no shortage of 'critics' within our contemporary media landscape – particularly in the limitless scope of online content and blogging services – invariably their restless activity amounts to little more than elaborate descriptions and conclusions that revolve around and reflect the critic's (usually narrow and genre definable) preferences. Some might argue that this lack of substance in criticism simply mirrors that of the cultural artefacts about which most prominent critics write, an argument which reverts to the conservative cultural criticism discussed earlier. Such a view, however, not only does a disservice to contemporary culture by dismissing it out-of-hand without sufficient analysis (non-participation in effect), but also fails to acknowledge the critic's own role (participation) in the process of cultural criticism. This is yet another oversight that characterizes work both in political economy and cultural studies, where the former overlooks the specificity of a cultural object, while the latter focuses on the agency, signification, meaning-

construction, and other recipient-centred activities which continue apace regardless of culture's material manifestations. Adorno's critical theory of culture, however, is neither so myopic nor restricted, for he acknowledges the (necessity of) mediation between critic and culture, without which no dialectical account of culture can hope to even commence. In addition to this, the allowance of one's preferences to influence cultural criticism is surely a major hindrance to effective critique, since 'taste' – which, in our relativistic and parodic cultural context in which 'anything goes', largely seems to relate to what a person does or does not enjoy, either genuinely or with a knowing irony – is by no means a measure of culture's worth. Indeed, the prevalence of taste in contemporary cultural criticism only serves to reinforce the principle of exchange and the ubiquity of identity-thinking, which on Adorno's account further aids the reification of consciousness. The kind of cultural criticism Adorno calls for does not entail the proscribing and management of art, advising people as to why they should like *x* and not *y*. Culture, if it is to remain faithful to its own concept, must extend beyond itself. And part of this movement is the role of criticism and the critic-culture relation. If critics act as cultural reporters, as it were, merely objectifying culture, they hasten the latter's disappearance or, at the very least, its obsolescence and subservience to the existing social world. As Adorno puts it, culture is the *suspension* of objectification (P, p. 22).

Acknowledging the intertwinement of criticism and culture helps to explain why any culture which is objectifying in its form and content will in turn tend to produce objectifying critics. Thus, what is required of contemporary cultural theory to move past stagnant disciplinary division is, in my view, an Adornian inflected criticism, which actively engages with culture in a manner that neither reduces its object to a mere thing, a fetish, nor celebrates the omnipotence of creative signifying practices and meaning construction without due regard to

material influences. Culture is not appropriate to the dominant material-symbolic dualism, since it is both material *and* symbolic. Its material presence affects ideas, representations, interpretations, meaning and language, while at the same time these processes of signification, symbolic appropriation, value investment, and so on, are no less material than labour, social intercourse and production. This dialectic passes without adequate analysis within the narrowly defined terms of political economy and cultural studies. However, through a careful reading of Adorno's critical theory, in addition to a more creative and critical approach to cultural objects, I believe that we can begin to plot the trajectory of a contemporary critical theory of culture which moves beyond the political economy-cultural studies standoff. In this vein, this thesis engages with some Adornian themes and concepts through film analyses and interpretations that seek to elucidate and bring out the social and political elements within both Adorno's critical theory and the films under discussion. In this way, I hope to move towards the kind of dialectical cultural criticism hitherto elucidated.

### **1.3 Adorno on Film**

Having ostensibly located an area for potentially illuminating research (admittedly about an already heavily analyzed thinker), my next task was to search for precedents in the existing literature on Adorno and film. To say that the assortment of appropriate texts written on this topic is limited would be a considerable understatement. At the present time, only a handful of articles and seldom any books have been written about Adorno's work in relation to film.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Alexander García Düttmann has undertaken an interesting study analyzing the films of Luchino Visconti taking as its point of departure a claim about blocked utopia in the introduction to *Negative Dialectics* (see Düttmann, 2009). This impressive if idiosyncratic text stands alone in its use of Adornian theory for film interpretation, although its style and method bear no comparison to the present project. By contrast, there is veritable industry of Adornian studies in other fields of the arts and humanities, most notably, music and literary theory. To mention just some of the book-length studies alone: on Adorno and music, see Witkin (1998); DeNora (2003); Paddison (1993; 1996); Spitzer (2006), while for Adorno and literary theory, see Helming (2009); Cunningham & Mapp (2006); and Harding (1997).

Now, there are two standard reactions to such a discovery (read: surprise). One can either assume that other scholars have considered, or even attempted, conducting research in this particular subject area, and have subsequently failed to produce something of the requisite quality – in which case a sense of panic might be the next appropriate response. Or, alternatively and more promisingly, one may return to the original research plan, carefully work through its implications (both theoretically and practically), and resolve that it *is*, after all, an area deserving of scholarly attention – in which case the researcher can progress with the project, seeing where it leads and amending it along the way as necessary. Obviously, the very fact that you are reading this serves as evidence of my choosing the latter route. Less obvious, however, is just how the link between Adornian theory and film can be successfully established. This is so primarily on account of Adorno's generally hostile and dismissive comments on the medium of film. I will begin this section by presenting some of Adorno's stated positions on film, before arguing that such responses to film are uncharacteristically shallow on Adorno's part and do not adequately acknowledge the potential of film to become a genuine art form. Moreover, Adorno's comments on film do not constitute a prohibition on adopting his theoretical concepts for the purposes of illuminating critical potential within filmic works. After all, one of the irrepressible and distinctive features of a *critical* (contra 'traditional') theory<sup>10</sup> is its reflexivity and historical development, meaning that to reify or limit thought to certain privileged areas of society, aesthetics, politics, and so forth, would seem to run counter to the original motivations of critical theory.

For the vast majority of his working life, Adorno remained a staunch critic of film. In his correspondence with Walter Benjamin, the devastating chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as the various

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<sup>10</sup> See Horkheimer's classic programmatic essay, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (2002 [1937]).

comments peppered throughout other texts such as *Minima Moralia* and *Prisms*, Adorno makes no secret of his reservations toward film as a medium and the cinema as a place of mindless pseudo-mimetic consumption. Diane Waldman, in one of very few articles to broach the subject of film in relation to Adornian theory, accurately highlights the most significant shortcoming in Adorno's conception of film. As Waldman shows, Adorno ontologizes film as inherently ideological on the basis of its mechanical reproduction of the world as it is. Since film is from the outset bound up with technical replication, and dependent upon vast sums of capital from constricting corporate structures for its creation, it can never achieve the artistic autonomy of a painting, a piece of music, or literature. Adorno is critical of the extent to which film participates in the continuation of a vicious cycle whereby the cultural object ostensibly duplicates the outside world, which is then witnessed and (ostensibly) accepted as such on screen by the spectators, who then perpetuate the very same 'reality' when returning to the 'outside world'. The circular logic<sup>11</sup> of culture-catering-to-consumer and consumer-adapting-to-culture results in a kind of stasis and naturalization of the contingent:

The more intensely and flawlessly [the film-maker's] techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen [. . .] Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies [. . .] [T]he film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality (DE, p. 126)

Adorno's conception of film, then, is decidedly limited and surprisingly undialectical, inasmuch as it does not allow for any filmic production that is not merely 'naturalistic' (i.e. replicating the existent).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Adorno ascribes the

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<sup>11</sup> The origin of this circularity appears beyond recognition by Adorno's account: "The assent to hit songs and debased cultural goods belongs to the same complex of symptoms as do those faces of which one no longer knows whether the film has alienated them from reality or reality has alienated them from the film, as they wrench open a great formless mouth with shining teeth in a voracious smile, while the tired eyes are wretched and lost above" (2001 [1938], p. 47).

<sup>12</sup> In this regard, namely, the unquestioning duplication of the status quo, Adorno's dismissal of film mirrors his disdain for positivistic social science.

diminution of consumers' spontaneity and imagination not to any personal or psychological failing, but to the "objective nature of the products themselves, especially to the most characteristic of them, the sound film" (DE, p. 126). Film is, thus, ontologically rendered non-art, irrevocably ideological, and dismissed out of hand, with no consideration given to the particular capitalist conditions in which films are produced. Instead of recognizing the potential within the medium under altered conditions of production and reception, Adorno disregards the medium *in toto* (Waldman, 1977, pp. 50-51). The problem, then, is not so much that Adorno focuses so insistently on the film production process, as that when looking at the production process he cannot envision any divergent forms that film production could take. In a shift that somewhat prefigures Herbert Marcuse's work, the technology itself becomes the problem for Adorno and the root of his rejection of film as being anything other than support for a pervasive and egregious culture industry.<sup>13</sup>

While Adorno's criticisms are primarily targeted at the medium of film itself, they are also directed toward its modes of mass reception. On the bad mimesis encouraged by the culture-industrial production of films, Adorno complains of the ways in which the "monopoly shuts its doors on anyone who fails to learn from the cinema how to move and speak according to the schema it has fabricated" (2001 [1981], p. 92). More forcefully, one finds the following damning comment in *Minima Moralia*, which intensifies the former criticism of the unwitting alliance forged between film and its audience:

Immediacy, the popular community concocted by films, amounts to mediation without residue, reducing men and everything human so perfectly to things, that their contrast to things, indeed the spell of reification itself, becomes imperceptible. The film has succeeded in transforming subjects so indistinguishably into social functions, that those

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<sup>13</sup> This is a surprisingly undialectical move in his argument, given that amid previous pages Adorno points out that standardization and cultural homogeneity is "the result not of a law of movement in technology as such but of its function in today's economy" (DE, p. 121).



wholly encompassed, no longer aware of any conflict, enjoy their own dehumanization as something human, as the joy of warmth (MM, §131, p. 206)<sup>14</sup>

To these negative assessments of film and spectatorship we cannot fail to add the now infamous and comically cantankerous complaint: “Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse” (MM, §5, p. 25). In Adorno’s multifarious works, “film generally does not rate as a subject of aesthetics [. . .] but is rather considered within the field of sociology of culture or criticism of ideology” (Hansen, 1981, p. 187). Thus, it would appear that, by Adorno’s lights, film is inherently *an*-aesthetic,<sup>15</sup> ideological, and incapable of provoking the kind of critical insight he so frequently locates in *bona fide* high modernist works (such as the dissonant music of Schönberg and the Second Viennese School, the attenuated and fragmented theatre of Beckett, or the disconcerting literary works of Kafka).

Despite these forceful dismissals of film as a genuinely artistic medium, in his later years, Adorno’s thinking on the matter does undergo a notable revision, offering a more nuanced and open understanding of the possibilities of film. In the 1966 essay, ‘Transparencies on Film’, he even goes so far as to acknowledge that film may yet become an authentic art form. Given what has gone before, this is no minor parallax change in perspective. As Hansen puts it, this “shift in angle re-opens areas of speculation which seem stereotypically blocked in Adorno’s earlier work” (1981, p. 187). In this late essay, Adorno recognizes and rectifies the one-sidedness of his previous statements on the medium of film. Instead of criticizing film production in itself – on the basis of its irrefutable

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<sup>14</sup> When writing this, it is highly likely that Adorno had the following line of Benjamin’s in mind, particularly since Adorno and Horkheimer’s culture industry chapter was written (partly) as a response to Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay. Indeed, the two passages seem very closely attuned to one another: “[Humankind’s] self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure” (Benjamin, 2008 [1936], p. 242).

<sup>15</sup> ‘An-aesthetic’ in the sense of being both (a) deadening of the senses, and (b) inherently not aesthetic.

reliance upon technological apparatus and reproduction – now Adorno makes the important distinction between *emancipated* and *commercial* film production, respectively (TF, p. 204). Emancipated production would “no longer depend uncritically upon technology”, while commercial production merely follows the naturalistic paths made available by filmic technologies. Having duly made this necessary distinction with regard to film production, Adorno ends the essay with the familiar sounding criticisms of culture-industrial homogenization and automatic self-reproduction of the status quo. Yet, because he has finally acknowledged the genuine possibility, if not also expectation, of an emancipatory aesthetics of film,<sup>16</sup> the critique of the culture industry holds more sway, appearing as more discerning and moving beyond generalized dismissal (for which his work has come under fire on countless occasions). No longer can the previous ontologized (negative) conception of film, nor the unified vision of spectators as always passive, be upheld without reference to the particular film in question. The ideological nature of the majority of film productions in the present should not be misconstrued as indicative of an inherent flaw in the medium itself and foreclosing of new aesthetic possibilities in the future under altered conditions of artistic creation.

What is more, even if Adorno had not published the ‘Transparencies on Film’ essay and tempered his previous claims about film, this would not pose a significant obstacle for the present project. For, as far as I can see, there are no irrefutable or justifiable reasons for Adorno’s outright dismissal of film as an aesthetic form. Moreover, it appears practically viable and theoretically valid to invoke aesthetic categories and concepts from Adorno’s critical theory in the analysis of filmic works. There is nothing to suggest the inapplicability of film to Adornian theory, and vice versa. As such, it is all the more surprising that

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<sup>16</sup> He even refers positively to a specific avant-garde short film by Mauricio Kagel entitled *Antithèse: Film for one performer with electronic and everyday sounds* (1965).

there should be such a dearth of existing literature and interpretations in these areas. In my view, the juxtaposition of Adornian concepts with filmic artworks is an interesting, provocative and worthwhile venture. That having been said, the *method* by which this original work should be conducted is not so clear. To such methodological concerns we shall now turn.

#### ***1.4 Towards a Constellational Method***

Having explored the general intellectual climate in relation to which the following research will be placed, as well as the arguments for considering film a valuable and appropriate object of study, it is necessary – before commencing the research proper – to outline the overall methodology underpinning the thesis as a whole. From what has been discussed so far, it should come as little surprise that I reject any method that would rigidly impose a formal structure or system onto Adorno's critical theory. If one were to attempt to deploy such a formalistic and analytical approach in reading Adorno's texts, the results would likely fall into one of two categories: on the one hand, complete frustration on the part of the analyzer as the texts refuse to 'fit in' with the chosen schema, or, on the other hand, an indefensible brutalization of the analyzed text so that it may be neatly schematized after all. Needless to say, both outcomes are quite undesirable and, moreover, appear almost sacrilegious when applied to such an unrelentingly anti-systematic thinker as Adorno. As such, it is necessary to engage with Adornian theory in a manner which best allows its ideas to freely develop, and illuminate the social world and its constitutive elements.

Rather than bringing external and supplementary concepts to bear on Adorno's work, distorting both the former and the latter in the process, it is, in my view, more fruitful to follow the contours of the established concepts, that is, to work

*immanently* with Adornian concepts in an attempt to discern their potential truth-content and blind spots. To this end, the guiding methodological principle of the present project derives from the notion of the *constellation*.

Walter Benjamin was the first to philosophically appropriate the concept of the constellation, stripping it of all strictly astrological connotations and instead putting it in the service of an interpretive methodology. Benjamin's distinction between knowledge and truth, and the techniques used in their pursuit, is an important one for the development of the constellational method. It is also a notable contributory factor in Adorno's thinking of the non-identical and the preponderance of the object [*Vorrang des Objekts*]. For Benjamin, the methodologies associated with knowledge acquisition tend towards possession and containment of an object, particularly through the practices of categorization and conceptualization. As Benjamin writes in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*:

Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of – even if in a transcendental sense – in the consciousness. The quality of possession remains (2003 [1928], p. 29)

Prior to the apprehension of an object by the knowing subject, the object is regarded (or rather *disregarded*) as having little significance or existence of its own. Through the incorporation of objects into philosophical doctrine (*contra* reflection), the methodology of knowledge accumulation reduces itself to what Benjamin calls "historical codification" (ibid., p. 27). In its incessant progression of subjective intention the pursuit of knowledge encourages the imposition of consciousness onto *its*<sup>17</sup> object. In contrast to this pursuit of knowledge acquisition, the methodologies working towards truth, on Benjamin's account, acknowledge that objects have a substantive existence *prior* to their

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to stress the possessive nature of this epistemological relation.

conceptualization by subjects. The philosophical treatise or essay – unlike a doctrine – lacks the “conclusiveness of an instruction” (ibid., p. 28), and instead engages with the object at various levels of form (*contra* imposed subjective content) and through irregular, interrupted and unintentional rhythms:

Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object. This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation (ibid.)

The constellational method – introduced in Benjamin’s ‘Prologue’ of 1928 and developed further in his writings of the 1930s – calls for a move away from the apprehension of objective content towards the comprehension of objective configurations. “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to the stars” (ibid., p. 34). While a knowledge-seeking approach may serve us well in examining single stars in isolation, such a method fails to, and indeed remains unable to, give due attention to the relation of stars with one another, relations which give stars *form* over and above mere individual content. Moreover, through a constellational approach, intention falls away, since, in appreciating the arrangements of ideas and objects, the latter remain as they were before the subjective moment of comprehension (the constellation is, after all, *external* to the objects themselves which are intentionless). Truth, then, in Benjamin’s account, is distinguishable from knowledge to the extent that it arises spontaneously from constellations of objects and not as the result of subjective imposition upon individual objects:

Truth does not enter into relationships, particularly intentional ones. The object of knowledge, determined as it is by the intention inherent in the concept, is not the truth. Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it. Truth is the death of intention (ibid., pp. 35-36)

This unimposing approach to truth-content is taken up in Adorno's critical theory. As Buck-Morss notes, Adorno's "central effort was to discover the truth of the social totality (which could never be experienced in itself) as it quite literally *appeared* within the object in a particular configuration" (1977, p. 96). Adorno, like Benjamin, follows the lead of interpreting the historical fragment in relation to its surrounding context (both past and present). In the early lecture of 1931, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', Adorno – heavily invoking Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study – rejects philosophy that presumes an overriding meaning or intention in material reality, a fixed if hidden essence awaiting philosophical disclosure. Rather, Adorno avers, the "task of philosophy" is "to interpret unintentional reality, in that, by power of constructing figures, or images (*Bilder*), out of isolated elements of reality, it negates (*aufhebt*) questions" (AP, p. 127). As an alternative to totalizing narratives of ceaseless progression, overcoming, and codification, the constellational method proceeds rather by way of arranging fragmentary concrete items and concepts so as to yield insights into the contingent unfolding of historical processes. In contrast to the hierarchical and dominating procedures of identitarian thinking that impose subjective concepts onto objects, constellations involve a non-hierarchical, non-imposing method whereby concepts are arranged together so as to encircle the object of cognition, allowing the latter to spring forth when an appropriate constellation allows the object's truth-content to emerge. In this conception of philosophy's interpretive task, Adorno's later thought remains remarkably consistent with his lecture of thirty-five years previous. The constellation figures prominently in *Negative Dialectics*:

The unifying moment survives [. . .] because there is no step-by-step progression from the concepts to a more general cover concept. Instead, the concepts enter into a constellation. The constellation illuminates the specific side of the object, the side which to a classifying procedure is either a matter of indifference or a burden (ND, p. 162)

Up to this point, Adorno and Benjamin appear to be singing from the same hymn sheet, as it were. However, there is a minor but noteworthy difference between their respective understandings of the object's existence. As we saw, for Benjamin, although the object can be viewed in its constellational arrangement with other objects, the original object nevertheless is unchanged. The point of the constellational method in Benjamin functions primarily to allow the subject to avoid imposing its intention on the object, so that the latter's integrity remains unaffected. But Adorno is critical of what he sees as the Medusa-like gaze of Benjamin's exposures or snapshots – 'dialectics at a standstill' – since these can end up re-enacting the very reification or freezing of the object that a constellational approach is meant to foil (see Adorno, 1992 [1974], pp. 220-232).

For Adorno, the object remains ever mobile, mediated, in a state of becoming. As such, the object *is* affected by its intertwinement with others and accrues new and diverse meanings over time. Such historical meanings are not solely reducible to the constellative movement of objects (i.e. strictly in the *relation* of objects), but rather enter into or become sedimented in the individual objects themselves. Here, then, one gets a sense of the dialectical nature of the constellation as simultaneously internal and external to the object. Most obviously, the constellational configuration of objects is external to any individual object, with the former providing the unintentional context for the latter. Yet, at the same time, this external context feeds into, co-constitutes and (at least in part) determines the inner integrity of the fragmentary object: "By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object's interior" (ND, p. 162). In the following passage, Adorno describes this internal-external dialectic in more detail. As such, it is worth quoting in full:

This history is in the individual thing and outside it; it is something encompassing in which the individual has its place. Becoming aware of the constellation in which a thing stands is tantamount to deciphering the constellation which, having come to be, it bears within it. The *chorismos* of without and within is historically qualified in turn. The history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects – by the actualization and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge. Cognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object. As a constellation, theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers (ibid., p. 163)

Thus, the strict demarcation between inside and outside is brought down, allowing the object to develop and maintain its mobility, instead of being coerced into submission under the whim of subjective categorization and the imposition of identity. Regrouping diffuse phenomena is “a continuously renewed attempt to picture the essence of society” through unimposing – or, at least, minimally imposing – forms of conceptualization (Buck-Morss, 1977, p. 96). In contradistinction to reifying and identitarian thought forms, the constellational method enacts a freer non-subsumptive procedure of idea construction. Instead of the epistemological subject subsuming an object under a singular domineering concept, the constellational configuration seeks to allow the object to remain in a more unimpeded state, able to transform over time, and thereby maintain the same dynamics and flexibility required of thought itself. As an important rejoinder to the overzealous ‘diamat’ thinker, for whom dialectics stands simply as the procedural overcoming of contradictions into a higher synthetic unity, the dialectics of a constellational method, by contrast, works negatively through the juxtaposition of diverse objects and concepts within configurations that precisely *draw out* rather than resolve extant inconsistencies and contradictions.



In his lectures on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Adorno makes reference to the "force field" that exists within a text like Kant's. Through the appreciation of the varied and frictional forces at work in the text, and not of their cursory rejection or tidy resolution, the reader may be permitted to go "beyond the immediate meaning on the page" (KCPR, p. 80). This immersion in the contours and tensions of the works in question seems most apt for the current project. The research presented herein will take the form of constellations in which Adornian thought figures are placed in conjunction with elements of certain filmic artworks,<sup>18</sup> so that illuminating interpretations and new perspectives might be cultivated amid our contemporary context. Just as the stars fall into new relations by virtue of their astrological reading, so my juxtapositions of Adornian theory and film will bring new meanings and figurations to both phenomena via their newly inaugurated proximity. Aspects of Adorno's thought can be elucidated and enacted through the aesthetics of Tarkovsky's and Haneke's films, respectively, while filmic artworks can offer insightful and helpful aids to our understanding of Adornian theory. As such, I hope to show how such readings can reignite the critical sparks of Adorno's philosophy for and in our own time, taking up the pregnancy of his bottled messages from an (as yet) unredeemed past for the purposes of breaking open our lamentably foreclosed future. Having presented the general theoretical background and methodological considerations of the thesis, we may now proceed to the more substantive tasks at hand.

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<sup>18</sup> The constellational method, as I have hitherto construed it, is not only appropriate for interpreting elements of Adornian theory. It is also apposite for the analysis of film. This is so because filmic artworks can be seen to embody a constellational methodology in their own modes of aesthetic production (and consumption). The construction of the image, precisely undertaken so as to allow every object to enter into association with others within the frame, closely resembles the notion of constellation as discussed in reference to Benjamin and Adorno. Indeed, Adorno says as much: "[Filmic montage] does not interfere with things but rather arranges them in a constellation akin to that of writing" (TF, p. 203).

## CHAPTER II

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# MIMESIS RECONSIDERED: ADORNO AND TARKOVSKY *CONTRA* HABERMAS

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will examine an important if ambiguous concept that I believe can provide an interesting and provocative response to the apparent predominance of instrumental relations. The complex concept under discussion here is *mimesis*. The focus will be on mediating between the theoretical work of Adorno and the filmic work of Tarkovsky, but in addition there will be need to refer to, in certain parts of the argument, some of the influential work of Jürgen Habermas. The latter's instituting of a significant paradigm shift in critical theory – by his own account, moving from the 'philosophy of consciousness' to 'linguistic philosophy' – has along the way almost entirely eradicated any traces of mimesis as a critical or fertile concept. My argument will be that mimetic behaviour (or 'comportment' [*Verhalten*], as is the most frequent translation) provides a timely and important alternative to the leading conceptions of rationality, namely, *instrumental* and *communicative*. To this end, I will examine Adorno's multifarious deployment of the concept, before developing an analysis of some of Tarkovsky's work, which, in my view, employs what could be justly construed as a 'mimetic method'.

The chapter will take the following structure. It begins with an exploration of the early uses of mimesis in Adorno's thinking (section 1), before moving on to consider the paradigm shift represented by Habermas' theory of

communicative action (section 2). Also in the second section, I chart the further development of Adorno's use of mimesis and contrast this to the unduly dismissive Habermasian reading with a view to rescuing mimesis from critical-theoretical oblivion. The final part of the chapter then looks to Tarkovsky's films as an aesthetic complement to and enactment of an Adornian understanding of mimesis.

## 1. MIMESIS AND CIVILIZATION: ADORNO'S INHERITANCE

In the 'Dedication' which marks the beginning of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno makes reference to the ancients and what was once regarded as the "true field of philosophy", but which has since fallen into neglect with the reduction of philosophy to mere method. The true field in question is that of the "teaching of the good life" (MM, p. 15). One could make the claim that this ancient concern with the teaching of the good life represents a theoretical thread that is deftly woven throughout the entire collection of aphorisms that follow on from the prefatory dedication. Such remembrance of and respect for pre-existing philosophical concepts is not only evident within Adorno's "reflections from damaged life". Indeed, the importance of engaging with extant philosophical themes is referred to explicitly in *Negative Dialectics*. There Adorno writes:

Knowledge as such [. . .] takes part in tradition as unconscious remembrance [. . .] Philosophy rests on the texts it criticizes. They are brought to it by the tradition they embody, and it is in dealing with them that the conduct of philosophy becomes commensurable with tradition (ND, pp. 54-55)

Just as the traditional teaching of the good life can be seen as a driving force throughout Adorno's ethics and social critique, so too may the ancient category of *mimesis* be viewed as another key concept recurring through his critical project.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In his seminal work on late Marxism, Fredric Jameson argues that mimesis is an omnipresent concept within Adorno's work, but one that is never really explained or defined. On Jameson's reading, in later works such as *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno merely refers back to previous uses of the concept, as if they were already established. I want to show that the complex and diverse forms mimesis takes in Adorno's posthumous tome were developed from earlier conceptions expressed over twenty years before in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Mimesis has a profound connection with the critique of instrumental reason and identity-thinking, and its development and conceptual ambiguity form an important part of its critical potential. Taking into account these earlier comments on mimesis will be of importance in showing how the divergent contexts within which mimesis appears indicate its connection with an alternative kind of rationality and forms of thinking that are non- (or at least *less*) instrumental.

The historical development of mimesis is something that cannot be adequately dealt with in such a limited space.<sup>20</sup> However, some awareness of its diversity and alteration over time will become evident as we chart Adorno's varying use of mimesis. As we will see, for Adorno, the refuge of mimetic comportment is not so much to be found in language, as it was for Walter Benjamin, but rather in *art*. Yet, of course, artworks are not completely outside of or other to language, since they are sites for a kind of non-conceptual expression, enigmatic through and through, yet not devoid of meaning or fundamental capacities of communicability. These general points are meant to serve merely as prefatory remarks to be borne in mind as the chapter progresses. We will have recourse to them throughout the subsequent arguments and analyses. With that having been said, let us proceed, then, with an examination of Adorno's mapping of mimesis, beginning with its archaic form.

### ***1.1 Archaic Mimesis***

As a longstanding part of human being, mimesis is a topic ripe for precisely the kind of macro-historical and social-anthropological analysis undertaken in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In their demanding and idiosyncratic text, Adorno and Horkheimer invoke the notion of mimesis in a variety of contexts, and critically dissect its relation to the processes of civilization and enlightenment. Their interest is in not only the archaic or pre-civilized forms of mimetic behaviour, but also the relation of these earlier forms to their contemporary manifestations. The authors argue that in its archaic form mimesis can be seen as a form of adaptation to the natural world in order to escape the threats posed by brute nature. This kind of mimetic behaviour is much like mimicry in plants and non-human animals. Indeed, in the early phases of the civilizing process,

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<sup>20</sup> A good account of some of the key developments and uses of the concept can be found in Gebrauer and Wulf (1995).

one could say that mimesis of this kind is prior to the development of rational consciousness and subjectivity. Archaic mimesis entails a concession to the superiority of nature by way of replicating its ossification, its bare existence, its deadness. In its encounters with the harsh realities and unpredictable movements of nature the developing self has to imitate nature's rigidity in order to survive.

When men try to become like nature they harden themselves against it. Protection as fear is a form of mimicry. The reflexes of stiffening and numbness in humans are archaic schemata of the urge to survive: by adaptation to death, life pays the toll of its continued existence (DE, p. 180)

Just as the chameleon adapts to its local environment to avoid easy detection by predators, so the early human being mimics its natural surroundings, sinking itself back into inanimate nature, enacting a form of instinctive regression that Freud claims to be inherent in every organic being (1961, p. 30).<sup>21</sup> These socio-anthropological interpretations neatly draw attention to the pre-rational status of archaic mimesis, while at the same time suggesting the emerging development of selfhood. It is clearly inadequate to merely replicate inanimate nature in the hope of avoiding the terror and threats posed by the natural world – much like if one were to 'play dead' when confronted with an incoming tornado. In this sense, mere mimicry of dead nature is irrational, or, rather, *pre-rational*. Yet, inasmuch as the archaic form of mimetic behaviour is, in some degree, *intended*, it already points toward the instigation of selfhood via the gradual differentiation between subject and nature. Archaic mimesis thereby contains an embryonic element of rationality within it. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that this kernel of rationality in archaic mimesis undergoes major development within what they term the *magical* phase of mimesis, to which we shall now turn.

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<sup>21</sup> This, of course, pertains to the 'death drive', which for Freud represents the irrepressible yet not total desire for calm, stability, and as such a return to an inorganic state (i.e. death). See Freud (1961).

## 1.2 *Magical Mimesis and Beyond*

In its magical form, magicians and shamans would interact with nature in ways that signalled a distinctive shift from the one-way subordination of human being to nature characteristic of the earliest (archaic) forms of mimesis. In the magical phase, mimesis undergoes 'organized control' whereby repeated rituals, sacrificial practices, and so forth, are rationally instigated and enacted with the idea of adapting and bending (if not entirely controlling) nature toward the particular interests of humanity. Thus, we witness a social and organizational shift from brute nature dominating the human in the archaic phase, to human beings (attempting to) manipulate and tame nature in the magical phase and beyond.

The development of magical mimetic activity is concurrent with that of self-empowerment. As a result of this shift, a steady yet definite movement towards a rational, instrumental control of nature is set in motion. As rationality accrues greater value for human beings in attempts to secure their own survival, and through increasingly effective domination of mere nature, mimetic impulses come to be seen as regressive, irrational, even animalistic, that is to say, pre-human. Mimesis in the post-magical, industrial phase thereby becomes prohibited, repressed, tabooed.

Civilization has replaced the organic adaptation to others and mimetic behaviour proper, by organized control of mimesis, in the magical phase; and, finally, by rational practice, by work, in the historical phase. Uncontrolled mimesis is outlawed [. . .] In the bourgeois mode of production, the indelible mimetic heritage of all practical experience is consigned to oblivion (DE, pp. 180-181)

In order to feel secure in its existence and to offset its inherent physical weakness, humanity in its industrializing and post-magical stage of

development employs its cunning and rationality to control nature with ever-increasing intensity and precision. With such rational development within the progress of civilization, mimetic behaviour is seen as either pre-rational or irrational, and in any event wholly irrelevant to modern social life, the latter representing an unequivocally forward step upon the path of progress and civilization. Yet, Adorno and Horkheimer argue – with more than a nod of recognition in the direction of Nietzsche and Freud – that the price to be paid for such self-constitution and empowerment is disproportionately high. For them, the mimetic faculty should not be discarded as simply an outmoded pre-historical relic. Rather, mimesis is inextricably and dialectically bound up with rationality. As much as the self is never fully rational and transcendent of its mimetic origins, so it is not reducible to its vital, pre-rational, natural core. In trying to eradicate or repress mimesis altogether, the rational subject (ironically) regresses to the archaic form of mimetic practice whereby the self becomes ossified, rigidified, inanimate. In other words, the much vaunted autonomous subject becomes but a mere object. In order to survive, the self imitates death.

Only consciously contrived adaptation to nature brings nature under the control of the physically weaker. The *ratio* which supplants mimesis is not simply its counterpart. It is itself mimesis: mimesis unto death. The subjective spirit which cancels the animation of nature can master a despiritualized nature only by imitating its rigidity and despiritualizing itself in turn (DE, p. 57)

Here we have, then, the Odyssean model of self-renunciation writ large. The cunning of reason and contrivance, in serving to secure the subject's existence when confronted with unbearable risk, doubles back on the self, debasing that which it desperately tries to rescue.<sup>22</sup> The toll for our unprecedented levels of security, brought about through increasing rationalization, is paid for with the surrender of all hopes of happiness drawn from mimetic relations with one's

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<sup>22</sup> The critique of self-renunciation and instrumental reason is explored in greater depth in the chapter on humanity and nature (see Chapter IV).



world. Inasmuch as mimesis can provide an alternative conception of subject-object interaction, as well as a nagging recognition of extant unhappiness and discontent [*Unbehagen*], it is an indispensable concept for critical theory – not least of all that of Theodor Adorno.

In his later works, Adorno's deployment of mimesis becomes more complex and diverse, taking on a variety of (related) forms in a manner not dissimilar to that of the non-identical. Mimesis becomes another, what we might call, *dialectical* concept, that is to say, a sort of *anti*-concept. If ideology lies in "the implicit identity of concept and thing" (ND, p. 40), then one must try to resist the urge to impose upon an object a single, self-identical, conceptual straitjacket. Already we have seen how the notion of mimesis has developed from an archaic form, through its magical phase to the rational-industrial phase, and it should come as no surprise that the content of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* serves to shatter any univocal definition one might offer for understanding mimesis. Indeed, the sheer diversity of contexts in which the term mimesis appears within the book has provided more than enough reasons to reconsider the possibility of even writing this chapter! Nevertheless, despite the occasional dizzy spells that may accompany readings of Adorno, I believe mimesis to be a concept of such significance – for not only understanding Adornian critical theory but also approaching and interpreting artworks – that one needs must embrace its conceptual ambiguity in the fight against conceptual reification and practical instrumentalization. Before examining the potential within Adorno's later use(s) of mimesis, however, it will be worthwhile to first reflect upon the likely reasons for its notable absence from the predominant critical-theoretical discourse of 'communicative rationality'.

## 2. THE COMMUNICATIVE PARADIGM AND THE BANISHMENT OF MIMESIS

As mentioned in my introduction to the thesis, the work of Jürgen Habermas more than most has exerted a profound influence on the trajectory of the development of critical theory in general, and the reception and interpretation of Adorno's work in particular. Despite giving the impression that the aims and concerns of first-generation critical theorists still motivate his own work, Habermas' significant move away from earlier incarnations of critical theory brings with it some major changes and compromises in the radical perspectives and possibilities within the rich intellectual legacy of the Frankfurt School. Habermas holds to what he sees as the still nascent rational potential in modernity and enlightenment, and as a result steers theory more towards pragmatism than radicalism.<sup>23</sup> In this section, I will briefly review the Habermasian paradigm shift – or 'linguistic turn' – and its concomitant rejection of mimesis as a meaningful concept for critical theorizing. Following on from this, I will reconsider the Adornian usage of the category of mimesis and try to defend its relevance against the likes of Habermas and his devotees.

### 2.1 *Mimesis Rejected*

In what amounts to essentially a wholesale dismissal of mimesis, Habermas has produced a range of influential criticisms of Adornian critical theory, calling for and, subsequently, successfully instituting a fundamental paradigm shift from the "philosophy of consciousness" – philosophy centred round transcendental subjects representing and tarrying with objects – to "linguistic philosophy" – philosophy focused on developing intersubjective communication aiming at mutual understanding and consensus (1984, p. 390). In the first volume of his

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<sup>23</sup> In a somewhat peculiar and paradoxical turn of phrase, Joel Whitebook classifies Habermas' project as one of "radical reformism" (2004, p. 89).

seminal *Theory of Communicative Action*, and indeed elsewhere, Habermas gives short shrift to the notion of mimesis, arguing it to be an utterly unhelpful category for critical theory since it can be understood as nothing more than an unspecifiable pre-rational, pre-cognitive “impulse”, the “sheer opposite of reason” (ibid.). These comments draw upon and supplement his deep unease with Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>24</sup>

As he makes unequivocally clear through the fifth lecture in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas believes that his philosophical predecessors, in what he refers to as their “blackest book” (1987, p. 106), lapse into Nietzschean irrationality and “performative contradiction” (ibid, p. 119). Habermas makes this claim on the basis that without retaining some valid element of reason that can provide a normative grounding for their critique, the authors cannot even begin to justify their own position, thereby irrevocably undermining the force and validity of the critique of enlightenment and reason. As a result of this self-refutation and reductive understanding of reason, Adorno and Horkheimer can only follow the inappropriate paths taken by the likes of de Sade and Nietzsche in merely affirming pre-rational or irrational moments as alternatives to an ever-increasing infiltration of instrumental rationality into all forms of modern cultural and social life. The mimetic faculty is viewed by Habermas as just such a pre-rational/irrational moment, inasmuch as it is mere impulse, the other of reason, an entirely ineffable intuition incapable of signifying or communicating any substantive content:

The critique of instrumental reason, which remains bound to the conditions of the philosophy of the subject, denounces as a defect something that it cannot explain in its defectiveness because it lacks a conceptual framework

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<sup>24</sup> A similarly dismissive perspective is evident in a somewhat throwaway comment by Esther Leslie, whereby amid an expert elucidation of Benjamin’s ‘work of art’ essay, she pauses to complain of Adorno’s “pessimistic sense of the mimetic capacity as the compulsion exerted on culture consumers to conform to the culture industry’s images of themselves” (2000, p. 154). Hopefully, the present chapter will go some way towards displaying the complexity with which Adorno treats the concept of mimesis.

sufficiently flexible to capture the integrity of what is destroyed through instrumental reason. To be sure, Horkheimer and Adorno have a name for it: *mimesis* (1984, pp. 389-390)

On Habermas' reading, then, Adorno and Horkheimer regress to a kind of pre-cognitive mysticism, whereby *mimesis* stands as a placeholder for something about which they can speak "only as they would about a piece of uncomprehended nature" (ibid., p. 383). Furthermore, in a simplification that has been replicated by other commentators,<sup>25</sup> Habermas renders Adorno's account of *mimesis* tantamount to *imitation*. Indeed, the former even uses the two terms interchangeably. Thus, we read of how "Imitation designates a relation between persons in which the one accommodates to the other, identifies with the other, empathizes with the other" (ibid., p. 390). While imitation may be indicative of *some* aspects of *mimesis* – one can think back to its archaic form and the mimicry of nature in this respect – it is not particularly helpful to reduce mimetic behaviour to mere imitation. In doing so, Habermas fails to give sufficient attention to the variable contexts, uses and meanings to which Adorno puts *mimesis*, and instead merely serves to bolster his own project of communicative action by subordinating or forthrightly dismissing that which cannot neatly come under the desired new theoretical paradigm. In the following section, I will address Habermas' criticisms and attempt to defend and further explicate Adorno's use of *mimesis*.

## 2.2 *Mimesis Reconsidered*

One of the prominent criticisms of Adorno proposed by Habermas relates to the ways in which the former is apparently still trapped within an obsolete philosophical tradition in the form of the *philosophy of consciousness*. Habermas

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<sup>25</sup> As Zuidervaart notes (1991, p. 332), Martin Lüdke has criticized a number of German commentators for inadequately differentiating between *mimesis* and *imitation* (see Lüdke, 1981).

argues that, for all his considerable theoretical efforts and deft dialectical contortionism, Adorno ultimately fails to move beyond the subject-centric epistemological underpinnings of the philosophy of consciousness, which since Descartes has concerned itself (almost exclusively) with relations between a *knowing subject*, on one side, and a *known object*, on the other. The subject-object dichotomy, according to Habermas, is unintentionally reinforced in Adorno's critical theory through the latter's flitting back and forth between an instrumental or identitarian form of thinking, on the one hand, and an enigmatic, irreducible, non-conceptual mimetic impulse, on the other. This position is then said to prevent the negative dialectician from uncovering the intersubjective potential within his own theory and instead merely flogs a philosophical 'dead horse', so to speak.<sup>26</sup> Yet, one should examine Habermas' claims closely here, for it is not clear that Adorno can justly be lumped together with philosophers of consciousness. It is true that in opening up at random a text by Adorno there is a high probability of encountering innumerable references to 'subject' and 'object'. This is hardly surprising given that his terminology is steeped in the heritage of German idealism. However, his understanding of and persistent engagement with the subject-object dialectic is not necessarily indicative of a defence or reinstatement of the philosophy of the subject. Quite the contrary in fact, inasmuch as Adorno is unrelenting in his attacks on phenomenological theories such as Husserl's and existentialism, broadly construed, for their attempts to seek originary epistemological foundations in the subject. In this regard, both Habermas *and* Adorno before him exhibit a concern with undermining the philosophy of consciousness for its positing of an isolated, transcendental, sovereign and meaning-giving subject. Of course, the conclusions to be drawn from their respective critiques are massively divergent, but it is important to acknowledge the largely shared

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<sup>26</sup> Albrecht Wellmer follows Habermas' critical precedent, arguing that Adorno's attempt at a "critical redemption of metaphysics" remains "bound up in the problematic premises of the modern philosophy of subjectivity" (1997, p. 127).

bases of their critical projects. In need of greater clarity in Habermas' reading, then, are the following two areas of Adorno's thought: (1) the subject-object dialectic; and (2) the relation between mimesis, rationality and aesthetics. These two areas are inextricably linked and feed into one another in a variety of ways.

On the subject-object dialectic, rather than asserting the cognitive and conceptual powers of a transcendental subject, *pace* Habermas, Adorno in fact is wont to draw attention to the "preponderance of the object" [*Vorrang des Objekts*] (ND, p. 183). This priority of the object stands out as marking the critical materialism of Adorno's thinking. Conversely, in Habermas' communicative project the object practically dissolves into thin air, with the emphasis being solely on interaction between subjects (intersubjectivity). The communicative turn could be said to have catalyzed a distinct move away from subject-object relations to subject-subject relations. As a result of this shift, for Habermas, there is no longer any need to invoke a mysterious reconciliatory interrelation with some 'other' that is beyond the reaches of domination or reification, for in communicative acts we are always already interacting with another subject, that is, a subject with a voice, communicative capabilities, and so forth, who is neither unknowable nor ineffable. Through communicative actions we strive toward being understood and a rational consensus. The relative lack of tension within Habermas' understanding of communicative practice is indicative of a more general overemphasis on identical meaning and mutual understanding in linguistic usage, which in forming the basis of a theory of communicative action largely ignores the discrepancies and alternatives of various communicative forms, some of which may have significant ethical import.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In Chapter IV, I discuss the argument that Adorno is of the opinion that objects too can contain or at least provoke ethical demands at times when an object's spontaneous development is suppressed or maltreated by domineering subjects with their identitarian rationality.

For Adorno, it seems clear that trying to put to rest the longstanding philosophical struggle and debate over the complex relations between subject and object by unquestioningly positing the *subject* as superior – as is the case not only for idealists but also for Habermas – is problematic and undesirable. Adorno's point is not that the subjective element in thinking be expelled (if indeed such a thing were even possible). Rather, he is cognizant of the restrictions imposed upon thought when subjectivity is hypostatized. The preponderance of the object is the materialist foundation of Adorno's critical theory, but it also points the way toward a greater reflexivity in subjective consciousness, which is to say that in order to fully realize itself the subject must reconnect with and give itself over to the object. In so doing, the subject does not fall into the traps associated with hypostatizing itself *qua* subject, while the object remains freer from domination within such a relation. Adorno's paradoxical yet provocative perspective on this new form of subject-object dialectic is made most explicit through his work on mimesis and aesthetics.

The vestiges of mimetic possibility, or rather the possibility of mimetic relations between subject and object, are, on Adorno's account, to be found in *aesthetics*. As he writes, the "survival of mimesis, the nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other, defines art as a form of knowledge and to that extent as 'rational'" (AT, p. 70). Thus, in contrast to the Habermasian rejection of mimesis as pre-rational or irrational and thereby of no use to knowledge, interests, communication and consensus, Adorno believes genuine artworks to contain elements of rationality within them and therefore the potential for world-disclosing or even world-changing experiences and knowledge. As Shierry Weber Nicholsen has argued, in the realm of aesthetics Adorno considers mimesis to be both "the activity of assimilating the self to the other" and "the affinity of the creation, the work of art, with objectivity" (1997, p. 62). This is how the play of interactions between subject and object are

internalized and then contained within the art object, without either one being hypostatized or elevated to a level of epistemological or ontological purity. In the act of creating a work of art, of course, the subject (or group of subjects) involved cannot but manipulate, dominate, and identify, to a certain extent, the objective material at their disposal. Adorno openly acknowledges as much when he writes of how, to the extent that all partial elements immanent to the work are subordinated to the unity of the whole, construction is “the extension of subjective domination” (AT, p. 74). Yet, he swiftly adds: “Construction tears the elements of reality out of their primary context and transforms them to the point where they are once again capable of forming a unity” (ibid.). The almost infinite number of ways in which such material can be arranged, and subsequently experienced again by individuals, is seen in our postmodern context as lending art its openness and enigmatic, puzzling or even ‘playful’ character. But, for Adorno, the artwork is not mere ‘play’, pastiche or haphazard whimsy. Rather, genuine works of art are both *mimetic* and *rational*:

Rationality in the artwork is the unity-founding, organizing element, not unrelated to the rationality that governs externally, but it [rationality in the artwork] does not reflect its [externally governing rationality’s] categorizing order (AT, p. 70)

While the element of subjective domination extends into the creation of the work of art, the objective result (the artwork itself) becomes an autonomous and unified object in its own right, with an “enigmaticalness”<sup>28</sup> that stands opposed to the categorizing tendencies of the social world in general and instrumental reason in particular. In its objective state, the work of art cannot but remain incomplete yet inexhaustible just as the non-identical cannot be represented directly (given that were it to be identified or conceptualized as such it would cease to be non-identical). For these reasons, Adorno takes interest not only in the objective artwork but also in the subjective activity relating to it, that is, both

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<sup>28</sup> Hullot-Kentor’s translation of ‘*Rätselcharakter*’.



in aesthetic *production* and *reception*.<sup>29</sup> Through its internalization of mimetic behaviour, as well as what Adorno terms its “immanent lawfulness” (AT, p. 72),<sup>30</sup> art stands as a conveyor of insight, reflection, communication and truth amid a social world whose prevalent forms of objective rationalization and reification perpetually reduce the subjective horizons of experience, knowledge and imagination. As a form of social critique that is both rational yet not reducible to a single repeatable ‘message’ or eternal meaning, genuine aesthetic objects engage with a dialectic of reason and mimesis – intertwined from the very start – and as such act as more than a mere “substitute for the traditional subject-object relationship” (Jameson, 1990, p. 256), instead subverting the whole basis upon which the epistemological demarcation between subject and object is founded.

Where Habermas sees weakness in mimetic-aesthetic activity *vis-à-vis* its lack of explicit validity claims – in other words, the very fact that art does not seem to be ‘saying’ or positing something tangible, rational, immediately communicable, and so forth – Adorno finds in this very openness, opacity and communicative irreducibility, the fundamental basis of art’s truth-content [*Wahrheitsgehalt*]. This is not to say that art has no capacity of communicability, or that it lapses into sheer irrationality. Rather, art is “rationality that criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it; art is not something prerational or irrational” (AT, p. 71). The mimetic language of art is merely of a different kind to that of philosophy. Yet, while the two forms are distinct in many ways – for example, art’s lack of conceptuality contrasted with philosophy’s conceptual language – they are neither wholly separate nor incompatible. Indeed, art and philosophy dialectically interweave and consistently call forth one another.

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<sup>29</sup> I have opted for the term ‘reception’ in this instance over the more obvious counterpart ‘consumption’ on account of the latter’s pejorative connotations – such as intellectual passivity and physiological ingestion.

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Tarkovsky expresses this sentiment in almost identical terms, when he writes of how art “necessarily obeys its own immanent laws of development” (1989, p. 170).

Such issues are of importance for our purposes here, for they already hint at the deficiencies inherent in any approach that presupposes a clean break between thought and non-identity. I will explore these elements of aesthetic-mimetic and philosophical-conceptual language in the following analyses of some of Tarkovsky's films. The analyses will draw upon Adorno's theory of mimesis as examined hitherto, and along the way hopefully provide an illuminating critique of the predominant Habermasian communicative paradigm.

### 3. TARKOVSKY'S MIMETIC METHOD

Despite receiving some notable (if haphazard) critical acclaim over many years, not to mention the apparent influence his works have had on the medium of film in general, Andrei Tarkovsky has seldom been the focal point of research to date. As Robert Bird notes, Tarkovsky remains an “elusive subject for reflection and analysis, and his name is surprisingly rare in discourse on film, whether popular or academic” (2000, p. 10). As someone who has viewed his work with an ever increasing sense of intrigue, I find this relative under-appreciation rather surprising. Hopefully an exploration of some of his films – particularly when undertaken in relation to a critical (aesthetic) theorist of such scholarly standing as Theodor Adorno – will help to bring greater attention to the many levels, nuances, techniques and ideas that, I believe, feed into and can be drawn out of Tarkovsky's enigmatic work. Between the years of 1962 and 1986, the headstrong yet patient director produced seven feature films, which, when considered in both chronological and constellational relations, appear to indefatigably seep into one another in interesting ways. The films share or at the least invoke some particular and notable images, reflections, motifs and ideas – some of which are direct relations perceptible on an initial viewing,<sup>31</sup> while other less obvious themes may be teased out or intuited on further viewing and reflection. The gradual and growing sense of familiarity that occurs over time through watching (and re-watching) Tarkovsky's films is characteristic of what Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie refer to as “a visual fugue” (1994). Such recurrent motifs may even allow one to invoke the adjectival neologism ‘Tarkovskian’ with more than a little justification. What I wish to argue here is that one of the most significant characteristics of Tarkovsky's *oeuvre* is to be found in his distinctive and highly sophisticated

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<sup>31</sup> Some of the more obvious visual and aural recurrences include the natural elements (particularly the earth and water), animals (especially horses and German Shepherds), milk, mirrors, and birds.

aesthetic form and method of film-making, what I will subsequently refer to as his *mimetic method*.

In a similar vein to other well-established *auteurs* – such as Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Bresson, Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard, to give but a few immediate examples – Tarkovsky's works (both consciously and unconsciously) chart the development of a uniquely personal and inimitable style, one that can provoke an extremely varied response from viewers. From excitement and engagement to bafflement, anger and rejection, Tarkovsky's films can hardly be said to leave anyone wallowing in a bog of indifference. His films – often long in duration, minimal in dialogue, fractured or non-linear in narrative, rigorously independent in pace and momentum – certainly do not fall into the prevalent culture-industrial categories associated with 'entertainment'. But, while there is much to be said for the active reception that Tarkovsky's work encourages, or more strongly *demands*,<sup>32</sup> my interest initially will be more on the mimetic elements that I believe can be seen in the aesthetic object itself, that is to say, the film or scene under consideration. Tarkovsky's particular style, method and form appear to have much in common with the Adornian notions hitherto discussed – especially, though not exclusively, the preponderance of the object and the theory of mimesis, as well as the relation between the 'languages' of philosophy and aesthetics, respectively. As with subsequent chapters, my readings are not intended to be merely 'one-way' (for example, applying Adornian theory to film). Rather, they should be read as *dialectical*, inasmuch as not only will certain of Adorno's ideas offer provocative and innovative tools with which to view and interpret some of Tarkovsky's filmic work, but the latter's films also provide provocative and fertile grounds for better understanding and reinvigorating the former's often complex critical social

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<sup>32</sup> I will examine the issues around reception and mimesis in section 3.4.

theory (a timely task given the prevalence and perseverance of Adorno's detractors).

Since technological innovations first produced the ability to portray moving images on screen, the medium of film and its primary tool, the camera, have been frequently celebrated as constituting the mimetic art form *par excellence*. The camera is widely revered as being capable, like nothing else, of entirely and authentically capturing and reproducing reality, of recording and mimicking the material world 'as it is'. Early film theorists, such as the Soviet film-maker Dziga Vertov (1896-1954), even went so far as to argue that the camera is vastly *superior* to the primitive human eye, inasmuch as the technological 'eye' is infinitely more perfectible than its natural predecessor.<sup>33</sup> The mimetic capacities seen to be inherent in film also extend beyond the seamless replication of reality (as in the 'social realist' tradition, for instance). Indeed, they permeate more recent theoretical developments, too, particularly in psychoanalytic film theory, which still maintains a reasonably dominant position within contemporary film discourse.<sup>34</sup> Following Christian Metz's influential work, the camera is said to stand in *as* the human 'gaze', not merely reproducing but mimetically appropriating – that is, becoming one with, assimilating to – the all too human desire for voyeurism. Through the filmic gaze we can supposedly witness and be party to an immediate experience of reality, or at least the reality of what is 'captured' on film.

Yet, in the various accounts that champion the mimetic capabilities within the medium of film, it is too often the technological device *per se* (e.g. the camera) that is given prominence and overemphasized. In the midst of such

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<sup>33</sup> For example, Vertov writes: "We cannot improve the making of our eyes, but we can endlessly perfect the camera" (1984, p. 16).

<sup>34</sup> This despite the best efforts of David Bordwell and Noël Carroll to bring down psychoanalytic film theory in their caustic collection entitled *Post-Theory* (1986).

undialectical triumphalism, and with an element of alienation not dissimilar to that proposed in Marx's notion of the 'fetishism of the commodity', the social and human bases of technological production either become opaque or are overlooked.<sup>35</sup> The camera's vision is but an extension of that of the human subject: without an operator, the camera has no such capacity to record. While Tarkovsky often enthused about the potential of film as a fledgling art form, there are some key differences and discontinuities to be found between his work and the dominant theoretical traditions in which film in general is steeped. The following are key points which, as will become clear, doubtlessly share certain traits with Adornian aesthetic theory and support my reading of Tarkovsky as a mimetic artist:

First is *technology versus technique*. Tarkovsky is not so strongly led by the capabilities and movements of the photographic technology itself,<sup>36</sup> but rather tries to discern the inner rhythms, movements and developments of the objective material confronting the technical apparatus. This technique moves Tarkovsky's work away from the cinematic conventions that were well established in, and even well before, his time.

Second is *reality*. Despite this almost 'organic' sensibility regarding aesthetic construction, Tarkovsky is not concerned with replicating or capturing reality 'as it is', since he (like Adorno) acknowledges the complex and continuous dialectic between subject and object. There is no 'peeping out', as it were, to see or experience reality without mediation (this would be akin to the philosophical fallacy that Adorno chastises as 'peephole metaphysics'). All images are unavoidably constructed.

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<sup>35</sup> This is particularly strange in the case of Vertov, given his extensive knowledge of Marxist thought.

<sup>36</sup> Although he will occasionally utilize some of technology's unique features – for instance, slow motion – if he feels the scene, or the meaning thereof, demands it or would be greatly enhanced by its use.

Third is *image and communication*. Tarkovsky's mimetic method betrays an adherence to the power of the image and its extra-verbal, intuitive structure of (rational) communication. In doing so, his works help to shed light on the limits inherent in a purely linguistically founded conception of communication, while drawing attention to the entwinement of *aesthetic* language and *philosophical* language, respectively.

Fourth, and finally, is *reception and mimesis*. The form of mimetic behaviour Tarkovsky's films elicit in the *viewer* is akin to an openness to the film's objective preponderance as well as its specific form and content, which resist traditional identificatory techniques. I argue that an Adornian conception of mimesis is appropriate to the interpretation of Tarkovsky's work and of altering (and enhancing) our capacities for critical viewing and experience. Such an argument will help to show up some of the limitations of the Habermasian communicative paradigm, and will have implications not merely in the confines of the cinematic arena, but also in the damaged social world in which we (co)exist.

I will now explore the above four points in turn.

### ***3.1 Technology versus Technique***

Let us consider, in greater detail, how Tarkovsky's work explores and represents a kind of mimetic activity, in contradistinction to the prevalent and somewhat restrictive conceptions of mimesis-as-imitation/replication that have so dominated both film theory and (Habermasian) critical theory. One of the most notable features of Tarkovsky's films can be seen in his refusal to adhere fully to established techniques, devices and 'languages' of cinema. From the time when film was in its infancy, traditional and repeatable methods of filming

and directing quickly brought to prominence, and then reinforced, a particular ‘grammar’ of the screen. In the process, a range of standard cinematic conventions became entrenched in the minds of film-makers, studio executives and viewers alike. These conventions – including establishing shots, reaction shots, cutaways, point-of-view (POV),<sup>37</sup> matched cuts, narrative linearity and fidelity, and so on – created expectations on the part of the audience and a certain predictability in the films themselves. While the processes involved in filming were so determined by this duty to adhere to strict narratives – with streams of setups and resolutions – similar limitations would follow in the post-production context, particularly in the role of *editing*.

The task of the editor in conventional cinema, by and large, was to merely dutifully follow and transpose the already explicit intentions of the director (and story) in ordering the film images so as to short-circuit any need for the viewer to actively interpret or think beyond the framed image at any given time. All scenes were shot and edited with a view of conveying direct developments in plot and/or character. For instance, in numerous war films, we witness typical scenes in which a character is shown surveying an area with binoculars or a rifle sight, before a routine cut is made to a shot (customarily with a circular black mask for added effect) depicting, or replicating, the character’s perspective.<sup>38</sup> Immediately and seamlessly, without any great effort, we assume the gaze of the character and readily integrate this frame into our understanding of the film’s narrative. In such instances both the actor’s position in the film and the director’s intentions are primarily overt, unquestionable, and

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<sup>37</sup> In the scene which follows the first obvious dream sequence in *Mirror*, Alexei talks on the phone to his mother and tells her of his dream. The dialogue accompanies an extended and complex camera movement, starting with a left to right pan followed by a steady tracking shot along the hall. The camera movement in itself flouts technical conventions, being neither strictly a pan nor a track. But more notable is the obscure point-of-view here. Alexei is speaking on a telephone (which is attached to the wall by a cable), yet the camera movement gradually and freely floats away from this apparently subjective perspective, exploring the scene from an impossible and artificial viewpoint.

<sup>38</sup> Even Stanley Kubrick’s (1964) otherwise groundbreaking *Dr. Strangelove* features a scene of precisely this nature.



(one is tempted to say) in danger of becoming overdetermined. Another example would be when a fade-to-black is used between shots to imply an indefinite passage of time which will be rapidly specified through subsequent dialogue and action, so as to allay any potential ambiguity or confusion on the part of the audience. Such formulaic techniques fall into the trend of 'question and answer' within linear narrative structures, in which a range of questions are raised – in relation to certain characters, actions, motivations, back stories, and so forth – that are later answered before a satisfactory closing resolution. So much, then, for the established techniques of film-making.

Partly reflecting a great belief in and respect for the audience, but likely even more so on account of his longing to create a unique aesthetic style, Tarkovsky found these conventions stultifyingly unimaginative, and duly sought to flout them. As a result of this desire to forge new pathways, in Tarkovsky's work the movements of the camera, as well as the editing techniques used, rarely serve to reinforce any mainstream cinematic conventions. Instead, his method is representative not of an assimilation of the human eye to the technological eye, but rather an assimilation of both human *and* technological eyes to the unique rhythms and movements of the objects themselves, or, more broadly construed, the environment. This is reminiscent of the Adornian notion that art is born of the attempt to make what is mute (nature, objects) *eloquent*, to give a voice to the natural world, or, better, to provide a minimally imposing aesthetic framework *in and through which* objects might become articulate. While it is undoubtedly the case that the artist, by engaging in the creative process, selects and arranges particular elements and materials in a manner which, as we observed previously, must to an extent risk furthering the subjective domination of objective material, following Tarkovsky's method the director is not at liberty to coerce his or her material into a preconceived framework. Rather, (s)he must become adept at discerning the temporal rhythms that are always already

present in the material, and work *with* them rather than against them. The cinematic image is, as Tarkovsky puts it, “essentially the observation of a phenomenon passing through time [. . .] The image becomes authentically cinematic when (amongst other things) not only does it live within time, but time also lives within it” (1989, pp. 67-68). This deep understanding of and respect for *time* – in all its natural, tangible, self-perpetuating realness – contributes in large part to the gradual yet precise development of Tarkovsky’s technique, which includes extensive use of long takes, panning and tracking shots as ways of remaining true (or *truer* at least) to objective temporal rhythm.

Of all the technical precision he exhibits, the long take is without doubt one of the most notable Tarkovsky trademarks.<sup>39</sup> Through extended shots – whether fixed, with tracking, ultra-slow zooms or pans – the image preserves the “concrete life and emotional content of the object filmed” (Tarkovsky, 1989, p. 70). There is a gradual and chronological rise in the use of long takes in Tarkovsky’s work. In the first of his seven feature films, *Ivan’s Childhood*, there is just one shot that lasts two minutes, while in *Andrei Rublëv* shots exceeding two and three minutes are frequent. These shot lengths are also commonplace in *Solaris* which features a longer take comprising four minutes. *Mirror* breaks the progression somewhat due to its use of relatively short shots, with just one scene that is approximately four minutes in length. But by the time of *Stalker*, the vast majority of shots now exceed two minutes, with many also breaching the four minute mark and one particular scene (in the room with the telephone) almost reaches seven minutes in duration. *Nostalghia* has the powerful extended take of Gorchakov carrying Domenico’s candle across the pool, which lasts eight minutes and forty-five seconds, while *The Sacrifice*, Tarkovsky’s last film,

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<sup>39</sup> It is also evidently one that is likely to aggravate certain viewers – even those watching with sympathetic eyes, as is evidenced by Fredric Jameson’s complaint of Tarkovsky’s “camera and his actors moving if anything more slowly than real time itself, with a solemnity quite intolerable to any but the truest [of Tarkovsky’s] believers” (1995, p. 92).

features a shot in which Alexander plants a tree, which lasts nine minutes and twenty-six seconds, becoming the longest in his oeuvre (Johnson & Petrie, 1994, pp. 194-195). In all cases, a mimetic relation between subject and object is present through which the dominating identificatory practices of subject-centred cognition are destabilized and dethroned, restoring an irreducibility of potentialities within sensible material (what Adorno would refer to as the 'non-identical'). Such methods once more call into question the centrality of the notions of intersubjectivity and undistorted communication to the Habermasian paradigm. The parameters and criteria that determine what qualifies as 'communication' should be extended, not curtailed. Tarkovsky's mimetic method, in rejecting the primacy of subject-subject interaction reinstates the primacy of the object, drawing attention to the inadequacies of unreflective subjective conceptualization and challenging the underlying assumptions of the theory of communicative action.

This critical potential is not only achieved in the sheer duration of the take. It is also awakened through the fixity of the camera's gaze. Indeed, frequently such long takes entail not only much planning and commitment *before* the shot, but also a great deal of technical movements and precision *during* the take. Tarkovsky's camera will often track, and, when it does so, it will sometimes also zoom. Meanwhile, in other instances, the camera tracks while parallaxically circling the focal object, or it may move at such a slow pace as to be almost imperceptible, so that only after an extended passage of time do we notice the shift in our perspectival position. Returning to the scene from *Nostalghia* in which Gorchakov carries the candle across the pool, it is easy to overlook the significant movement of the camera, since its tracking accurately mimics or shadows the deliberate movement of the character. In *Stalker*, where we witness the title character's sepia-tinged dream sequence featuring the stream filled with seemingly random objects, the camera slowly but continually

draws forward – affecting something like a vertically unfolding cinematic tapestry – floating above the water, allowing every piece of material within the frame to become eloquent both as an independent object and in constellation with those around it. In such long takes, the mimetic method of the director aims at remaining as faithful as possible to time inherent in things, or what Adorno would refer to as the sedimented history in the object(s).

Another significant technical element of what I am here calling the ‘mimetic method’ is *editing*, for it is in the specific ordering of the individual shots that the rhythm, movement and time within each object and shot demands (and should receive) due respect and foregrounding. As important as the editing process must be, it is – for obvious logistical reasons – subordinate to the filming process. Without the latter there would be no need for the former. But editing essentially entails, once again, a submission on the part of the subject to the preponderance of the object. In this way, the editing process follows the inherent structures, flows and rhythms contained in the shot material, and tries to assemble them accordingly into an unified whole. This aesthetic unity is thereby not strictly *imposed* upon the material by the artist, but rather results more from, and is propelled by, the filmed material itself. Tarkovsky refers to precisely this element of editing in the following passage, which is worth quoting at some length:

Editing is ultimately no more than the ideal variant of the assembly of the shots, necessarily contained within the material that has been put onto the roll of film. Editing a picture correctly, competently, means allowing the separate scenes and shots to come together spontaneously, for in a sense they edit themselves; they join up according to their own intrinsic pattern [. . .] In a curious, retroactive process, a self-organising structure takes shape during editing because of the distinctive properties given the material during shooting. The essential nature of the filmed material comes out in the character of the editing (1989, p. 116)

Such mimetic forms of editing are in stark contrast to the deliberately provocative and disjunctive cuts of, say, Jean-Luc Godard, or the didactic and ideologically determined content produced through the techniques associated with *montage*.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Tarkovsky – despite having a general admiration for Sergei Eisenstein’s talent and contributions to both the theory and practice of the developing medium of film – was hostile towards montage cinema, seeing in it a domineering cinematic form through which the artist/director imposes his or her will, firstly, on the *material* (during construction) and, then again, on the viewing *audience*. On Tarkovsky’s account, rapid cuts that juxtapose independent shots from divergent contexts in order to create a third moment merely serve to rupture any possible “time-pressure” that might exist within a shot. The result of such techniques is superficiality and inconsistency that pervades the imagery, as each shot is emptied of its original temporal content and coerced into a new, unnatural and self-contained form. The editing in montage cinema is so subordinated to the ideological position of the author that, by the time the film reaches the audience, all that is required is a mere decoding of the (unequivocal) meaning of the ‘text’. Meanwhile, in the mimetic method, editing proceeds immanently – that is, in accordance with the movement of the material itself in each scene – and, instead of being an activity that instrumentally serves the will of the author, retains the dialectical interaction between the author (subject) and the material (object). In so doing, the mimetic technique allows the filmed material to extend beyond the limits of the frame, invoking and relating the myriad interconnections between the particular shot and what is external to the shot. Technique (as much as technology) is in and of itself a *neutral* phenomenon, that is to say, it can be tailored towards furthering the existing forms of subjective domination, *or* it can be deployed mimetically, in a way that restores to the object its subjugated

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<sup>40</sup> Of course, montage was famously vaunted by Walter Benjamin, but interestingly – and somewhat surprisingly – Adorno also occasionally referred to montage in a more promising and positive light (for example, see TF, p. 203).

priority. As an artist whose technique, I would argue, can be seen as ‘mimetic’, Tarkovsky would undoubtedly have endorsed Adorno’s claim that “art mobilizes technique in an opposite direction than does domination” (AT, p. 70).

### 3.2 *Reality*

Siegfried Kracauer argued that the “essential material of ‘aesthetic apprehension’ is the physical world, including all that it may suggest to us. We cannot hope to embrace reality unless we penetrate its lowest layers” (1997 [1960], p. 298). Leaving to one side the corporal qualities of Kracauer’s chosen verbs ‘*embracing*’ and ‘*penetrating*’, there is nonetheless something of this materialist aesthetic that rings true in both Adorno’s critical theory and Tarkovsky’s films. Despite taking the real world as its guide, realism, in Tarkovsky’s work, is not to be confused with the striving for a perfect and unambiguous replication of the ‘real world’. It rather relates to the desire to assimilate artistic technique to the temporal movements and contours of the material in question, allowing the latter to speak in a manner that is *non-coercive* to the utmost extent possible. There is, of course, a risk of lapsing into a kind of organicist reductionism here, with so much talk of respecting the innate time that is sedimented in each object, and so forth.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the successful production of authentic works of art must be more than merely capturing reality, ‘as it is’, for this would surely mean that anyone with the requisite technology could aptly represent a true likeness of reality on film. Indeed, this conclusion would surely reduce the art of film to the function of that most ubiquitous of modern-day phenomena, closed-circuit television (CCTV).

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Bird perceptively likens the ruin at Galgano in the finale of *Nostalghia* to Caspar David Friedrich’s *Ruin at Eldena*, arguing that such imagery betrays the “ubiquitous temptation of romanticism in Tarkovsky’s films” (2008, p. 66). In a similar vein, Steven Vogel (1996) is critical of Adorno and Horkheimer for what he sees as a lapse into Romanticism with their conception of nature as an undifferentiated pure objectivity that is systematically maimed through the ‘progressive’ dialectic of enlightenment. Although a popular criticism, it can only be sustained by a reductive and instrumental reading of Adorno. My rendering of Adorno’s conception of nature is presented in Chapter IV (§2).

Tarkovsky himself acknowledges as much when he writes, “[n]aturalistically recorded facts are in themselves utterly inadequate to the creation of the cinematic image” (1989, p. 107). There clearly have to be supplements to a mere duplication of the material in order to instantiate an authentic aesthetic image. We might begin by noting the complex and continuous interaction that occurs between the subjective artist (and their utilization of technical means) and the objective matter. In other words, there is a double movement – of subject and object – at work in the cinematic image. As Bird puts it, the cinema “returns us to material reality not by representing it to us, but by forming a space where things and human gazes encounter each other as forces of resistance” (2008, p. 57).

Tarkovsky’s work incorporates this movement in introducing techniques that simultaneously attest to the objectivity present in the shot, on the one hand, while also enacting the shot’s artifice – its constructedness – on the other. In doing so, his films remain faithful to reality precisely by not fetishizing or reifying it. The director is not in the business of simply capturing reality, but at the same time neither is she at liberty to create absolutely anything *ex nihilo*. Tarkovsky writes, invoking the materialist bent mentioned above, “[o]ne of the most important limitations of the cinema, if you like, is the fact that the image can only be realised in factual, natural forms of visible and audible life” (1989, p. 71). There are, as it were, physiological and physical mechanisms that place inherent restrictions upon (and guides for) artistic practice and representation.<sup>42</sup> As Adorno writes, “Artworks derive from the world of things in their performed material as in their techniques” (AT, p. 176). He continues:

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<sup>42</sup> This claim is ostensibly rendered problematic – albeit anachronistically – by the recent and rapid progressions in CGI (computer-generated imagery), which make it possible to create images seemingly without restriction. However, the results to date, even at their most technically advanced, appear to be nothing more than slicker looking forms of cartoon animation. While there could be an argument to be made on behalf of animated cinema and social critique, I doubt that it would proceed on the basis of form and technique over content.

[T]here is nothing in them [artworks] that did not also belong to this world and nothing that could be wrenched away from this world at less than the price of its death (ibid.)

Again, this is characteristic of the dialectic between artist (subject) and material (object): “Construction tears the elements of reality out of their primary context and transforms them to the point where they are once again capable of forming a unity” (AT, p. 74). The mimesis of the cinematic image, then, is not of a Platonic kind. That is to say, the image is not trying to *imitate* reality. Rather, the mimetic movement in film is dual layered: firstly, the subject-as-artist subordinates her practice to the preponderance of the object; before, secondly, the subject-as-viewer assimilates to the object-as-artwork (more on the latter specifically in section 3.4).

This dialectic is played out within the context of some of Tarkovsky’s most arresting scenes. These are the scenes that, while adhering to the rhythms of their content, also subvert the realness of the objective components. Often seamless additions or movements are used to effect dreamlike experiences in which time, space and physical laws (for a brief time at least) no longer restrict the possibilities of the shot. One example of an infiltration of an ‘outside’ object entering the artwork can be observed when a French poster for Tarkovsky’s film, *Andrei Rublëv*, is seen on the interior of the dacha, creating a disjuncture that disturbs the narrative identity (in the form of Alexei) by imparting the director’s autobiographical content onto the film. Yet, it is the authenticity of and mimetic connection between the objects in the shot that extend into these overtly artificial elements, creating a continuity and density that compel the viewer to follow the contours of the work, rather than become detached as soon as any ‘non-natural’ part of an image is discerned. Tarkovsky notes that “[a]ll too often film dreams are made into a collection of old-fashioned filmic tricks,



and cease to be a phenomenon of life" (1989, p. 30), which is why he refuses to give typical cinematic clues or breaks between real and fantasy – such as the routine misty-edged frame, visual fades or aural interludes. Given that dreams, as semi- or sub-conscious expressions, are so important to the creation of an authentic image of character, history, relations, and so on, Tarkovsky shoots them according to the same principles as all other scenes. The 'surreal' moments that people recall from dreams or dreamlike experiences are usually not so different from 'everyday life' (for want of a better phrase). The eerie feelings sometimes associated with dreams are often elicited by the unexpected juxtaposition (or constellation) of perfectly routine and comprehensible things. In *Mirror*, there are a number of sequences – some of which are dreams, others memories – which remain true to the authenticity and coherence of the film but do so while drawing attention to the technical apparatus, the artist's hand, as it were. Sometimes a change in colour is used (usually a switch to black-and-white or sepia-like tones), but this is not always the case, again frustrating existing cinematic formulae or visual cues. At other times, a subtle use of slow motion is present, though not always immediately apparent, as in the memory scene that shows Maria (the narrator's mother) and her colleague Lisa hurrying along a hallway in the printing factory. There are also moments when characters directly address the camera, sometimes silently,<sup>43</sup> other times with dialogue.<sup>44</sup>

Another way in which Tarkovsky mediates reality and art is in his depictions of dream, memory and fantasy. He regularly makes use of both temporal and spatial disjuncture. In Alexei's first dream sequence in *Mirror*, the mother is seen walking through a room after having washed her hair, as the camera

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<sup>43</sup> For example, the second scene in *Nostalgia* when, upon hearing the running water, Gorchakov turns his head and looks to the camera; see also the shot towards the end of *Mirror* in which the mother briefly smiles and looks into the lens (simultaneously gazing at Alexei – her son, the narrator – but also at we the audience).

<sup>44</sup> For example, the monologue delivered by Stalker's wife in the penultimate scene of *Stalker*.

tracks sideways to show her reflection in the mirror. The camera pans further and Maria goes out of frame to the *right*, but shortly she reappears to the *left*, giving the impression that she exists concurrently in two distinct parts of the room. She then approaches the mirror and moves a hand toward its surface. The camera pans to the mirror and we now see the hand and image of an old lady (played by Tarkovsky's real-life mother) wearing the same white gown and shawl as Maria. Of course, only later do we discover that both women in the dream (mirror) sequence are the narrator's mother, Maria, yet the impeccable interrelation and arrangement of form and content in the sequence already lends a sense of (at least partial) comprehensibility, even on a first viewing. While the overall effect of the shot does not adhere to traditional cinematic conventions relating to dream sequences, the shot evokes an authentic dreamlike experience. The reality in and of the cinematic image arises neither entirely from the filmed objects nor simply from proficient subjective technique. Reality, in art, stands at the intersection of the two.

This dialectical understanding of the relation between reality and art perhaps also goes some way towards explaining why, in his films that are undoubtedly in the general field of 'science-fiction' (namely, *Solaris* and *Stalker*), Tarkovsky refuses the allure of special effects technology. Visually, there are hardly any moments that even hint of supplementary effects.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it is only *aurally* where notable innovations are present, particularly in the eerie soundscapes provided by Eduard Artemiev, which through their disconcerting textures and layers of synthesized noises become an indispensable part of the aesthetic whole. Comparing Tarkovsky's form of science-fiction to the endless streams through which the genre appears to us today – what with the ever-increasing capabilities of CGI and so forth – one sees in the former an aesthetic

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<sup>45</sup> The depiction of the mysterious 'ocean' in *Solaris* suggests some additional effects but no others come to mind.

engagement with and reflection upon reality, while in the latter there is little beyond mere escapism, whimsy and fantasy. As Miriam Hansen has argued, the utopian reach of the mimetic impulse “prefigures the possibility of a reconciliation with nature, which includes the inner nature of human beings, the body and the unconscious” (1997, p. 90). As such it would be wrong to seek either a reinforcement or reproduction of an unreconciled existent, on the one hand, or reconciliation through exile, on the other. Tarkovsky’s work effectively resists the dual temptations of *replication* and *escapism*, in its mimetic method and mediation between reality and art.

### 3.3 *Image and Communication*

Earlier in the chapter, we considered some of the limitations of a Habermasian conception of communication. Here I want to return to this theme, but with a greater focus on the relations between image and communication, and art and philosophy. Adorno’s theoretical work and Tarkovsky’s filmic work provide some complementary insights that challenge some of the core tenets of the theory of communicative action. We noted previously the wholesale rejection of mimesis that accompanies the paradigm shift in critical theory from ‘consciousness philosophy’ to ‘linguistic philosophy’. Concomitant with the banishment of mimesis is a disciplinary demarcation – or ‘division of labour’ – in which art and philosophy (and the languages thereof) are held to be distinct and incompatible, two realms that follow their own unique logics and forms of rationality. The pragmatic conception of language (and its use) favoured by Habermas and his followers tends towards an overly positive understanding of the efficacy of conceptualization and communication. Utterances by a speaker (subject *a*) make a number of validity claims and as such can be either accepted, rejected, or left undecided, by the receiver (subject *b*). *Consensus* is at the heart of

discourse; the former acts as both *arche* and *telos* of the latter. Thus, we have the basis for *intersubjectivity*.<sup>46</sup>

With consensus as its goal, communicative action favours language use that is clear, precise, transparent and sincere, that is, language aimed towards truthfulness. This is promoted and classed as ‘normal’ language use. Such ‘normal’<sup>47</sup> language use, for Habermas, is the primary method through which social integration is achieved, and for this reason it ought to be prioritized. The centrality of the ‘force of the better argument’ is indicative of the precedence of discursive reason (philosophy) within the dominant communicative paradigm. Reason in communicative action is rational and enlightening, working in the service of freedom and the enhancement of the democratic public sphere and its institutions. Thus, so the Habermasian argument concludes, we should resist being hoodwinked by Adorno’s persuasive yet totalizing critique of reason and have no need to follow his lead unto a dead-end of irrationality and aporetic artworks, leaving the substantial achievements of the enlightenment and reason behind as so much debris.

Yet, the place of aesthetics in both reaching understanding and developing intersubjectivity is far from isolatable. What I want to show in this section is that, although art and philosophy may well work with different methods of communication and forms of rationality – sensuous in art, conceptual in philosophy – they are nonetheless interlinked, inseparably so, and ultimately co-constitutive of knowledge and understanding. Therefore, to split them off from one another is to render each partial and wanting.

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<sup>46</sup> The significance of the phrase ‘intersubjectivity’ to Habermas’ project is perhaps partly a making explicit of claims that should already be understood from the term ‘subjectivity’. When Adorno speaks of subjectivity the notion always implies co-constitution of and interaction between subjects. In this context, then, the ‘inter’ prefix could be said to be superfluous.

<sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault would say ‘normalized’.

The following quote is exemplary of the stark demarcation of art, on one side, and philosophy, on the other:

Tarkovsky is not a philosopher, but an artist. He writes philosophy unusually well for an artist, but his best work remains his art, and it is a mistake to confuse the two or to treat them as equal, or to try to bring them together to reveal the 'true' Tarkovsky (Jones, 2009, p. 264)

Now, I think most people familiar with his films would agree that Tarkovsky's best work is indeed his art. But, even if we disregard the fact that this particular artist happened to write rather sophisticatedly on a range of philosophically inflected themes, it is still highly misguided to cordon off philosophy and aesthetics in such a way. Indeed, such conceptual segregation is precisely what occurs in the prevalent forms of culture-industrial production/consumption, whereby art – from kitsch to classics – is packaged and prescribed in metaphorical 'culture tablets' to be regularly consumed to ease psychic disquiet. Yet, one thing that authentic artworks carry within them is an impulse towards philosophical interpretation: "Artworks [. . .] await their interpretation" (AT, p. 169); "Aesthetic experience is not genuine experience unless it becomes philosophy" (AT, p. 172). An artwork cannot be created with a specific aim in mind, say, of satisfying a particular subjective urge or interpretive niche, as it were, since this makes of art a mere instrument, destroying its (partial) autonomy and integrity in the process. An artwork has no immediate message to transmit to an observing meaning-consuming subject. When a work of art states an unequivocal or categorical claim it ceases to be art; in such instances, it merely reproduces the transparency thesis of discursive reason (in which case the artist might as well have written a philosophical treatise and be done with it).<sup>48</sup> Interpretations, no matter how philosophically adept, will always fail to fully capture the aesthetic object. Indeed, awareness of precisely this

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<sup>48</sup> Adorno is emphatic on this point: "Artworks that unfold to contemplation and thought without any remainder are not artworks" (AT, p. 161).

inadequacy or incompleteness of conceptualization, thought, and language, is one of art's crucial characteristics, and the persistence of the discursive determination of concepts over objects perpetually drives the need for aesthetics: "The content [*Gehalt*] of art does not reduce without remainder into the idea, rather, this content is the extrapolation of what is irreducible" (AT, p. 170).

Tarkovsky's films consist of complex constellations of images that call forth interpretation, and thereby also engage in a form of *communication*. Of course, when I use the term communication in this context, it is not to be read in precisely the same form as would be understood in a purely linguistic framework, which is to say that whatever communicative elements exist in and arise from the films cannot be reduced to mere signification or even symbolism.<sup>49</sup> Tarkovsky's mimetic method attests to the *sensuous* aspects of life, subjectivity, objectivity, thought, experience and communication.<sup>50</sup> Communicative interaction between persons is complex and multifaceted. The inert concepts deployed in discourse, no matter how transparent and self-reflexive they may be, cannot properly identify and represent what they purport to.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, concepts are semantic placeholders that we use while continuing our quest towards greater eloquence and expression. Art does not step in to 'fill the gap', as it were, or to provide the aesthetic *yin* to philosophy's *yang*. Yet, art *can* serve to articulate this very lack, this negative remainder that

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<sup>49</sup> The director's views on symbolism are too complex to be explored here. Suffice it to say, Tarkovsky clearly made use of certain symbolic images in his work, yet he was stringently against reducing shots to symbolic interpretations. The latter point probably goes some way towards explaining his more hyperbolic dismissals of symbolism in his work: "I had the greatest difficulty in explaining to people that there is no hidden, coded meaning in the film, nothing beyond the desire to tell the truth. Often my assurances provoked incredulity and even disappointment. Some people evidently wanted more: they needed arcane symbols, secret meanings" (Tarkovsky, 1989, p. 133).

<sup>50</sup> Adorno notes this with reference to the "indispensable sensual element of artworks" (AT, p. 177); and again, "art, mimesis driven to the point of self-consciousness, is nevertheless bound up with feeling" (AT, p. 336).

<sup>51</sup> The recurrent motif of stuttering within Tarkovsky's work – most notably in *Ivan's Childhood* and the opening scene of *Mirror* – could be seen to evoke this ineluctable failure of the speech-act. Even when physical impairments dissipate, we remain nevertheless incapable of full articulation.

escapes conceptual identification. As such, art both immanently criticizes conceptualization while indirectly conceptualizing. Artworks make no direct conceptual claims, yet are densely suffused with conceptuality. They are all “pervaded by the conceptual” (AT, p. 125). This marks art’s inherently dual character, as well as its inextricable links with philosophical thought. “Philosophy and art converge in their truth content: The progressive self-unfolding truth of the artwork is none other than the truth of the philosophical concept” (ibid., p. 172).

The place of the cinematic image within this art-philosophy dialectic is noteworthy. The image is capable of expressing – or, rather, is capable of allowing for the expression of – something that is beyond the subjective conceptual grasp. In this way the image remains true to the mimetic comportment that problematizes traditional subject-object epistemology, as well as the commonplace linguistic formulation of signifier-signified. As Miriam Hansen claims:

Mimesis [. . .] does not pertain to the relation between sign and referent; it is not a category of representation. Rather, it aims at a mode of subjective experience, a preverbal form of cognition, which is rendered objective in works of art, summoned up by the density of their construction (1997, p. 90)

In his precise and dense construction of aesthetic images, Tarkovsky’s use of actors is another point worth considering. The actors in his films are – to the extent that one would expect an ‘actor’ to perform dialogue – quite insignificant in relation to the film as an artistic whole. In fact, the director made a point of hiring semi- or even non-professional actors, often on the basis of purely physical characteristics rather than auditioning talent as such. Moreover, according to a wide range of mutually reinforcing first-hand recollections, Tarkovsky offered very little if anything in the way of detailed direction (on

voice, wording, emphasis, tone, pace, expression, and so on). Instead, his focus was almost exclusively on physical placements, movements, gestures, manners and feeling.<sup>52</sup> In other words, the construction of the image (and the arrangement or sequencing of images) is what makes for a genuine aesthetic object, not the outward expressions and pronouncements of its lead characters. The coherence of the aesthetic image is what communicates or intimates to the viewer, but this connection is indirect. Any illumination arrives via refraction, since the image is both determinate and indeterminate. The strength of Tarkovsky's films, as Natasha Synessios argues, is that they give "form, density and a particular 'voice' to an aspect of life that language is not capable of" (2001, p. 49). They are 'enigmatic', but they are neither mystical nor obfuscatory, for the lawfulness and consistency in each film calls forth and guides subsequent interpretation. The latter may indeed be without absolute finality, but that is not to say that interpretation can proceed in any old way.<sup>53</sup> In this somewhat elliptical sense, art interacts with conceptuality to invoke the non-conceptual. This latter notion chimes with Adorno's assertion that the "cognitive utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the non-conceptual" (ND, p. 10). Mimesis, then, rather than being some purely pre-rational or mythical residue, an 'other' of reason, is instead deeply enmeshed in the dialectic of reason and communication. Through the construction of the image, mimesis reflects that which cannot be directly communicated but can only be gleaned, as it were, through a glass darkly.<sup>54</sup> Tarkovsky's view of the importance of the

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<sup>52</sup> Tarkovsky complains: "Actors are often told to 'get the meaning across'. And so the actor obediently 'carries the meaning' – and sacrifices the truth of the persona in the process" (1989, p. 155). Alexander Kaidanovsky (who played the eponymous Stalker) recounts in an interview that Tarkovsky once told them on set: "I don't need your psychology, your expressiveness [. . .] The actor is part of the composition, like the tree, like water" (cited by Johnson & Petrie, 1994, p. 45).

<sup>53</sup> Indeed, there is a risk, in the predominant deconstructive reading tendencies towards 'play', of advocating wilful misreadings that ignore the real socio-historical content sedimented in the text under consideration. In such cases, virtuosity in interpretation trumps the potential for aesthetic truth-content.

<sup>54</sup> This kind of refracted or partial glimpsing of truth is reflected in Tarkovsky's shots which often depict characters, objects and situations through mirrors, windows, sheets of rainfall, puddles, half-memories, dreams, and so on.



image is given as follows, in terms which seem to reprise certain Adornian refrains:

The image is indivisible and elusive, dependent upon our consciousness and on the real world which it seeks to embody [. . .] We cannot comprehend the totality of the universe, but the poetic [i.e. cinematic] image is able to express that totality. The image is an impression of truth, a glimpse of the truth permitted to us in our blindness (1989, p. 106)

When the pressure of experience that is linguistically contained within the verbal and significative structures of a film reaches its limit, the cinematic image is needed to intensify, bring out and give voice to that pressure and experience. Tarkovsky's image opposes the reductive practices of identification in language.<sup>55</sup> But it does so precisely in order to keep true to the mimetic promise inherent in communication. Art retains a language-like character through its formal properties and mimetic composition. Amid the space between an indecipherable cacophony of meanings and a void of meaning altogether, the artwork communicates diversely and enigmatically. The artwork's "enigmatic image is the configuration of mimesis and rationality" (AT, p. 168). The textured, complex, dense composition of the image sets forth associations and intimations which significative language is simply not capable of attaining. What seeps out of linguistic rationality is absorbed and rejuvenated by its mimetic dialectical counterpart, which in artistic praxis develops its own non-violent forms of communication.

### ***3.4 Reception and Mimesis***

Throughout the preceding arguments, I have occasionally alluded to an additional level of mimetic activity that occurs in the realm of aesthetic

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<sup>55</sup> There is a memorable scene in *Nostalgia* where Gorchakov (a poet himself) sets fire to a book of poetry (by Arsenii Tarkovsky, no less, the director's father). The image takes over (mimetic) communicative duties from the word.

experience. The first level of mimetic comportment exists in the aesthetic-productive process, that is, the subject-object dialectic that plays out between the artist and the 'raw' material (for want of a better term). Though this mimetic level is unquestioningly paramount in the argument, there is nevertheless a second level mimesis which warrants consideration, for without it works of art would be in danger of becoming largely irrelevant or dismissed as vacuous objects. The second level mimesis occurs in the act of aesthetic *reception*, the point at which a subject (or group of subjects, as is often the case with filmic works) encounters the objective artwork and experiences it. Tarkovsky's cinematic works – like any genuine work of art – exceed ostensible meanings through their formal construction and coherence. They cannot be approached and experienced according to the usual co-ordinates of subjective reasoning and conceptual ordering. In the previous section, I noted Tarkovsky's preference for certain actors and acting methods, and with regard to mimetic reception this insistence on physicality, visceral energy, and image construction (opposed to overt expressiveness, psychology, excessive dialogue, and so on), takes on greater significance. The viewer is indirectly, surreptitiously perhaps, provoked into interpretive activity, for the refusal of both exterior expressivity and conventional clue-giving in the film requires that the viewing subject attempt to assimilate to the aesthetic object. The artwork follows its own immanent laws and in its objective final state is not pliable to the traditional categories of identification:

What is essentially mimetic awaits mimetic comportment. If artworks do not make themselves like something else but only like themselves, then only those who imitate them understand them (AT, p. 166)

Only through such mimetic comportment can a genuine experience (and a move towards understanding) be hoped for. In relation to Tarkovsky's work, Maya Turovskaya notes that "the more the form of the film prevails over the

exigencies of plot and narrative structure, the greater the effort required [of the audience]" (1989, p. 95). It is as if the film presents itself as a Rubik style puzzle, one that has a definite form and can be picked up countless times though with no guarantee of approaching a 'solution'. The puzzle requires of us input and activity, yet each time we take up the puzzle its configuration seems to have altered, almost as if it has taken on a life of its own quite beyond our repeated and laboured attempts to 'solve' it. Tarkovsky's films are saturated with just such feelings of puzzlement, wonder<sup>56</sup> and enigma. They give rise to a form of reception that combines intuitability and interpretation, since neither on its own is up to the task of reaching understanding (or knowledge for that matter). Neither pure concept nor pure intuition will suffice: "Shorn of its antithesis, intuitability would become a fetish [. . .] Because aesthetic appearance cannot be reduced to its intuition, the content of artworks cannot be reduced to the concept either" (AT, pp. 126-127). Applying our conceptualizing faculties to the aesthetic object will fail because the former can never fully capture the formal properties and enigmatic content within the latter. At the same time, however, attempts to renounce all conceptual work and merely experience the artwork intuitively, viscerally even, will be inadequate since the artwork is always pervaded by the conceptual, that is to say, it is not wholly intuitable.

Mimesis inheres in Tarkovsky's films, and the viewer is compelled to assimilate to the film, to follow its immanent logic, rhythm, development, abandoning the domineering and instrumental form of rationality that pervades the social world. In doing so, a dialectical space is opened up between subject and object in which the potential truth-content in the film may find its (partial) expression. Its truth-content remains partial since art is not in possession of, what Hegel would call, the Absolute. Any truth that is sedimented in Tarkovsky's work is shrouded in black. It is not graspable directly, for all art remains semblance

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<sup>56</sup> "A priori, art causes people to wonder" (AT, p. 167).

[*Schein*]. Art is inescapably in and of its social context. Should that context prove to be replete with contradictions, falsehoods, ideological structures, and so on, then any artwork that claims or invokes total immunity from these factors will be an unadulterated illusion (ideology). The necessary semblance of art should not be overlooked or papered over, as if its autonomy were pure. Rather, its semblance becomes a part of its very composition. Through its very semblance it calls all false appearances into question, thereby partly redeeming semblance.

Moreover, as we noted earlier, were an artwork to have only one interpretation, a single truth or message, it would cease to be art. This is partly why I find Tarkovsky's films to be of greater aesthetic value than those in the tradition of montage. The innovative work of montage directors is not without artistic merit, but in terms of its relation to mimesis and reception there is a drawback. The drawback being that, while montage cinema also displays the kind of puzzle-like character of which we have just been considering, the 'puzzles' within montage films come with in-built limitations and authorial guidelines that dictate to the viewer how he or she should 'solve' them.<sup>57</sup> Stretching the puzzle metaphor a bit further still, the montage film perhaps best recalls the jigsaw puzzle, in that there are many different parts, cut up into different shapes and sizes, but which nonetheless can only come together in *one* particular and coherent final form. Its *telos* inheres in the method. This brings to mind Adorno's more general criticism of ideologically driven works:

There are artworks in which the artist brought out clearly and simply what he wanted, and the result, nothing more than an indication of what the

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<sup>57</sup> In one of Tarkovsky's stronger denunciations of montage cinema, he writes: "Each of these riddles [in montage film] has its own word-for-word solution [. . .] the author proceeds to make a total onslaught on the audience, imposing upon them his own attitude to what is happening" (1989, p. 118). There is probably a lot to say in favour of such a view, given that the Bolsheviks actively deployed montage films as an effective propaganda tool. The Party would surely have been less enthusiastic towards the technique were it to open up interpretive possibilities and autonomous thought forms.

artist wanted to say, is thereby reduced to an enciphered allegory. The work dies as soon as philologists have pumped out of it what the artist pumped in (AT, p. 170)

Tarkovsky's work, in contrast, offers up no singular reading or message. Instead, his films call for the subject to follow the self-contained flows of time, space and imagery that run through the work as a whole.<sup>58</sup> Once set in motion, the images and sequences within Tarkovsky's films appear paratactically like connected train carriages, each linked to the ones immediately preceding and following, adding in the process greater weight and momentum to the overall movement. The suggestiveness of certain opaque motifs that seem to recur in different films, in diverse contexts and forms, extends each film beyond its own limits, calling forth associations and constellations of images that draw the viewer on to the interpretive praxis necessary for genuine aesthetic experience. The "intellectual stimulation experienced by the audience [. . .] gives the spectator a moment of true co-authorship, awakening the creative instinct" (Turovskaya, 1989, p. 99). In Tarkovsky's case, the finished film will always exert a certain level of coercion over its audience. But then, all objects have this potential within them, and indeed it is precisely this unknown or unquantifiable force of coercion that the subject unduly reacts against through the imposition of rigid thought forms and categories. In such instances, it is as if the subject-as-spectator becomes an aesthetic sleuth, proudly proclaiming: 'Aha! Yes, *that* is what this object is. *This* is what it does. And *this* is the method by which it does so'. The object is reactively submerged beneath a sea of concepts and identifications, and is silenced in the process.

In contrast to this suppressive subject-object relation, the mimetic reception required of Tarkovsky's work and other artworks gives back priority to the

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<sup>58</sup> One might recall the importance of temporal flow (rhythm) in the editing process, which, as was noted, constitutes a major part of Tarkovsky's method of achieving an aesthetic totality.

object. As the director himself notes, in encountering his films the viewer will either sink into the flow of the film itself, assimilating herself to it, or she will not, in which case “no contact is made” (Tarkovsky, 1989, p. 120). It is precisely the former type of viewing that represents the kind of mimetic reception required of aesthetic objects. If any hope for social transformation and a more critical self-consciousness is to be found in film (and I will argue throughout this thesis that it is), then such an altered state of receptive, aesthetic and mimetic subjectivity – assimilating to the object itself rather than delimiting it under conceptual schemata – will be a prerequisite of any such change. Along such speculative lines, we might yet move some way towards Adorno’s claim, to wit: “Contemplation without violence, the source of all the joy of truth, presupposes that he who contemplates does not absorb the object into himself: a distanced nearness” (MM, §54, pp. 89-90).

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have attempted to explicate the complex concept of mimesis as it appears and develops in Adorno’s critical theory. This was deemed to be of importance in response to the stringent attack on mimesis contained within the paradigm-shifting critique of Jürgen Habermas. I argued that in the latter’s ‘communicative turn’, and the concomitant banishment of mimesis as a fruitful concept, the possibilities for critical-theoretical projects are reduced and limited. The primary form of such limitation was seen to be present in the distinct move away from subject-object to subject-subject relations (intersubjectivity). In his formulations, Habermas discards that which does not fit in to his construal of reason, in the hope of leaving behind what he sees as mystical ‘others’ to reason, of which mimesis is exemplary. Yet, as I have tried to show, there is an unavoidable non- or pre-conceptual moment to rationality and communication, as theorized by Adorno and imparted aesthetically by Tarkovsky in his mimetic

method, which bespeaks the inadequacies and necessary failures of communicative action. The thesis of the preponderance of the object, which highlights the necessity of returning epistemological priority to the object, was argued to be of immense significance to Adorno's critical thinking. Moreover, the preponderance argument was also drawn out of my readings of Tarkovsky's filmic works, once more with the aim of refuting the Habermasian rendering of mimesis. While Adorno's work advocates the potential in mimesis through its theorization and conceptualization, Tarkovsky's films aesthetically deploy mimetic techniques in order to non-conceptually invoke the same latent critical possibility within mimetic comportment. Taken together, a powerful and persuasive case is made for the enduring, if not irreducible, pertinence of mimesis as an intriguing and illuminating concept.

# CHAPTER III

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## MARGINALITY AND CRITIQUE IN ADORNO AND HANEKE

### INTRODUCTION

At the heart of Adorno's critical theory, one can sense a disquieting paradox relating to the possibilities of resisting the deleterious effects of the present social world. This paradox may be summarized as follows: resistance to the totally administered world is both *absolutely necessary* yet *utterly impossible*. The implications of this aporetic notion of resistance are ominous, for they appear to induce a boundless sense of despair at not only the state of the social world but also our inability to alter it in any significant way. It is as if, to invoke once more Benjamin's infinitely intriguing reading of Klee's *Angelus Novus*, we are being uncontrollably swept along by the winds of 'progress' and, having no say in its direction or speed, can only lament and capitulate as the debris left in its wake mounts ever higher. Adorno's apparently aporetic position points toward the interrelations between individual subjects and the social objective totality. In trying through critical thought to estrange and displace the world as it currently stands, we may be afforded glimpses of what freedom and true human flourishing could be, via the negation (or negative analysis) of their currently distorted forms. Yet, at the same time, whatever we can presently think or imagine will be indelibly coloured, affected and ultimately *restricted* by the extant 'bad' reality. Such are the limitations of our socially determined consciousnesses. These arguments seem to suggest that while we should attempt to resist the societal impositions that bring about and reinforce



suffering, the pervasiveness and power of the objective totality is such that, however we may try to resist it, we will ultimately fall short and, what is more, may unintentionally exacerbate or perpetuate existing failures.

These ostensibly totalizing formulations have, in recent years, brought defenders and detractors alike into quarrels over the political, ethical and practical potential in and limitations of Adorno's work. It is fair to say that to date the limitations have received more widespread expression and influence. My aim here is to help redress the balance by offering a reading of Adorno, in constellation with some of the provocative filmic work of Michael Haneke, that goes beyond a mere reiteration of the former's original claims and proposes a tentative model of, what I will call, *marginal subjectivity*. I argue that both Adorno and Haneke present existing affluent (Western) societies in unremittingly pejorative terms, with seemingly minimal possibility for resistance or large-scale social change. However, neither Adorno nor Haneke is willing to relinquish their belief in the inextinguishable potential of critical (if partial) autonomy amid social domination. The apparent impossibility of entirely subsuming human subjectivity sustains the hope that, when sufficiently marginal to the existent social order, one can call that order into question and perhaps even provoke semi-autonomous responses from other individuals in the process. The results of such a process of gradual marginalization cannot be predicted in advance, but it is clear that, should the margins become more populous, both the legitimacy of the status quo and the brutal foreclosure of the future will be severely challenged.

The structure of the chapter will take the following form. In the first section, I examine the macro-level critique of Adornian critical theory, and make the case for reading both Adorno and Haneke as anti-psychological social critics (sections 1.1 and 1.2). This argument precedes a discussion of the apparent

absence of a collective revolutionary subject and the implications this has for critical social theory (1.3). The second half of the chapter is dedicated to developing the idea of a marginal subject. The first of two subsections defends the legitimacy of estrangement as part of marginal subjectivity (2.1), while the second explores the dialectic of bourgeois coldness and how this functions as a crucial catalyst for critique in both Adorno's social theory and Haneke's films (2.2).

## 1. THE FALSE WHOLE

In this first section, I will explore the radical<sup>59</sup> social criticism that is offered in both Adorno's theoretical work and certain of Haneke's films, since in both cases the existing social world is conceptualized in decidedly bleak terms. When confronted with Adorno's vision of late capitalist society<sup>60</sup> one finds precious little respite. His critical theory at the social (macro) level is resolutely Marxian. Theoretically, Adorno undoubtedly follows Marx's famous call for the "ruthless criticism"<sup>61</sup> of all that exists. Yet, while the Marxian position was always developed within and conceived as part of a progressive linear movement through history, culminating in its telos of a utopian communist society, Adorno's position is thoroughly decentred, anti-systematic, non-linear and anti-teleological. What is more, his works exhibit an absence of the revolutionary optimism and underlying sense of inevitability so prevalent in traditional Marxist thought. For Adorno, there is nothing to suggest that things might substantively improve in the near future: "no higher form of society is concretely visible [. . .] [A]nything that seems in easy reach is regressive" (2001 [1978], p. 202). This range of factors severely complicates any attempt at arriving at a clear or definitive understanding of Adorno's 'Marxism', and, moreover, such factors make it difficult to draw out individual concepts as being absolutely central or foundational to his overall critique. The latter is so because each concept purposively feeds into and out of other concepts, and in a (supposedly) non-hierarchical manner.<sup>62</sup> Despite these apparent difficulties, however, I believe it is possible to discern what is of most relevance in Adorno's

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<sup>59</sup> 'Radical' here should be understood in relation to its original Latin form [*radix*] (i.e. referring to the very roots or fundamental elements of a problem).

<sup>60</sup> For my purposes, I consider our contemporary so-called 'postmodern' context to be largely an extension of capitalism's 'late' phase. Adorno uses the term 'late capitalism' to refer to the monopolistic and centralized forms of capitalism that arose towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. My decision to maintain its use here is primarily to avoid the unnecessary and anachronistic juxtaposition of 'postmodern' and 'Adorno'.

<sup>61</sup> This line appears in Marx's letter of September, 1843, to his friend Arnold Ruge.

<sup>62</sup> A more detailed account of this idea has been explored in the opening chapter on *constellations*.

work for our present purposes, namely, maintaining the necessary *macro*-level critique of late capitalist society, in addition to suggesting potential ‘marginal’ responses at the *micro*-level. Before we can develop an argument for such responses, we must first provide an account of the false social world that is, according to Adorno, so profoundly damaging and deforming of contemporary experience. It will also be possible to consider how such arguments might illuminate certain elements of Haneke’s filmic work, and, furthermore, how the latter can be interpreted as aesthetically supporting the former.

### 1.1 *Social Theory Contra Psychology*

It is my contention that there are some interesting and persuasive parallels within the social critiques to be found in both the work of Adorno and Haneke. One of the most interesting elements is the apparent eschewal of psychological categories and explanations. The point to be made here is not that the discipline of psychology is in its entirety without merit or relevance. Rather, inasmuch as it refers to and makes routine diagnoses on the basis of what it takes to be *individual* pathologies, psychological explanation remains limited in its scope, incapable of moving adequately towards a wider theorization of extant *social* conditions. I claim that both Adorno (through *theory*) and Haneke (through *form*) offer just such refutations of psychology’s pre-eminence, and call forth a more radical and all-encompassing social critique. However, the implications of their seemingly totalizing criticisms are such that any counter-position to egregious objective forces is significantly endangered. If the social totality is genuinely of a kind that forcefully compels individuals without exception to bend to meet its demands, then there would appear to be very little in the way of prospective resistance or improvement. I will address this apparent practical deficit in the second half of this chapter. In the meantime, I will make the case for an *anti*-psychological reading of Adorno and Haneke.

Adorno frequently emphasises the *total* nature of society's 'administered' features. He hardly tires of reminding his readers that nobody is immune to or exempted from the brutalization and deformation of life. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we are told how, under the ever-extending trawling net of the culture industry, "no one can escape", while in *Negative Dialectics* one finds that "In a state of unfreedom no-one [. . .] has a liberated consciousness" (ND, p. 95). But it is within the pages of *Minima Moralia* where one finds relentless variations on the theme of total societal domination. The following examples include some of the most remarkable: "All this leaves no individual unmarked" (MM, p. 33); "There is no way out of entanglement" (MM, p. 27); "no-one [. . .] can escape such degradation" (MM, p. 31); "no-one, without exception, can now determine his own life" (MM, p. 37); "the ever more rigid hierarchy that encompasses everyone" (ibid.); "In principle everyone, however powerful, is an object" (ibid.). Any divergence in the integrative effects of the social totality upon a particular individual is, by Adorno's account, purely a difference in degree and not in kind.

The apparent ubiquity of objective forces, working over the heads and behind the backs of individual subjects (to paraphrase Ernst Bloch), leads Adorno to problematize the much pursued analytical fit between psychology, on the one hand, and critical theory, on the other. Psychological explanations – primarily deriving from interpretations or creative adaptations of Freud's work – can be seen to supplement a critical social theory when the latter's (primarily Marxist) theoretical tools show explanatory weaknesses, for example, in providing adequate reasons as to why people would so act to perpetuate conditions that fundamentally work against their own interests.<sup>63</sup> To this end, advocates of social psychology often argue the case for the value of psychology to the

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<sup>63</sup> This attempt to mediate between critical theory and psychology is most clearly to be found in the work of one of Adorno's Frankfurt colleagues, Erich Fromm, but the mediation is also implicit in the work of other members of the Institute (e.g. Herbert Marcuse).

classical Marxist categories of *base* and *superstructure*. The material base is analyzed in terms of fundamental human drives, while the ideological superstructure is seen to reinforce or serve the economic realm by way of these base-level drives. The foremost of these drives is self-preservation. Since self-preservation is a perpetual priority for human beings, immutable at its most basic level of ensuring one's ongoing survival, it can be exploited ideologically so as to encourage individuals to adapt to existing economic forces in order to sustain themselves. Of course, the Adornian criticism of this social-psychological position is that within a false society, *self-preservation* will also always entail significant elements of *self-destruction*. The purely instrumental-rational forms of self-preservation required of capitalist society entail nothing less than self-renunciation. The self preserved is merely a deformed version, and – as Adorno at his most sombre might add – perhaps so deformed as to be hardly worth preserving.

Still, Adorno does not advocate the dichotomous thinking that would posit society, on the one hand, and psychology, on the other. Such a position would be insufficiently dialectical, and, moreover, would seem to theoretically smooth over practical antagonisms by holding each realm in a mutually independent, that is, unmediated condition. For Adorno, this “separation of society and psyche” is nothing but false consciousness, and holds little hope of uncovering the real determinants of human behaviour – both on an individual and social scale. The separation of society and psyche “perpetuates conceptually the split between the living subject and the objectivity that governs the subjects and yet derives from them” (SP1, p. 69). The latter half of this claim reasserts the dialectical moment in the critique of psychological explanation. That the social totality both governs subjects' behaviour and derives from subjective behaviour indicates the indispensability of psychology to critical theory. There are

moments when Adorno concedes the importance of psychological concepts to social and political thought, as when he writes:

Without psychology, in which the objective constraints are continually internalized anew, it would be impossible to understand how people passively accept a state of unchanging destructive irrationality (MTP, p. 271)

This point attests to the value of psychology for comprehending seemingly irrational behaviour patterns. In the very same paragraph, however, he goes on to note that such psychological motivations cannot be strictly read as *causes*. Rather, it is more likely the case that such psychological effects merely result from and in response to “objective obstacles” (ibid.). Indeed, the very first line of the cited passage states, “The objective theory of society, in as much as society is an autonomous totality confronting living individuals, has priority over psychology” (MTP, p. 270). So, while Adorno unquestionably takes influence from Freud and gives much of his scholarly attention to psychological concepts – most notably repression, ego-weakness, narcissism and internalization – the Frankfurt theorist, I claim, ultimately *rejects* psychological approaches, at least at the level of understanding thoroughly *social* phenomena. For Adorno, the latter should be prioritized theoretically, for in reality they hold material precedence.

The refocusing and broadening of this critical perspective seeks to locate the failings of existing society at the macro level, and reignite interest in the earlier and more far-reaching psychoanalytic aim of bringing the unconscious to subjective awareness. This original aim of treatment has, on Adorno’s account, been neglected or rather supplanted by the theoretical models proposed by social psychologists (such as Erich Fromm and Karen Horney). In the process, the more radical premises of Freudian psychoanalysis – the biological foundations of psychic suffering, the repressive features of *Kultur*, the

essentially unruly energies of libido, and so on – are revised in a more openly ‘progressive’ light, so that the primary function of social psychology and psychoanalysis becomes successful (re)integration of individuals into society. Such treatments give inadequate attention to social causes and, moreover, are morally neutral. The cure is seen to be positive when the individual is able to adapt to, fully participate in and enjoy the various offerings of the status quo. This rather uncritical position thus lends psychological insight a functionalist bent, which is anathema to Adorno’s social critique. As he writes in a note from the writing of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Where psychology has to be called in to explain human beings they are already disordered [. . .] To resort to psychology in order to understand one’s fellow man is an effrontery (DE, p. 246)

On Adorno’s account, then, critical theory should be wary of resorting to psychological explanatory devices, but – given what he concedes elsewhere – neither would it be prudent to entirely discount psychological findings, since some of these have proven genuinely groundbreaking in terms of understanding the motivations and mechanisms underlying individual behaviour. Instead, one needs to maintain the preponderance of the object, namely, society, and work to uncover the objectively reproducing social forces that seemingly demand the problematic responses which psychoanalysis tries to treat. As Adorno puts it, the “recurrence or nonrecurrence of fascism in its decisive aspect is not a question of psychology, but of society” (EAA, p. 194); “All varieties of psychologism that simply take the individual as their point of departure are ideological” (SP1, p. 77). Elsewhere, in his critique of Karl Mannheim, for instance, Adorno notes how, in the activities carried out under the guise of the ‘sociology of knowledge’, the “growth of antagonisms is elegantly described as ‘the disproportionate development of human capacities’,



as though it were a question of personalities and not of the anonymous machinery which does away with the individual" (P, p. 35).<sup>64</sup>

In relating these arguments to the concept of mimesis (examined in Chapter II), one could say that psychoanalysis has long since enabled damaged subjects to mimic or assimilate to the reified forms of 'happiness',<sup>65</sup> 'success', 'living a full life', and the rest, so relentlessly peddled through the sprawling channels of the culture industry. Indeed, in the essay 'Sociology and Psychology', a cantankerous Adorno flatly states that "therapists are frauds" (SP1, p. 78). He continues, "In adjusting to the mad whole the cured patient becomes really sick – which is not to imply that the uncured are any healthier" (ibid.). At this juncture, one begins to see the true extent of Adorno's negativism, inasmuch as he views the slightest suggestion of happiness or adjustment to the status quo as either an unjustifiable compromise or downright delusion. The "cult of psychology", as he puts it, is "the necessary accompaniment to a process of dehumanization, the illusion of the helpless that their fate lies in their own hands" (ibid., p. 76). Here the potentially affirmative and ideologically supportive effects of psychoanalytical practice and theory, to the detriment of a more thoroughgoing, radical questioning of society, become evident. The point at which critical thought stays faithful to its potential for emancipation is when it seeks not to offer false comforts or enforced reconciliation, but instead to

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<sup>64</sup> It is interesting to note a parallel here in relation to how, amid the fallout from the financial crisis of 2008, certain individuals were exposed and depicted as 'evil', aberrations, high stakes criminals, greedy speculators, and so forth. But is not the more salient point that an *entire system* failed, showing itself to be not only unstable and corruptible but wholly unsustainable in any case? It is overly simplistic to characterize individuals (such as Bernie Madoff) as eccentric or excessive, for this forestalls deeper *systemic* analysis of the social and economic conditions that tend toward such crises. Projecting collective discontent onto a small number of individuals who merely represent the falsity of a total system is a sure way of re-establishing 'normality' with minimal disruption. Adorno makes a similar criticism of film villains: "Even if [brutal businessmen] were thereby revealed as monstrous characters, their monstrousness would still be sanctioned as a quality of individual human beings in a way that would tend to obscure the monstrousness of the system whose servile functionaries they are" (2001 [1981], p. 66).

<sup>65</sup> One recalls a series of popular advertisements in the 1980s, which proclaimed proudly: "Happiness is a cigar called Hamlet". In response, one need only consider the complex relations that pertained between Freud and his beloved yet destructive cigars in order to appreciate the duplicitous nature of both commodity and consumer.

bring extant unhappiness to consciousness of itself.<sup>66</sup> In so doing, it remains possible to refute the (by now) default Fukuyaman position, whereby liberal democratic capitalism is seen by many people as, if not the ‘best’ of all imaginable political systems, then certainly the ‘least bad’ and therefore only feasible option.

## 1.2 *Haneke's Anti-Psychological Form*

Continuing on the anti-psychology theme just elaborated through Adorno's critical theory, in this section, I will argue that few directors' work so fervently resists the use of psychological devices, invocations and motivations than that of Michael Haneke. Nearly all of his films indirectly invoke the presence of anonymous social forces permeating and deforming contemporary life, in both the public and private spheres. In Haneke's stark vision of the modern-day Western world, one feels a collective sense of complicity set amid a consumerist hell populated more by commodities than communities, its ‘characters’ divested of all but their reified exteriors (truly characters *sans* character). While Haneke's work takes as its basis specific individuals, as it must do in order to become determinate in some way, it also denies these individual characters (and us, the film's spectators) any personal or idiosyncratic features, such as one might expect to find in more traditionally constructed narratives. Instead, the majority of Haneke's filmic works seek to give form to the overriding falsity and alienation inherent in affluent ‘Western’ societies.

In his first feature film, *Der siebente Kontinent* (1989), we are presented with a collection of fragments that provide snapshots into the repetitive and mundane life of a middle-class family (which, as one of Haneke's trademarks, consists of

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<sup>66</sup> See section 2.2 on the need for conscious unhappiness.

mother Anna, father Georg, and their daughter Eva).<sup>67</sup> The film is set in Linz, Austria, but this is only discernible from the registration plate on the family car, which is shown in the opening carwash scene. For the remainder of the film, the specific location is rendered purposefully anonymous. The cityscape depicted is merely a wash of concrete blocks, shops, the Autobahn, petrol stations, checkouts, industrial parks, offices, and so on, all of which bespeak of interchangeability and sameness. Indeed, in interviews the director has stated that his aim was to show a kind of archetypal consumerist society, rather than making a film that is distinctly 'Austrian', 'French', or whatever, since this could allow for simplistic defence-mechanisms to arise, in which the viewer or film critic comforts herself with the thought that the critical portrayal of social alienation and automatism on screen pertains only to Austria.<sup>68</sup> Each scene in the film is transitioned by way of black outs, which in traditional film narratives usually signify the transpiration of time. In Haneke's films, by contrast, fade outs act as a *fragmenting* device, replicating the isolated repetitiveness of his characters' lives. Some scenes could have a short space of time separating them, while others are clearly taking place concurrently. The temporal differentiation that fade outs usually connote is completely subverted. Whether washing up, cleaning teeth, tying shoelaces, working, or having sexual intercourse, all actions are shown with the same lack of feeling, thought, spontaneity and interaction, as if they have merely been objectively designated and functionally determined. No matter how much time has passed between scenes, the

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<sup>67</sup> Haneke made a number of television films beforehand, but I refer here to his first theatrically released work.

<sup>68</sup> In an interview, Haneke recounts a time when, following a screening of this film at Cannes, a journalist asked him: 'Are things so terrible in Austria? Is that the way it is?' (Haneke & Porton, 2005). In putting forward such a question, the journalist clearly missed the social-critical elements in the film and its attempts to widen the context beyond national borders. Elsewhere, Haneke notes that critics and viewers are tempted to minimize any disquieting effects of a work by saying that "the *auteur* who made this film is a negative person, he is pathological" (Haneke & Riemer, 2000, pp. 169-170). Similarly, after damning the mutilations necessary in order to achieve an "unhampered capacity for happiness", Adorno complains that the critical subject, the consciously unhappy person, "will be told gloatingly by psycho-analysis that it is just his Oedipus complex" (MM, §38, p. 63).

characters' activities remain as perfunctory and rote as at any other time, as if every day is equally insignificant and wholly interchangeable.

Having established this bleak view of a family's contemporary existence, one might expect to be given more individual information about the characters. Any spectator familiar with prevalent cultural trends and narrative devices will be immediately tempted to demand a 'back-story', some causal explanation to address the pressing question, to wit: what has made them so disconnected, cold, lifeless and automated? Yet, at no point during the film does Haneke provide any psychological clues as to why the family appear to live in this fashion. There is an image that recurs three times in the film, a poster from the Australian tourist board showing a picturesque sandy beach. This image represents the 'seventh' continent, a kind of utopian dream image that presents itself as an escape from the existent. As the film continues, we get the impression that the family are preparing to emigrate, to search for this 'utopian' alternative in Australia. The father (an engineer) submits his notice at work, while the mother closes their bank account. Georg narrates a letter to his parents explaining that they have decided "to leave". But the form of escape we are led to anticipate in the film does not materialize. Instead, what we witness is the gradual unfolding and methodical undertaking of a brutal family suicide pact. During the last third of the film, we see the father and mother systematically offload or destroy all of their possessions – selling the car, flushing money down the toilet, cutting up clothes, chopping up furniture, smashing the fish tank<sup>69</sup> and breaking vinyl records – before each in turn (starting with daughter Eva, then Anna, and finally Georg) takes an overdose of pills and dies in front of a television screen (their sole remaining possession it

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<sup>69</sup> Haneke notes on the DVD extras that, when the film was screened at Cannes, more people walked out during the extended shot of Georg flushing currency down the toilet than at the smashing of the aquarium which results in the graphic depiction of a suffocating fish.

seems), as the latter shows nothing but 'snow'<sup>70</sup> and emits the discomfiting sound of white noise.

The family's decision to physically remove itself from an unbearable social world succumbs to nihilistic despair, in which there is believed to be no justifiable alternative, no 'right' way of living their false life, to invoke Adorno. Their self-annihilation here conforms to the darkest logic of Silenus, namely, that best is to have never been born, but, since this is not possible, the next best thing would be to die soon. If life were to emphatically attain its own concept, that is to say, if life truly 'lived',<sup>71</sup> then death would be the greatest fear for human beings. Yet, the damning criticisms of contemporary life offered by both Adorno and Haneke suggest that the difference between experiencing literal death, on the one hand, and living death (i.e. reified life), on the other, is rapidly diminishing.

*Der siebente Kontinent* is a disturbing and chilling work that provokes an interpretive quest on the part of the viewer for meaning and explanation. One of the most routinely used interpretive devices is, of course, that of *psychology*. If we wish to begin to comprehend some ostensibly unfathomable event, then surely there must be particular elements in an individual's psychic constitution and personal history that offer up some explanatory leads.<sup>72</sup> But, building upon the Adornian position I have outlined, psychological elucidation is inadequate to the task of social critique. Focusing on individual actions in isolation, attempting to provide coherent and diagnostically verifiable motivations for

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<sup>70</sup> 'Snow' refers to the black and white electronic noise seen on analogue televisions when no signal is received.

<sup>71</sup> Adorno cites Ferdinand Kürnberger in the epigram to *Minima Moralia*: "Life does not live" (MM, p. 19). See also: "Life itself is a lifeless thing" (S, p. 151); "Life has become the ideology of its own absence" (MM, p. 190).

<sup>72</sup> In this light, another viewer of *Der siebente Kontinent* recently asked the director whether he had suffered an "unhappy childhood" (Haneke & Porton, 2005), once again resorting to the reductive reassurances of psychological explanation.

such actions, reduces the critical moments in the film's representation of the social. The form itself helps constitute the work's content. In this way, psychological interpretation is not only insufficient for social critique but is also a decidedly limited approach to the aesthetics of film. As Adorno remarks:

The psychologism of aesthetic interpretation easily agrees with the philistine view of the artwork as harmoniously quieting antagonisms, a dream image of a better life, unconcerned with the misery from which this image is wrested (AT, p. 14)

In Haneke's work, the aim is to bring social contradictions and antagonisms to consciousness, without offering any condolences or cursory reconciliations. His films stand as "an appeal for a cinema of insistent questions instead of false (because too quick) answers, for clarifying distance in place of violating closeness, for provocation and dialogue instead of consumption and consensus" (Haneke, 1992, p. 89). Haneke's cinematic form and style is unrelentingly *anti-psychological*. There is a telling moment in *Funny Games*, in which the terrorized mother, Anna, asks the two violent intruders, "Why are you doing this to us?" The first boy, Paul, tells of the other's (Peter's) history of suffering child abuse and drug addiction, before the pair laugh in mockery of such psychological explanation, revealing the claims of abuse and addiction to be just more fabrications, another part of their sadistic 'funny games'. Moreover, we never discover the real names of the protagonists. They haphazardly adopt the names 'Peter' and 'Paul', but also play around with other monikers (for instance, 'Beavis' and 'Butthead'). The critique of psychology is also effectively served in Haneke's rendering of the individual family members in *Der siebente Kontinent*. Their identities are withheld for a considerable time. Indeed, even facial recognition is precluded for the film's opening, where we are instead confronted with a range of partially captured limbs, torsos, objects, and so on; in other words, everything *but* the face (only at 11mins 45secs do we first get a shot of Eva's face). There is minimal dialogue throughout the film, which serves

not only to highlight the general impossibility of genuine communication in a false world, but also to leave the individual characters as essentially synecdochal, as substitutable specimens of a universally determined kind of 'individual'.<sup>73</sup> This recalls Adorno's critique of identity as the primal form of ideology:

The all-powerful principle of identity itself, the abstract interchangeability of social tasks, works towards the extinction of their [individuals'] personal identities [. . .] [T]he abstraction implicit in the market system represents the domination of the general over the particular, of society over its captive membership (S, p. 148)

And, once again, this time with direct reference to film:

In so far as a film only recounts the fate of an individual, even if maintaining the most extreme critical awareness, it already succumbs to ideology. The case which is presented as one which is still worth recounting becomes for all its desperate nature an excuse for the world which has produced something so worthy of being related (Adorno, 2001 [1981], pp. 65-66)

This is not to say that one cannot have any recourse to individual subjects as a way of trying to make sense of contemporary society. Indeed, the later parts of this chapter would make little sense were this the case. Rather, the more plausible method of enquiry can be found most explicitly deployed in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, which states its aim as beginning from subjective experience and reflections (*from* 'damaged life'), and extrapolating to the broader social, cultural and anthropological levels. Haneke's filmic work, too, plays its part in representing subjective experiences in a way that abstracts from them to the universal social plane, thus extending feelings of complicity and guilt to society

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<sup>73</sup> As a point of interest, Haneke almost always uses variations on the names Georg and Anna for his central bourgeois parents, re-establishing the destruction of individuality in a false society. In *Code inconnu* (2000), *Le Temps du Loup* (2003) and *Caché* (2005), the main characters take the French variants, Georges and Anne; in *Benny's Video* (1992), we have again Georg, Anna and Eva – exactly replicating *Der siebente Kontinent*; while in *Funny Games* (1997), the parents also take the German forms Georg and Anna.

as a whole.<sup>74</sup> “There is nothing innocuous left” (MM, p. 25). Amid a social world of ‘universal fungibility’<sup>75</sup> it is no longer possible to sanguinely point to singular instances of self-sustenance or full autonomy as evidence of an indefatigable and progressive ‘humanity’. Instead, one has to work from and through the existing ‘damaged’ forms – subjective and objective, individual and social – that are constituted parasitically, or rather *symbiotically*, since the process is not merely one-way. Critique, then, would be charged with reading out of individual experiences their socially sedimented character, in other words, their objectively determined elements:

[T]he task of criticism must be [. . .] to decipher the general social tendencies which are expressed in these [cultural] phenomena and through which the most powerful interests realize themselves. Cultural criticism must become social physiognomy (P, p. 29)

This method of criticism, I believe, upholds the rejection of micro-psychological explanation, and retains that most valuable and endangered *social-critical* vision, the eye that sees in the seemingly mundane or everyday details of life the relations between the universal and particular. One might say here that not only is the Devil in the detail, but also that the detail, as it were, is in the Devil.

### 1.3 *The Absence of a Collective Subject*

The macro-level analysis of the false whole, as presented in the first section of the chapter, offers a damning and unrelentingly critical vision of contemporary society. As we saw, the objective determinants of individuals’ behaviour are such that originally rational goals – such as self-preservation – come to be

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<sup>74</sup> As Mattias Frey argues, the fractured moments (scenes) in Haneke’s *71 Fragmente* “remarkable only in their unremarkability, form a system that implicates an entire form of society for the crime of one” (Frey, 2003).

<sup>75</sup> The phrase ‘universal fungibility’ refers to a state of affairs in which no thing or end exists or is pursued for its own sake, but rather only for the sake or in the service of something else. In other words, everything parasitically ‘lives off’ other things and retains no intrinsic value. As Adorno puts it in *Prisms*, “all being is merely there *for* something else” (P, p. 20).



wholly irrational, as the logic arising out of real material need outlives its primary necessity and carries over into the conscious domination (and destruction) of nature and the self. Again, in this regard, one can see the retention of particular Marxian ideas within Adorno's social criticism, concerned as it is with the means and relations of production, humanity's interactions with nature, commodification, forms of life determining consciousness, and so on. Yet, despite its recognizably (if selective) Marxian tone, Adorno's theory parts with Marx on one of the points of central importance for critical theory's hope of revolutionary social change, namely, the *collective subject*. Rather than following the traditional and progressive Marxian trajectory of revolution – most thoroughly theorized and supported by Georg Lukács – with its immanent collective (class) subject in the form of the proletariat, Adorno almost entirely rejects this element of, what might be generally termed, 'Hegelian-Marxism'. In its stead, I argue, he offers a quasi-Kantian position, founded upon the enhancement of critical self-reflection, autonomy and judgement. These claims will be developed in the latter half of this chapter, but for now let us better understand why Adorno claims that a collective subject is no longer, or at least not currently, a possibility.

By Adorno's account, the social totality both predominates over individual subjects and is objectively unified. While individuals produce and reproduce the totality, the latter gains if not an agency then at least a certain objective momentum of its own that estranges it from its constituent members. As noted before, social forces come to work over the heads of human beings. Society precedes the subject. However, the social totality is neither fully coherent nor positively cohesive.<sup>76</sup> It is shot through with contradictions, tensions, conflicts,

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<sup>76</sup> Adorno maintains the use of the concept of 'totality' only for the purposes of *negation*. To my knowledge, he – unlike Lukács for instance – does not invoke the notion of totality in any positive, Hegelian manner. For Adorno, the whole is false. For an excellent analysis of 'totality' in and after Western Marxism, see Jay (1984a).

inconsistencies, incommensurabilities, and suchlike – all of which are unavoidably reproduced in the thoughts and practices of individuals. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, for Adorno, society is not only *unifying* but is, at the same time, *fragmenting* and *atomizing*. It is largely such fragmentation and the concomitant (enforced) unification – or ‘reconciliation under duress’ [*erpresste Versöhnung*] – that leads Adorno to retract hopes of or calls for an entirely class-conscious revolt. As social and political conditions alter over time, it is untenable to unreflectively assume that a collective historical subject will always be lying in wait, easily identifiable, ready to be awakened into true consciousness and undertake the revolutionary praxis seen as necessary to realize universal emancipation. Such a view would not only instrumentalize and subsume a whole range of individuals (who already suffer subsumption and instrumentalization under the false whole), but would also hypostatize revolutionary conditions, as if one could create a template for revolution that need only be grafted on to a given social context.

The point to recall here is that the context in which we find ourselves affects both the practical and theoretical possibilities at any given time. Critical theory must always reflect upon itself for precisely this reason. One has to accept that the collective historical subject is exactly that: *historical*. It is in this regard that one can understand the peculiar sense of melancholic belatedness running through Adorno’s critical theory, which must no doubt irk those radical critics who like to invoke the Leninist question, ‘what is to be done?’ The oft-cited lament in the opening words to *Negative Dialectics* bespeaks the general tone of Adorno’s philosophy and confirms this sense of belatedness: “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed” (ND, p. 3). The same theme is also repeated and developed elsewhere:

The rationality of self-preservation is ultimately doomed to remain irrational because the development of a rational collective subject, of a unified humanity, failed to materialize – a situation with which, in turn, each individual has to contend (SP1, p. 78)

So, the historical contingency of collective possibilities and socio-political conditions play a major part in Adorno's refusal to elaborate a theory of a revolutionary collective subject. Yet, in addition to this, there are perhaps even stronger reasons for the absence of a collective subject in Adorno's work. This becomes clearer if we recall the considerable influence of Nietzsche, which runs through Adorno's thinking,<sup>77</sup> an influence that leads to an unwavering suspicion of collectivism and group formation. The fervour with which Adorno refutes the ideology of a higher, collective reason is certainly on par with anything penned by the author of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Compare, for example, the following passages on collectives, madness and irrationality:

Madness is something rare in individuals – but in groups, parties, peoples, ages it is the rule (Nietzsche, 1990 [1886], p. 103)

A modicum of madness furnishes collective movements [. . .] with their sinister power of attraction (MTP, p. 265)

More comprehensive examples include:

[I]f praxis obscures its own present impossibility with the opiate of collectivity, it becomes in its turn ideology [. . .] Weak and fearful people feel strong when they hold hands while running. This is the real turning point of dialectical reversal into irrationalism. Defended with a hundred sophisms, inculcated into adepts with a hundred techniques for exerting moral pressure, is the idea that by abandoning one's own reason and judgment one is blessed with a higher, that is, collective reason (MTP, p. 276)

People who blindly slot themselves into the collective already make themselves into something like inert material, extinguish themselves as self-determined beings (EAA, p. 198)

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<sup>77</sup> For a decent if preliminary exploration of the Nietzschean heritage in Adorno's corpus, see Bauer (1999). I think it fair to say that the Nietzschean elements in Adorno's thinking are still in need of greater attention.

Brecht's line – that the party has a thousand eyes while the individual has but two – is as false as any bromide ever. A dissenter's exact imagination can see more than a thousand eyes peering through the same pink spectacles, confusing what they see with universal truth, and regressing (ND, p. 46)

Thus, while the Marxist elements in Adorno's thinking demand wholesale transformation at the *social* level<sup>78</sup> and help to bolster his scepticism regarding all attempts at piecemeal reform, the Nietzschean – and, for that matter, Kantian – elements within his critical theory call for respect and recognition of the irreducible particularity of each unique *individual* and the necessity of using one's own reason (becoming *mündig*, that is, politically mature). On Adorno's account, any subordination of the individual to a manufactured collective would be to engage in precisely the kind of 'identity-thinking' that is the principle form [*Ur-form*] of ideology against which a negative dialectics attempts to think. Adorno's challenge to the traditional Marxist position, with its understanding of a progressive and revolutionary trajectory, occurs (a) at the level of socio-historical embeddedness – the recognition that the contexts in which theory and praxis take place cannot be hypostatized and considered immutable; and (b) as a result of the violent subordination of individuals to the prevailing social totality – a feature of the false whole that needs to be resisted, not replicated in collective movements.

This distinct departure from the collectivist revolutionary impulse can be tackled in a number of ways. For example, some may want to show that 'new social movements' have the potential to exert real political pressure and resistance, on an international scale, leading to progressive policy changes. This approach would try to empirically disprove Adorno's claims about the alleged absence of a collective subject. Yet, there is another (more interesting)

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<sup>78</sup> "No emancipation without that of society" (MM, p. 173).

possibility, which instead of refuting Adorno's arguments would consist in trying to reconstruct a theory of resistance through and out of his arguments. For the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate that there exist marginal subject positions that can offer points of resistance to the false whole and help to foster more autonomous forms of thinking and acting. As exemplary and provocative, marginal subjectivity makes use of a critical proximity to the social order, and as such can shed light on the latter's failings. In making the case, I will explicate some Adornian themes with reference to the filmic work of Haneke.

## 2. THEORIZING THE MARGINAL SUBJECT

Having offered a damning critique of contemporary capitalist society and rejecting the attempts of psychological theory to provide explanations at an appropriately social level, it is important to consider potential responses to the 'false whole', lest we succumb to the prominent caricature of Adorno's work as eschatological and irredeemably pessimistic.<sup>79</sup> Elucidating clear guidelines or arguments for positions of resistance is certainly nowhere near as straightforward as drawing out the radical social criticism that inheres in Adorno's and Haneke's work, respectively. As Deborah Cook notes with some regret, Adorno "appeared to be far more interested in describing the nature of domination than in assessing the potential for resistance to it" (1996, pp. 52-53). This is undoubtedly the case, not only for Adorno's critical theory but for Haneke's films as well. On the rare occasions when Adorno drops his guard, as it were, and lets slip an allusion to a positive image of one kind or another, it is more often than not couched in strategically vague and messianic terminology. As such, there is a definite need to actively reconstruct a form of resistive potential out of and in response to Adorno's perceptive yet totalizing social theory. To this end, I will here develop a defence of, what I will call, *marginal subjectivity*. The marginal subject position enables a process of estrangement to occur between the individual subject and the objective social environment, such that critical reflection can take place. To the extent that critical forms of thinking and acting are routinely expunged from the social whole, I argue it becomes a duty of those individuals who, for a variety of reasons, can be considered *marginal* to existing society to remain as socially (and self-) critical as possible.

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<sup>79</sup> See the following descriptions: "a deepening pessimism" (Jay, 1973, p. 107); "tragic pessimism" (Connerton, 1980, p. 119); "bleak pessimism" (Bottomore, 2002, p. 37); "implacable pessimism" (Vogel, 1996, p. 101); "starkly pessimistic" (Bennett, 2001, p. 3); "Adorno's gloom" (Agger, 1992, p. 12); "so gloomy and pessimistic" (Blühdorn, 2000, p. 80). In all cases, these descriptions precede a critique of Adorno's pessimism as unwarranted, problematic and unhelpful to socio-political practice. I hope to offer something of a reconstruction here that will help redress the balance in Adorno's favour.

As this section progresses, I will make the argument with recourse to Adorno's theoretical work and Haneke's filmic work.

## 2.1 *Marginality and Estrangement*

Given the at times exaggerated and totalizing nature of the social critiques offered by Adorno and Haneke, in addition to the general absence of belief in the potential for collective resistance or agency, it is unsurprising that their portrayals of the contemporary world are frequently regarded as overly dark, hopeless, bleak and pessimistic. Yet, in my view, there nevertheless remains in their work an indefatigable kernel of *hope*. Such hope, however, is not bound to a concretized vision of the future. Rather, it is founded upon the vestiges of resistance that remain in the present, despite all attempts to expedite their eradication. The decisive transformation of hope has also to do with its relocation from a fully class-conscious collective subject to fragmented, marginal and individual subjects. To this end, marginal hope grows out of the recognition that human subjectivity is incapable of being wholly integrated:

The rigidified institutions, the relations of production, are not Being as such, but even in their omnipotence they are man-made and revocable. In their relationship to the subjects from which they originate and which they enclose, they remain thoroughly antagonistic. Not only does the whole demand its own modification in order not to perish, but by virtue of its antagonistic essence it is also impossible for it to extort that complete identity with human beings that is relished in negative utopias (Adorno, 1998a, p. 156)

Just as Adorno's anti-systematic negative dialectics makes the claim that when we utilize an abstract concept to subsume and classify a particular there will always be a remainder (the non-identical), so, even with the best efforts of the culture industry and its concomitant ideology, human subjects are never fully identical with their subsumption under the categories imposed upon them

through predominant social forces. There is always a subjective excess to objective identifications, and such excess can result in critical illuminations. However, since social conditions so strongly determine individual subject positions, such insights cannot be presumed achievable from the outset. It is not as if we can produce a neat set of guidelines which, if followed to the letter, will result in universal autonomy. Acknowledging this limitation would seem to lead to conflict with the dominant waves of liberal-democratic understanding.

The tenets of liberal-democratic orthodoxy are born of the notion of *equality*. While equality, *in abstracto*, is without question a laudable notion, in our contemporary context, this egalitarian impulse is primarily if not only to be found amid a prevalent and crippling *relativism*, whereby all views are deemed ‘merely subjective’ and therefore of equal (in)validity.<sup>80</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor aptly describes this situation as follows:

Though we insist on having our preferences and consider the freedom to like and dislike inherent in democracy, these preferences are limited to the judgment itself. Whatever we find to like in an art gallery, we assume someone else might, with equal justification, dislike. Conversely, what someone else likes, we might just as well, and with equal justification, dislike. In the morality of our everyday aesthetics, what is important to us is that we have our likes and dislikes, and at any moment be ready to call a truce over the objective claim of a distinction in value (2004, p. 182)

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<sup>80</sup> One often encounters this relativistic trend within postmodern cultural studies, in which individual consumers are regarded as the irrefutable basis upon which to understand and interpret cultural products; what they say goes, and external judgement by self-appointed ‘experts’ is considered authoritarian and therefore strictly off-limits. While I give due attention to subjective responses to certain cultural objects, and, indeed, even invoke the notion of autonomy (clearly a subject-centred concept), here as elsewhere I nonetheless retain the primacy of the object in this regard. Autonomy should not be thought of as a strictly isolated subjective achievement as such, but rather as a *process* occurring in the relation between particular subjects and objects. Despite the protean creativity of funded researchers and active consumers alike, not all cultural objects can be considered equally conducive to the promotion of autonomy. To acknowledge qualitative differences in cultural artefacts is hardly elitist. In fact, it is surely essential if genuinely critical engagement and judgement is to occur. As Adorno notes, “Where it [insight into culture] finds inadequacies it does not ascribe them hastily to the individual and his psychology, which are merely the façade of the failure, but instead seeks to derive them from the irreconcilability of the object’s moments” (P, p. 31). The primacy of the object reinstates the materialist conditions of thought, and undermines the overly imposing (if illusory) powers of the liberal subject.



To proffer arguments that run counter to the egalitarian cornerstone of liberal *doxa* is to instantly trigger accusations of ‘elitism’, ‘paternalism’, ‘authoritarianism’, and suchlike.<sup>81</sup> Yet, I claim, unless we can accept that certain individuals – by virtue of circumstantial deviations pertaining to proximity, opportunity, ability, interests, independence, and so on – are in some crucial respects better placed to glean critical insights into an existing social order, there can be little hope for any substantive challenge to the status quo. In an intrinsically exploitative and unequal social order, to claim that every individual has the same degree of freedom, expression, capacities and choice would not only be an outright lie (the ‘liberal fiction’ of equality), but would also serve to exacerbate extant inequalities by pre-emptively quashing dissenting voices. The (at present) unavoidable divergences in subjective positions require not only recognition but analysis so as to locate critical and resistive potential within the damaged existent. It is at this juncture where the concept of *marginality* becomes central to critique. Let me explain more precisely what is meant here by the term ‘marginality’.

In the first instance, marginality relates to an individual’s degree of dependence on, entanglement in, and commitment to, an existing social order. As noted previously, on Adorno’s account, there is no opting out, as it were, from society. The universal prevails over the particular, shaping and (de)forming subjects, without exception, in the process: “The choice of a standpoint outside the sway of existing society is as fictitious as only the construction of abstract utopias can be” (P, p. 30). Yet, in acknowledging universal entanglement and the impossibility of escape, one need not succumb to the resigned view that all individuals, thoughts, actions, theories and practices are *just as* entrapped and doomed to capitulate within the false whole. When Adorno claims that there

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<sup>81</sup> Adorno, of course, has often enough been confronted with just such accusations, most notably in relation to his culture industry thesis. For one of the more forceful critiques along these lines, see Collins (1987).

can be no emphatic forms of life – that is, no genuine *living* as such – within the confines of a false society,<sup>82</sup> I think it should be understood as a necessary guarding against all kinds of ersatz reconciliation, all positive understandings of the present state of affairs, any view or behaviour that would (whether intentionally or not) dull the critical edge required in facing the horrors of the world. As Adorno remarks, “[c]ritical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge [i.e. the increasing reification of the mind] as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation” (P, p. 34). Thought, on account of the irreducibility of the non-identical objective excess, inherently reaches beyond itself, folding back in on its attempts at conceptualization before reconstituting itself and trying again. Thought remains critical by virtue of the recognition of its inadequacy: hence, thinking as dynamic process *contra* static achievement. The underlying nature of this reading, then – the claim that there are no longer any binding guarantees, ethical or moral, as to the appropriateness of our thoughts and actions – is, what we might term, vigilant negativism. Instead of proceeding in a strictly teleological manner, seeking out the rational elements within the existent, critique must now proceed by way of *negation*, in other words, without a positive telos guiding it.

For such negation to occur, one requires a decidedly critical perspective of that which should be negated, of that which ought not to be. The key to achieving such a perspective, I argue, is *marginality*. An individual so fully enmeshed in, dependent upon, or subordinated to, socially determined actions is, on my view, unlikely to be in a position to critically analyze prevalent social structures and objective forces. The same social and political co-ordinates functionally integrate those subjects who are entirely embedded within the existent. Whether someone is in a position of economic luxury and wishes to continue enhancing their wealth, or struggles in relative poverty and must toil for so

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<sup>82</sup> “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly” [*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*] (MM, §18, p. 39).

many hours in order to survive, both subject positions are wholly determined by the extant order. For differing reasons but with similarly cooperative outcomes, each is significantly invested in society as it is. Neither has a sufficiently distanced position from which to critically reflect on the social world. Yet, at the same time, one can hardly justify leaving the demands of critical thinking to individuals who are completely outside of or absolutely alien to the false whole. For, in this case, it would be impossible for such subjects to adequately know society's internal mechanisms – its practical demands, political horizons, ideological workings, socio-cultural values, mores, and so on. Thus, we move from, on the one hand, a position in which there is insufficient distance, to, on the other, a position that is too distant. In the former, unbreakable entanglement forestalls critique, while, in the latter, insufficient connection empties the motivational and epistemological bases for critique in the first place. Herein lays the pertinence of the marginal position.

The marginal subject, like Georg Simmel's 'Stranger' (1950 [1908]), is *in* but not entirely *of* society, neither fully inside nor outside. One can sense elements of this conception of marginality in Adorno's work, when, for instance, he writes of the position of the "dialectical critic of culture", who must "both participate in culture and not participate" (P, p. 33). It is not enough merely to approach objective phenomena – cultural artefacts, social trends, institutional structures, and so forth – as an impartial external observer, as a kind of 'free-floating intellectual' (to use Mannheim's phrase). Social scientists have long debated the extent to which their practices and theories should follow the model of the natural sciences, all the while giving too little attention to the fact that their 'object' of study is not of the same ilk as that of natural science. The 'social' is both objective *and* subjective, and the 'scientist' herself is also entwined in, not merely external to, the social. Stefan Müller-Doohm alludes to this embeddedness when he notes that Adorno "did not analyse the universal, that

is contemporary society, from the perspective of an observer contemplating it from outside, but from within" (2009 [2003], p. 441). I would modify this claim slightly, for Adorno was not – and critical subject positions, in my view, can never be – entirely ‘within’ the existent society. The critical position is neither within nor without, but rather liminal. Let us consider the following well-known passage from the final aphorism in *Minima Moralia*:

Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light (MM, §153, p. 247)

This sentence is often cited, but the interpretive focus is ordinarily placed on the latter ‘messianic’ part. My interest presently lays more in the necessity of estrangement [*Verfremdung*],<sup>83</sup> and how it relates to the notion of marginality. I understand estrangement and marginality to be closely interrelated, for both require of the individual a certain proximity to the social order – a “distanced nearness”, to appropriate an Adornian phrase (MM, p. 90).<sup>84</sup> Of course, estrangement has important definitional contrasts with strangeness. Mere ‘strangeness’ is indicative of an entirely new and unknown relation, sensation, experience, or whatever, and arises from the very fact that we encounter something that is absolutely alien to our current knowledge, memories, social norms, values, and so on. Strangeness would be the expected response of an individual with no connection to his or her present situation. Estrangement, by comparison, is a concept with greater depth and complexity, for it is only

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<sup>83</sup> It is not possible in the space available to go into the arguments over the complex terms ‘*Verfremdung*’ and ‘*Entäusserung*’. The central distinction, for my purposes here, is that the former (usually rendered as ‘estrangement’) signifies a state in which once familiar people or objects appear distant, unfamiliar, unwelcome, while the latter (usually rendered as ‘alienation’) signals a process through which a genuinely constitutive element of something is given up, externalized, torn from its origins – e.g. a person’s labour is alienated when it is merely undertaken on someone else’s behalf, as it becomes something determined by external controls. Alienation so understood can be said to have little if any positive effects, whereas estrangement is clearly more ambiguous and, as I will argue, provides the necessary distance for critical reflection.

<sup>84</sup> In contrast to the enforced elimination of distance between subjects, or what Adorno refers to as “false nearness” (MM, p. 173).

possible within the context of previously established familiarity, affection, connection, and – when applied to interpersonal relations – friendship even. A marginal subject position allows for the micrological appraisal of everyday details, objects, interactions and stimuli that are otherwise routinely incorporated into our daily lives and given minimal attention. The marginal perspective, as neither wholly faithful nor completely alien to social phenomena, contains the possibility of estranging our common, everyday surroundings, finding them to be no longer one's own as such. It is my contention that in the work of both Adorno and Haneke one can find examples of such marginality and estrangement. In Adorno's case, of course, the marginality exists in large part because of his conditions of exile. Living in exile, in a society not one's own, is perhaps the archetypal form of marginal subjectivity, whereby one is neither assimilated nor rejected, but instead lives out an interstitial existence. Meanwhile, in Haneke's case, it is the aesthetic object itself that provokes estrangement and attempts to marginalize the spectator in the process. Let us now consider this latter claim in more detail.

The majority of Haneke's films enact a kind of estrangement through which the everyday features of contemporary, affluent, consumerist society, so familiar and taken-for-granted, become *de-familiarized*, inhospitable, even hostile. One of the ways in which Haneke's work prompts such estrangement is with the use of long takes and repetition. The long take is often understood as giving filmic form an objective or realist temporal core, that is to say, a temporal verisimilitude that dutifully reproduces the time of the 'real world'.<sup>85</sup> In Haneke's work, by contrast, the long take usually employs a fixed camera focusing on mostly familiar actions or scenes (often with no direct narrative correlation). The fixity of the formal technique coupled with the repetitious

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<sup>85</sup> One can see this kind of long take usage in the Italian neo-realist work of Michelangelo Antonioni, or, in one of the most disturbing examples of recent years, the 'real-time' rape scene in Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2002).

nature of the content produces an interpretive excess, that is, an enforced perspectival movement on the part of the spectator. When confronted with long takes depicting repetitive, banal or static content, one's intellectual-interpretive capacity is accompanied by a reawakened affective investment in both the content shown and the form in which it is shown. Such emotional (re)engagement – a kind of renewed cathexis – can manifest itself in terms of anger, impatience, boredom, confusion, disquiet, delight, humour, or whatever. This cognitive-affective connection with the object is essential if one is to move from a position of *identification* to one of *estrangement*. Identification is the predominant manner in which subjects experience familiar behaviours and grow accustomed to social surroundings. In Haneke's debut film, the family's existence is seen as socially productive and functional, yet personally and emotionally hollow, calling to mind Adorno's claim:

The illusory importance and autonomy of private life conceals the fact that private life drags on only as an appendage of the social process. Life transforms itself into the ideology of reification – a death mask (P, p. 29)

Quite simply, basic functionality within society can be unravelled when identification and adaptation are undermined by or replaced with a sense of estrangement. This is precisely why the aim of Adorno's critical theory and Haneke's filmic work is to estrange the familiar, to challenge the uncontested ubiquity of routinized identification and activity. In Haneke's case, the long take serves this end effectively by exhausting our automated, that is, socially (pre)determined, responses to all-too-familiar phenomena, and instead allowing the latter to be seen anew, as unfamiliar or, more precisely, thoroughly *de-familiarized*. As Haneke notes, in a criticism of televisual advertising methods, the "faster something is shown, the less able you are to perceive it as an object occupying a space in physical reality, and the more it becomes something seductive" (Sharrett, 2010, p. 586).

Consider the opening scene in *Der siebente Kontinent*, in which we are positioned in the back seat of a vehicle as it slowly passes through a carwash. The three family members remain silent and passive throughout the shot. We only see the backs of their heads as the interior of the (temporarily inescapable) vessel darkens. We hear disconcerting rumblings from the technological apparatus outside, and sense a degree of claustrophobia. Moreover, the scene introduces the synecdochal technique that recurs in the film, whereby, in this case, the family's entrapment in the car (commodity), the warning sign ahead that reads 'Do Not Brake', the slow yet inexorable forward movement of individuals devoid of autonomy, perfunctorily fulfilling preformed actions, all serve to indict the objective conditions that bring such phenomena about. A perfectly familiar and regular practice – in this instance, passing through an automatic carwash – becomes estranged through both Haneke's formal representation and our spectatorial experience of this occurrence amid an altered context. The scene is an apt example of the paradoxical notion mentioned previously, a 'distanced nearness'. The view is distanced inasmuch as it is reproduced (and consumed) in a cinematic format, thus displacing the action from its original context (a petrol station or garage). Yet, at the same time, the perspective could not be closer, to the extent that the camera takes us inside the central object of the shot. We become one of the inhabitants of the car, and, of course, in terms of what the car can be said to symbolize, namely, society, we genuinely *are* its co-inhabitants and co-creators.

*Der siebente Kontinent* covers three separate days in the family's life – one day out of each year, for three years. On each day, Haneke frames the same rote behaviours, the morning 'rituals', in the same fragmented form, refusing to give precedence to the individual subjects. Instead, he obscures their faces and, as a result, the viewer is charged with reflecting on the everyday occurrences on

screen, in other words, the actions over the actors. Through the dual techniques of repetition and duration we become increasingly estranged from once familiar phenomena. Our taken-for-granted vision is altered, or perhaps even *hampered*.<sup>86</sup> But such a transformed way of seeing is a prerequisite for adopting a critical attitude towards what confronts and engulfs us on a daily basis.<sup>87</sup> The marginal position is one that is not (yet) entirely functionally integrated into the existent. In both Adorno's theory and Haneke's film, I believe, one finds such marginality put in service of radical social critique, and as a way of provoking a greater degree of estrangement between individual subjects and their objective social environment.

## 2.2 *Conscious Unhappiness: The Dialectic of 'Bourgeois Coldness'*

An essential and related element of marginality is that of conscious unhappiness, or, put another way, the overt foregrounding, as opposed to covert repression, of extant unhappiness. The marginal position, in which a subject is neither fully inside nor outside society, provides the capacity to both recognize and intimately know the 'happiness' that is socially produced and promoted, while retaining enough distance to be genuinely critical of such forms of happiness and challenge the latter's value and validity. Arising out of this ultra-critical perspective on happiness is dissatisfaction and negation. Given the dispiriting state of affairs at the societal level (as analyzed in the first half of this chapter), it would be not only irrational but immoral to willingly

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<sup>86</sup> "The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass" (MM, §29, p. 50).

<sup>87</sup> *Der siebente Kontinent* was actually based upon a report Haneke read in an Austrian newspaper, telling of how a family opted for collective suicide rather than continuing with their alienated, administered life. Relatives of the deceased could not comprehend how such a comfortable bourgeois family – living in a nice home, with decent jobs, financial security, and so on – could choose to take their own lives. Indeed, such was the relatives' disbelief that they refused to accept the validity of the suicide note and demanded a full police investigation. This level of denial reinforces the necessity and critical value of a degree of estrangement and marginality. Over-identification with what envelops us, day in, day out, diminishes our capacities for making judgements and thinking autonomously.



integrate oneself into a radically bad social order.<sup>88</sup> The remaining aim, then, is to resist – as much as is possible given the divergences of subject positions – the ersatz comforts of cathartic consumerism, and in the process refuse the tacit demands for universal adaptation. Adorno alludes to this notion of marginal resistance, when he offers the following prescriptive advice:

The only responsible course is to deny oneself the ideological misuse of one's own existence, and for the rest to conduct oneself in private as modestly, unobtrusively and unpretentiously as is required, no longer by good upbringing, but by the shame of still having air to breathe, in hell (MM, §6, pp. 27-28)

Maintaining this position at all times would seem to require the utmost austerity, a wholesale denial of falsified happiness and recognition of the lie that holds happiness to be genuinely attainable amid objective unhappiness, as if happiness were a purely individual phenomenon, something that does not depend in any way upon social factors for its realization. There is a temptation when interpreting Adorno's work to attribute to it an ethic of care, or of love, that serves as a form of opposition to the predominant indifference and coldness of the social totality.<sup>89</sup> Yet, I claim that such arguments are too hastily injecting a degree of positivity into Adorno's theory that is insufficiently dialectical and, furthermore, presupposes a subjective position too far removed from the existent society. My argument here is that, rather than holding fast to positive conceptions of love, warmth, solidarity, and so on, Adorno and Haneke instead work *within* and *through* the dialectic of bourgeois coldness. This builds upon the preceding understanding of universal entanglement and marginality, inasmuch as while every individual is, to some degree, determined by social forces, there are yet varying ways in which the coldness that permeates society

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<sup>88</sup> In this way, a marginal position can be said to follow Adorno's advocating of social negation in contrast to the positive Hegelian form of social affirmation (see Geuss, 1998).

<sup>89</sup> Bernstein's monumental effort to reconstruct an ethical theory out of Adorno's thought is primarily centred round the notion of an ethic of care (see Bernstein, 2001).

finds its way into individual subjects. Coldness may not be avoidable, but it can surely take different forms and responses depending on individual subject positions.

Those familiar with the intellectual history of Marxist social and political theory might feel justified in expecting from Adorno's damning and totalizing social critique an equally unambiguous condemnation of all things 'bourgeois'. Marx, probably more than any thinker before or since, deployed the 'bourgeois' adjectival tag with such regularity and pejorative ferocity as to leave one in no doubt over which class was to be held solely responsible for the deplorable failings of the status quo.<sup>90</sup> In Adorno, by contrast, there is a deep ambiguity at the core of his understanding and use of the term 'bourgeois'. In place of wholesale dismissal, one finds a more nuanced dialectic at work. For Adorno, the bourgeois subject is not solely mythical, since its ideological constituents are born out of a genuine promise of freedom and autonomy (Wohlfarth, 1979, p. 975). The afterlife of bourgeois values is dialectical, inasmuch as it represents both possibility and risk. Its possibility lies in the unrealized potential of the original concepts – autonomy, freedom, free and fair exchange – which, even amid their current ideologically determined context, retain some truth-content. Indeed, in my view, despite the catastrophic course taken by world history, Adorno retains a (qualified) belief and hope in these bourgeois concepts. Yet, at the same time, since such concepts and values are inherently progressive and tend toward their own universalization, there is always the danger that one lapses into reaffirming the mythical status of bourgeois values, that is, the idea

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<sup>90</sup> To illustrate this point, here are some examples taken from a range of Marx's writings spanning nearly half a century. In all cases, the connotation is unequivocally derogatory: "it is man as a bourgeois and not man as a citizen who is considered the *true* and *authentic* man" (1978 [1843], p. 43); "bourgeois economists" (1978 [1846], p. 140); "bourgeois thoughts" (ibid., p. 141); "bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors" (1978 [1867], p. 302); "bourgeois intellect" (ibid., p. 327; p. 370); "his usual unerring bourgeois instinct" (ibid., p. 426, n5); "bourgeois democracy" (1978 [1879], p. 550); "respectable 'bourgeois behaviour'" (ibid.); "chock-full of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideas" (ibid., p. 554); "this favourite bourgeois phrase" (1978 [1891], p. 216).

that they are, in fact, already fully present and have been achieved. Despite these dangers, Adorno clings to what he sees as the vestigial potential within the bourgeois self as one of the few, if not only, viable (if still inadequate) responses to a radically evil social world. The point, then, is not to throw out these concepts and categories *in toto*, but instead to use them against their currently instantiated and alienated forms. In so doing, one can highlight the discrepancy between, on the one hand, what the concept attempts to represent, and, on the other, how these concepts are in fact materially and socially realized, and distorted in the process. My argument here is that, given the falsity, or at the least inappropriateness, of existing instances of solidarity, co-operation, love, warmth, freedom, autonomy, and so forth, the marginal subject need approach such phenomena with a coldly critical, negative, eye. On my reading, both Adorno (through his theoretical work) and Haneke (through his formal technique) work in and through the dialectic of bourgeois coldness, so as to bring to light the failings of the current society and to provoke more marginal and semi-autonomous responses in individuals.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes critically of coldness, referring to it as “the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz” (ND, p. 363). Bourgeois coldness is characterised by indifference,<sup>91</sup> a distinct lack of empathy and care for all but those select few with whom we have familial or close relations. Adorno’s claims about the fostering of indifference in the rise of fascism also extend to the post-war situation in liberal-democratic societies. Indeed, one can clearly witness a rehabilitated ideology of coldness and indifference re-emerging with a vengeance through the Thatcher and Reagan administrations of the 1980s in the UK and USA, respectively. The understanding of ‘society’ as some kind of

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<sup>91</sup> “The coldness of the societal monad, the isolated competitor, was the precondition, as indifference to the fate of others, for the fact that only very few people reacted [to the rise of fascism]” (EAA, p. 201).

dangerous fiction that acts as an excuse for workshy, non-productive individuals, became (and, to a large extent, is reappearing today)<sup>92</sup> *de rigueur*. Yet, amid precisely this asocial and atomized existence, the enveloping “glacial atmosphere” of the present (MM, p. 30), the marginal subject retains the potential to ingest and utilize this socially obligatory coldness towards more critical and autonomous ends. The very form of coldness that was, on Adorno’s account, the fundamental principle of bourgeois subjectivity and instrumental in supporting the barbarism of Nazism, is now, paradoxically, a prerequisite for adequately resisting and criticizing the existing forms of liberal social reform, ersatz satisfactions, emotional investment in commodities, counterfeit happiness, and all adjustments to the status quo: “the very movement of withdrawal bears features of what it negates. It is forced to develop a coldness indistinguishable from that of the bourgeois” (MM, p. 26). And, again:

Whoever imagines that as a product of this society he is free of the bourgeois coldness harbours illusions about himself as much as about the world; without such coldness one could not live (MTP, p. 274)

Maintaining an appropriate (marginal) distance from society demands that one reject ostensibly positive elements within the false whole. In this regard, one might think of the growth of specialized charitable organizations, ‘fair trade’ or ‘ethical’ consumerism, the existence of ‘new social movements’, amendments to enhance working conditions and wages, as well as improvements to ecological policies both nationally and internationally. While it would be morally dubious to object to such developments given the extent to which they serve as at least some form of progressive counterweight to prevailing inequalities, it is nonetheless imperative to retain that rigorous coldness of critique, an

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<sup>92</sup> The present Liberal Democrat-Conservative coalition government in the UK has recently made much of the idea of ‘big society’. Yet, being primarily a Conservative-led cabinet, what this equates to is seldom different from the coldness and indifference under discussion – the idea being that individuals and families should be allowed to take care of their own, without interference from the state, institutions or other people. Social forces and practices remain, as usual, unchallenged and unchanged.

indefatigable capacity for negation, which steadfastly refuses to submit to the momentum of the existent. No matter how correct it may be to feel compassion for those who suffer under present conditions and as a result offer support for particularistic responses aimed at addressing concrete instances of suffering, it is precisely the particularistic nature of such actions that render them inadequate. The paradoxical nature of charitable money-raising campaigns is that, in the main, they employ evocative imagery of individuals, thereby humanizing a systemic problem requiring a systemic solution.

[T]here is an aspect of compassion which conflicts with justice [. . .] It confirms the rule of inhumanity by the exception which it practices. By reserving the cancellation of injustice to fortuitous love of one's neighbour, compassion accepts that the law of universal alienation – which it would mitigate – is unalterable (DE, pp. 102-103)

On this account, coldness would appear to be the *antithesis* of compassion culminating in a lack of affective connection to and with concrete particulars, both subjects and objects alike. Initially, this critique of compassion strikes the reader as somewhat jarring, for is it not precisely this process of abstraction, of subsuming particularity under the universal, that occurs in the primordial form of ideology, namely, identity-thinking? How then, one might reasonably wonder, can coldness be anything other than a reinforcement of indifferent abstraction?

As I alluded to previously, while coldness permeates all of society and is thereby, to all intents and purposes, unavoidable, it is nevertheless enacted and assimilated by individuals in varying ways, dependent upon their degree of (partial) autonomy or independence. The marginal subject – as one who clings to at least a modicum of independence by way of not being fully absorbed into the false whole – can utilize coldness so as to negate piecemeal reforms and particularistic, charitable practices that merely result in strengthening the very

structures and institutions that bring about the need for such charitable interventions in the first place. Coldness in this regard is not strictly antithetical to compassion, love, and happiness, but instead is placed squarely in the service of negating that which falsely claims to stand for compassion, love, and happiness. The negation, then, far from being the philosophical dead-end of a resigned, pessimistic *Weltanschauung*, is in reality the more open and optimistic position, since it refuses to recalibrate its co-ordinates to the limited purview of the present.<sup>93</sup> Adorno offers support for this reading in the following passage:

He who is not malign does not live serenely but with a peculiarly chaste hardness and intolerance. Lacking appropriate objects, his love can scarcely express itself except by hatred for the inappropriate, in which admittedly he comes to resemble what he hates. The bourgeois, however, is tolerant. His love of people as they are stems from his hatred of what they might be (MM, p. 25)

The provocative language deployed here – tolerance and intolerance, love and hate – bespeaks a certain kind of coldness, detachment even, but it surely cannot be cast as the language of indifference. Rather, one senses both the inescapability of coldness and the possibility of its dialectical overcoming [*aufhebung*] which would bring coldness to full “consciousness of itself, of the reasons why it arose” (EAA, p. 202). Turning the socially demanded coldness against itself and against the placations of false warmth – this is one of the primary tasks for the marginal subject.<sup>94</sup> Not to posit love and happiness as indissoluble human qualities that live on in spite of the enveloping glacial atmosphere, but instead to take up the unavoidable coldness within and use it to shatter the illusory forms of love and happiness routinely and forcefully

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<sup>93</sup> In an interview, Haneke offers a similarly scathing attack on those individuals who would merely settle with and adjust to the existing horizons of experience, rather than negate them: “The people who make entertainment movies are the pessimists; the optimist tries to shake people out of their apathy” (Haneke & Horton, 1998).

<sup>94</sup> In this way, one might think of coldness as a *pharmakon*, that is, as potentially both poison *and* antidote. Jacques Derrida made much of this definitional complexity in his seminal if somewhat protracted essay, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ (see Derrida, 1981).

marketed to each and every individual. The most prevalent ideological commandments today perpetually implore us to smile more, to be happy, to love and care for one another, and so on, all of which, of course, can conveniently be achieved through the purchase and exchange of commodities. The marginal subject resists, as much as her position of relative autonomy will allow, the unremitting pull of present society's injunctions to enjoy and relax. In pursuing such a resistive stance, one critically (re)uses this pervasive coldness, initially demanded for survival but now necessary for the sake of rejecting the ersatz comforts offered by consumerism and capitalist exchange relations. Adorno remarks of Freud that he "makes himself as hard as the petrified relations, in order to break them" (cited in Jarvis, 1998, p. 81). This is indicative of the dialectical movement of bourgeois coldness that is, in my view, central to an understanding of what constitutes a marginal subject, and helps to ensure the latter's vestigial autonomy and critical distance from the status quo.

The foregoing arguments provide the theoretical basis for what I am defending as the marginal subject position. However, I want also to consider how Haneke's filmic work, in my reading at least, contributes to the dialectic of bourgeois coldness and promotes a marginalization of the spectating subject in the process. As in the case of Adorno's critical positioning, Haneke's films, in both their form and the spectatorial act of viewing, contribute to a similarly marginal, semi-autonomous perspective.

Conventional film techniques and narrative devices tend towards affirmative relations between the viewer and reality (the reality of the world within and without the cinematic frame). Stories, characters, episodes, and so on, for the most part, are tidily explicable within the already established and ceaselessly reproduced interpretive frameworks. There are few film works that resist the temptation to ultimately return to the spectator a sense of affirmation, whether

this is achieved by inducing a warm glow of recognition and identification with straightforward characters ( $x$  is the 'good guy',  $y$  is 'evil'), or with an emotionally stabilizing 'payoff' to compensate for any disturbances incurred along the way as if by some kind of cunning of cinematic reason. Haneke's work is unique – and uniquely Adornian – in its outright *negativism*, that is, its rejection of any move towards positive reassurance, closure, adjustment or spectatorial placation. On my reading, Haneke replicates in film what Adorno attempts in theory, namely, the dialectical *aufhebung* of bourgeois coldness.

The inescapable coldness permeating society feeds into Haneke's work and can be discerned in both its content and form. In terms of content, the majority of his films depict characters almost entirely devoid of emotional capacities and interpersonal connections, save those that are painful and (psychologically speaking) undesirable. Haneke's first three feature films are often understood as constituting an 'emotional glaciation trilogy' [*emotionale Vergletscherung Trilogie*], since thematically they share much in common: among these themes are alienation and coldness between people; the increasing televisual mediation or virtualization of the world and the loss of 'reality'; narcissism; consumerism; and violence (and the representation thereof). Aside from the more blatant portrayals of cold indifference, usually culminating in acts of senseless violence,<sup>95</sup> there are many scenes in Haneke's work that seem to consume and (re)present the glacial atmosphere of contemporary society as it feeds into particular micrological situations. One thinks here of the perfunctory and soulless sex scene (*Der siebente Kontinent*), the extended and mutually resentful telephone conversation between an elderly man and his daughter (*71 Fragmente*), the casual disregard that a couple seeking to adopt display in their choice of child (*71 Fragmente*), the cold calculation of Benny's father whose

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<sup>95</sup> For example, Benny's murder of the girl in *Benny's Video*; the two sadistic intruders in *Funny Games*; the disaffected student's random and unexplained shooting spree in a bank at the end of *71 Fragmente*; and, of course, the systematic self-annihilation of the family at the climax of *Der siebente Kontinent*.



primary concerns are career-preservation and how best to dispose of the murdered girl's body (*Benny's Video*), and, finally, the foreboding scene on the Metro where Anne is accosted and harassed by two youths before failing to acknowledge the one person on board who actually came to her aid and intervened (*Code inconnu*). Such provocative and memorable scenes testify to Haneke's concern with the unrelenting coldness of existing society and the centrality of this theme within his filmic content. Yet, these examples appear to be somewhat undialectical or one-sided in their representation of coldness. In such scenes, there is little suggestion that coldness may include in its own counteragent. In light of this (possible) dialectical deficit, let us take a more detailed look at another example from Haneke's oeuvre, which indirectly bespeaks of coldness.

In one of the scenes in *71 Fragmente*, when a man breaks the otherwise silent and sterile occasion of a married couple's dinner by saying to his wife (just before sipping his beer), "I love you", she responds by asking if he is drunk, since he is not the kind of person to just say such words. She goes on to ask, "So, what do you want?" The husband admits he thought "it might help". "Help with what?" the wife replies, and with this the husband lashes out with a single sharp slap to his wife's face. She slightly rises from her chair and considers walking away from the table, but shortly retakes her seat. After they have both silently processed the initial shock of the situation, the wife lovingly touches her husband's arm, and within half a minute they resume eating dinner as before, as if nothing had happened. Both characters in this unsettling scene are shown as being utterly incapable of love. The man's words are delivered with reluctance and resignation, as if being uttered by someone under the command of external forces or a ventriloquist, while the wife's unrelenting suspicion and cynicism speaks of the coldness that counteracts the capacity to love. Yet, were she to accept such inadequate and inauthentic expressions of

love, or were she even to acknowledge the very possibility of genuinely loving in the present time, her coldness would cease to hold any critical potential for its self-overcoming. In “erecting truth directly amid general untruth”, the idea of love, here and now, deforms and betrays truth and subsumes it within the false whole (MM, §110, p. 172). In making do with a partial and paltry form of love, the wife would indirectly affirm the existent – an existent that should be rigorously negated. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the wife’s cold response to the man’s strained attempts at loving expressiveness is ultimately the socially critical and necessary one, that is, the one that calls the false proclamation of love by its name and thereby resists its placating and affirming allure.

Adorno writes of the entanglement between the injunctions to love and the imposition of coldness, in the following passage:

The exhortation to love – even in its imperative form, that one *should* do it – is itself part of the ideology coldness perpetuates. It bears the compulsive, oppressive quality that counteracts the ability to love. The first thing therefore is to bring coldness to the consciousness of itself, of the reasons why it arose (EAA, p. 202)

This passage recalls the old Kantian argument, to wit, ‘*ought*’ implies ‘*can*’. That one should love presupposes that the subjective capacity to love is already present, and is simply awaiting actualization. The more critical and marginal perspectives – which, in my view, both Adorno and Haneke adopt – are those which challenge the notion that love today is even experientially possible. As such, coldness should not be hastily repressed or therapeutically reduced, but instead, given its capacity to provoke critical insights into the false whole by refusing the comforts associated with adaptation, coldness should be more fully, internally and dialectically understood and worked *through* rather than *against*. In this regard, one may think of the ‘shudder’ [*das Schauder*] as simultaneously an internal (negative) sensation of coldness *and* the recognition

of external, objective, *lived* coldness. In Haneke's films, there are numerous images and events that elicit a visceral response on the part of the spectator akin to the mimetic shudder, that undeniable and unsettling corporeal 'flinch' in recognition of something that ought not to be.<sup>96</sup> Of course, in the non-aesthetic contexts of our daily lives, we physically shudder when an unexpected or sharply increased feeling of coldness occurs, or upon hearing particularly loud, piercing or unpleasant sounds that jolt us. Yet, the very persistence of the possibility of experiencing the shudder is enough to signal that human subjectivity has not been entirely nullified or functionally incorporated into the dominant social structures. Socially prescribed coldness does not move monodirectionally.

The emotional coldness depicted in Haneke's bleak content is reproduced in the formal setup of his shots, many of which employ a static camera position, perhaps suggesting an indifferent and passive observer.<sup>97</sup> Yet, paradoxically, or rather *dialectically*, precisely this coldness in form promotes the vestigial autonomy and humanity missing from so much of life as shown in the film's content. Utilizing well placed edits and predictable types of point-of-view shot may well aid the mainstream spectator's comprehension of the content, but at the same time this concession to convention will diminish the impact and critical potential of the film image and its formal representation, not to mention the audience's level of participation in its interpretation. Haneke himself speaks of this excessive possibility within form, when he states: "All important artworks, especially those concerned with the darker side of experience, despite

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<sup>96</sup> "The cinema has tended to offer closure on such topics and to send people home rather comforted and pacified. My objective is to unsettle the viewer and to take away any consolation or self-satisfaction" (Sharrett, 2010, p. 587).

<sup>97</sup> This fixity is replicated elsewhere, most notably perhaps in Majid's graphic suicide in front of Georges in *Caché*. The camera's position and distance is coldly maintained throughout the scene despite the emotionally and visually disturbing power of the imagery. This is likely the most explicitly violent scene in Haneke's corpus. Indeed, throughout Haneke's work, the vast majority of violence is left off-screen, with often disorienting diegetic sounds providing greater information for the viewer than the visual data.

whatever despair conveyed, transcend the discomfort of the content in the realization of their form" (Sharrett, 2010, p. 584). By eschewing the conventional shifts in point-of-view and thereby suspending complete identification with the characters, Haneke's film demands that the spectator become involved in active engagement with and critical judgement on what is shown. The formal qualities of the film refuse to do the interpretive work on behalf of the spectator. Instead, the form merely pushes the spectating subject into what I see as (potentially at least) a marginal position, that is, one between the poles of *internality* – whereby one feels recognition, affiliation and ultimately affirmation with what one sees – and *externality* – in which one feels entirely foreign or other to the content and as a result lacks the motivational and epistemological bases upon which to engage with it.

Haneke's preferred formal techniques mostly centre round a combination of fixed passive shots and long takes. In its fixity the camera is turned into a (deceptively) neutral tool of cool observation, performing a clinical-style examination, rejecting the moral and identificatory injunctions that accompany standard shot/reverse-shot techniques. The latter make for an all-too-comfortable and explicable experience, which, as I have been arguing throughout this section, starkly contrasts with the position of Adorno and Haneke, who, in my view at least, seek to unsettle, provoke and disturb us into critical awareness. Haneke's refusal of the simplistic shot/reverse-shot device is abundant. For instance, in *Benny's Video*, the moment when Benny shoots and (eventually) kills the girl with a bolt gun takes place *off-camera*. The camera remains static throughout and no edit is made that would enable the viewer to adopt the perspective of either victim or culprit. Similarly, in *Code inconnu*, in a long fixed shot of Anne (played by Juliette Binoche) ironing and half-watching television, the screams of a young girl from an adjacent apartment become

audible, temporarily disrupting Anne's routine.<sup>98</sup> As before, in this scene there are no direct routes for identification provided, yet, nor is there a comfortable distance or escape from implication. Indeed, throughout many of Haneke's films, people are shown as being simultaneously victims and perpetrators of widespread injustices and violence. Culpability is, thus, rendered *social* through and through.

The dialectic of bourgeois coldness acts at two levels in Haneke's work: (1) in the aesthetic object itself; and (2) through the marginalization of the (spectating) subject. Firstly, then, the coldness ingested and brought to bear aesthetically, through Haneke's 'gaze', is not inhuman, indifferent and purely mechanical, such as would problematically replicate the functional structures of the status quo. Rather, Haneke retains, in filmic form, a marginal position that refuses both direct identifications, on the one hand, and a comfortable escapist distancing, on the other. His work occupies the margins between the 'mainstream' and the 'avant-garde'. While the mainstream is critically deficient on account of its general adaptation to the existent, the avant-garde moves ceaselessly towards the complete rejection of the possibility of coherence, communication, critique, meaning and interpretation. In each of these 'torn halves' of film practice there is, in my view, little hope for a significant shift in subjective positioning and understanding, since both the mainstream and the avant-garde have well-established audience expectations, rituals, viewing practices, discourses, and so on, which appear to allow for minimal disruption to received norms and opinions. The marginal position, however, as aimed at in Haneke's work, might provoke a greater degree of critical reflection and spectatorial engagement from a wider range of subjects, given that it is situated amid neither the traditionally produced and marketed films of the mainstream,

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<sup>98</sup> We later see Anne attending the young girl's funeral, clearly racked with the guilt of her past inaction.

nor the self-posed outsider state of anti-mainstream experimentalism.<sup>99</sup> From its critical proximity, its transgression of such narrow categorial distinctions, Haneke's work has the potential to connect with different audiences and provoke a variety of responses. This provocation of viewer activity gives rise to the second element of the dialectic of coldness worthy of note.

The dialectic of coldness moves not only within the filmic object itself, but also in its interpretive relationship with the viewer. Haneke's work serves to place the spectating subject in a position of co-authorship, marginality and joint responsibility. The genuine practice of co-authorship occurs not merely voluntarily, as if only applicable to certain viewers who may happen to be in an interpretive mood, as it were. Rather, the films demand from the viewer a more active role in the production of coherent or possible interpretations. Haneke's work is 'difficult' (to use one of the most popular terms of the present time) and opaque, but it is not devoid of meaning. That it is filled with ambiguities, disturbances, narrative fragmentation or inconsistencies, disruptive actions, unconventional framings, and unresolved questions, is testament to the belief that an active and critical spectatorship, engaging in (at least semi-) autonomous thinking is still possible. If the viewing subject is simply not willing to put in any time, thought and effort upon experiencing the artwork, then there should be no expectation that the work give them some ready-to-hand political message, moral, affirmation, or whatever else. Haneke's marginalization of the spectating subject occurs, as noted previously, at the levels of both form and content. In taking up the coldness of the social world, Haneke's work clinically cuts through the veil of our 'second-nature' situation, making the routinized behaviours of his interchangeable characters appear as emotionally empty and unfulfilling as they are in reality. The coldness of the

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<sup>99</sup> As Wheatley notes, Haneke's films do attract wider audiences and, in some cases (e.g. *Funny Games*), are even cunningly marketed in such a way as to play to mainstream genre definitions, if only to thoroughly undermine them within the final product (2009, pp. 86-87).

gaze is notable for the way in which it mirrors the viewer's complicity in the perpetuation of the false whole, our general inaction and inertia, our default bystander position. Yet, coldness has its dialectical moment occur within the act of spectatorial recognition, whereupon the viewing subject is brought to an acute awareness of precisely this unavoidable coldness as it exists in the aesthetic object itself, in the objective social world and, of course, in ourselves. The eschewal of all love, warmth, solidarity, positivity, affirmation, and so forth (which Adorno also advocates in his critical theory), and the unflinching ingestion of coldness – the *pharmakon* of capitalist society – make Haneke's films undeniably irritating, marginal, subversive and critical. Through a consciously dissatisfied and unhappy starting position and the (difficult yet necessary) rejection of all false positivity,<sup>100</sup> the dialectic of bourgeois coldness, through the marginal subject, begins to move towards its own abolition. Denial or suppression of such coldness will surely not result in authentically loving and free relationships, but instead will likely reinforce the failings of the status quo. As a significant step towards enhancing critical understanding, one would perhaps do better to foreground coldness, to consciously bring its objective ubiquity to subjective awareness.

For Haneke (and, indeed, Adorno), given the current inaccessibility of right answers (and right living), a responsible course of action would be to persistently raise critical questions and challenges towards that which presents itself as natural, good, unalterable, or just the way things are. Disrupting the smooth perpetuation and integration of the social order stands as the ethical core of the marginal subject. In Haneke's case, this may mean that one

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<sup>100</sup> Adorno is consistent and emphatic on the necessary rejection of present forms of happiness. For example, "thought's position toward happiness would be the negation of all false happiness" (ND, p. 353); "Prescribed happiness looks exactly what it is [. . .] The admonitions to be happy [. . .] have about them the fury of the father berating his children for not rushing joyously downstairs when he comes home irritable from his office" (MM, §38, pp. 62-63); "In the false world all ἡδονή [pleasure] is false. For the sake of happiness, happiness is renounced" (AT, p. 15).

(re)considers opinions, attitudes and reflections, not only in direct response to certain images and filmic artworks, but also in relation to one's own experience of and relation to contemporary society as the latter objectively permeates our individual lives. Similarly, on my reading of Adorno, one remains faithful to the possibility of authentic love, happiness, togetherness, and warmth, precisely by remaining cold in response to their current ideological counterfeits. Maintaining one's marginal proximity to the damaged social order allows for precisely those perspectives that "displace and estrange the world", that show it to be "as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light" (MM, §153, p. 247). The hope is that soon the margins will have become so densely populated as to bring about a critically-minded majority capable of genuinely negating the status quo and once again opening up the future – our futures.

### SUMMARY

The foregoing analysis has considered the two-level critique at work in both the critical theory of Adorno and the filmic work of Haneke. In the first half of the chapter, we examined the various threads of their *social* criticism, that is, the macro-level critique through which late capitalist society is portrayed in unflinchingly pejorative terms. Moreover, an attempt was made to argue for an anti-psychological reading of the work of Adorno and Haneke, respectively. It was demonstrated how their social critique tends towards imagery of a negative totality or false whole, which in turn brings about the aporetic position with which the chapter began, namely, that resistance to the distorted and deformed social world is both utterly necessary yet absolutely impossible. In order to rescue the indefatigable kernel of hope that lie at the heart of Adornian critical theory, as well as take into account the ostensible disappearance of a collective revolutionary agent, in the second half of the chapter I sought to



defend the resistive potential of marginal subjectivity. To this end, I considered the relevance and legitimacy of estrangement in constituting an integral part of marginal subjectivity, whereby the extant social world can come to be viewed and confronted in all its falsity and irrationality. Further toward the aims of marginality, the chapter ended with an exploration of, what I called, the dialectic of bourgeois coldness, and sought to indicate how this dialectic might function as an indispensable catalyst for critique in both Adorno's theory and Haneke's films. The very coldness demanded of individuals by social forces in order to guarantee one's personal survival cannot but turn back upon itself and toward society, thus, provoking and providing the clinical and critical distance required of radical social critique. Such marginalization prefigures the undermining of the legitimacy of the status quo, and as such is invaluable to the urgent task of theorizing and enacting wholesale social transformation.

## CHAPTER IV

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# THE DIALECTIC OF NATURE AND HUMANITY IN ADORNO AND TARKOVSKY

### INTRODUCTION

Amid the fallout from the global financial crisis of 2008, it was inevitable that strategically adept ‘vulgar Marxists’ would begin rubbing their hands together in anticipation of a total overhaul of capitalism, brought about by the latter’s own contradictions, flawed mechanisms, false logics and tendencies towards self-destruction or implosion. The vulgar Marxist might triumphantly claim, ‘Aha! *This* is how capitalism is unsustainable. It has shown itself to be so. Now is the time to overthrow it’. In my experience, variations on this theme regularly crop up at all manner of protests, conferences, seminars, art gatherings, social and political events and suchlike. Of course, the global economic situation is worthy of detailed and prolonged attention, and it does provide some ground for renewed social movements against the deleterious effects of capitalism. To this extent the current financial climate of ‘austerity’ may provoke interesting and critical responses from diverse groups of people. Yet, as we have seen many times in the past, the functionaries of capitalistic structures prove to be quite adept at bending and reforming in ways that can accommodate and adjust to major challenges and crises. As a result of such structural flexibility, I remain sceptical with regard to the extent to which one might view the present situation as pregnant with possibilities for radical change. Indeed, this

scepticism is what prompted my defence of marginality, critique and negativity in the previous chapter.

There is, however, an even greater challenge facing existing modes of capitalism both locally and globally – one that will in all probability constitute an unavoidable catalyst for radical social transformation, since to ignore its dangers could result in nothing less than the complete eradication of the species. I refer here to the looming threat of major ecological catastrophe. As threats go, an intensifying ecological crisis, certainly when compared to the more ‘immediate’ phenomena associated with the financial crisis, seems like an abstract and distant one. It is hard to fathom within the normal boundaries and terms of our everyday existence. But a renewed and critical understanding of our existing practices in relation to the natural environment is of immense and growing importance. The social ecologist, Murray Bookchin (whose work will be explored in this chapter) sums up the current situation in the following stark terms:

Our world, it would appear, will either undergo revolutionary changes, so far-reaching in character that humanity will totally transform its social relations and its very conception of life, or it will suffer an apocalypse that may well end humanity’s tenure on the planet (2005, p. 82)

The relationship between humanity and nature has long since been problematic and difficult to adequately theorize. It is complex and unstable. But this complexity and instability means that it is open to change. In this chapter, I will offer an Adornian account of the dialectical relationship between human beings and nature. In doing so, I hope to show that it is possible and desirable to re-conceptualize nature (and our place within it) in ways that avoid the hypostatization and dualistic thinking that underwrites not only the (anti-humanistic) discourse of ‘deep ecology’, but also the (humanistic) discourse of ‘social ecology’. I argue that neither of these dominant approaches to ecological

problems adequately conceptualizes the complex interrelationships between humanity and nature, and that the dialectical understanding as found in Adorno's critical theory, and in Tarkovsky's filmic work, offers a useful and suggestive contrast.

I will begin by outlining some of the core tenets of two influential ecological discourses, namely, 'deep ecology' (1.1) and 'social ecology', respectively (1.2). As will become clear, despite sharing a profound concern with the 'natural' world, the discourses of deep ecology and social ecology have developed largely in a hostile and antagonistic relationship with one another. After rehearsing some of their central arguments, I will offer some criticisms of each discourse (1.3), before exploring Adorno's complex invocations of nature in his critical theory (2). Having defended an Adornian understanding of the dialectic between humanity and nature, I will bring the chapter to a close by relating this reading to the aesthetics of Andrei Tarkovsky (3). My objective here is to offer an explication and critical defence of Adorno's theory of nature in contrast to the somewhat limited and tension-filled discourses of deep ecology and social ecology, respectively.

## 1. DOMINANT DISCOURSES: 'DEEP' ECOLOGY VERSUS 'SOCIAL' ECOLOGY

Recent years have witnessed a notable resurgence of interest in the natural world and humanity's place within it. Prompted by intensifying and unprecedented levels of dread towards an impending ecological catastrophe, the relations between the social and the natural have come under much scrutiny. Such concerns are not merely confined to the halls of academia either, as a variety of media vehicles, activists and 'personalities' have sought to raise awareness of the threats posed *by* and *to* our surrounding environment. The limited perspectives on the present situation fall into a persistent dichotomy with regard to the general *direction* of the threat faced: are humans jeopardizing the harmony inherent to the natural world, or are nature's mutations threatening human ways of life? Should we reconnect or 'return' to nature, as is often said, or is it necessary to alienate ourselves from nature altogether? Marxist accounts of society remain intent on uncovering the ideological fictions of all manner of 'naturalization', and postmodern constructivism extends this critique by completely collapsing 'nature' into culture. Meanwhile, a rediscovery of an inextinguishable natural foundation has found expression in pro-nature discourses, which deploy nature as an ontological or material limitation to constructivist pronouncements of human superiority (see Soper, 2005). Such questions, all too commonplace in the formation of contemporary attitudes, do not adequately acknowledge the complex mediation between human beings and nature.

Despite significant efforts by ecological thinkers to theorize environmental crises, I believe that there remain major shortcomings in their fundamental conceptions of humanity and nature. Two of the most influential ecological discourses are that of 'deep ecology' and 'social ecology', respectively. Given their influence, in this section I will offer interpretations and criticisms of these

discourses with recourse to Adornian theory. As will become clear, there exist some significant divisions within these ecological discourses, and these disagreements have regrettably led to an impasse. It is my aim to demonstrate how Adorno's critical theory may provide resources with which to overcome or at least better understand the reasons for such stagnation.

### 1.1 *Deep Ecology*

The discourse of deep ecology is not reducible to a unified and strictly definable list of agreed positions, as it draws upon a wide range of influences and traditions in the development of its diverse claims.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible to delineate certain features of the deep ecology discourse which mark its differentiation from other ecological forms of thought (particularly that of social ecology). The term 'deep ecology' made its first appearance in 1973, when the Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess, published a lecture summary in which he sought to establish a deeper ecological framework than the 'shallow' one popularized by reformists.<sup>102</sup> In the summary, Naess sets out a number of foundational principles and larger objectives of the fledgling deep ecology movement. The first of these principles begins from a rejection of the "[hu]man-in-environment image" in favour of the "*relational, total-field image*" (1973, p. 95). This latter image consists of organisms existing in a field or web of "intrinsic relations":

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<sup>101</sup> This is undoubtedly the case despite Naess' original claim following his inauguration of the term 'deep ecology', namely, that the "seven points listed provide *one unified framework* for ecosophical systems" (1973, p. 99, my emphasis).

<sup>102</sup> The reformist or 'shallow' ecology is such that our existing socio-cultural values, behaviours, work patterns, and so on, are never put under any serious scrutiny. Instead, the economy, institutions, policies, science and technologies are amended in their development to recognise and react to environmental threats. Contemporary examples include: exemptions from congestion charges for hybrid vehicles; individual (and still voluntary) household recycling schemes; protection of certain sites of so-called 'outstanding natural beauty' or regions of 'wilderness'; offering reusable bags in supermarkets (again, at this time the use of non-plastic bags is, unfathomably, only voluntary). Such practices, for Naess, fail to address the root causes of ecological problems, and merely allow extant social life to continue unabated.

An intrinsic relation between two things *A* and *B* is such that the relation belongs to the definitions or basic constitutions of *A* and *B*, so that without the relation, *A* and *B* are no longer the same things (Naess, 1973, p. 95)

This total-field image, then, takes into account the relative interdependence of ecological matter and species, such that none can singularly sustain its existence without relying upon at least some others in the ecosystem. The acknowledgement of ecological interdependency forms the basis of another key principle of deep ecology, namely, *biospheric egalitarianism*. This principle<sup>103</sup> holds that, given the inextricable connections between ecological things (in the most extended sense of the term), no single species can rightly claim moral priority:

To the ecological field-worker, *the equal right to live and blossom* is an intuitively clear and obvious axiom [. . .] The attempt to ignore our dependence and to establish a master-slave role has contributed to the alienation of man from himself (Naess, 1973, p. 96, original emphasis)

Not only, then, does the deep ecology discourse promote the notion of intrinsic *relations*, but it also upholds the belief in intrinsic *value*. The latter supports the relational, total-field image that breaks free of an enlightenment anthropocentrism that has so adversely affected the non-human world for millennia. This rejection of anthropocentrism also accounts for deep ecology's active distancing from reformist (or technological) positions that would have us ignore the root causes of human-centred, ecologically unsound praxis, and instead guide techno-scientific work towards relieving some of the most damaging effects of human activity on the non-human world, thereby allowing us to sustain existing lifestyles with minimal disruption or change. The technophile believes in the infinite ingenuity of human inventiveness such that, when faced with new threats or challenges, science and technology can be

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<sup>103</sup> Naess notes that biospheric egalitarianism can only be asserted "in principle" since "any realistic praxis necessitates some killing, exploitation, and suppression" (1973, p. 95).

rapidly developed and deployed to solve each and every ecological problem. Such a position is, of course, anathema to deep ecology advocates, since it remains wholly anthropocentric and reduces the entirety of non-human (animate and inanimate) matter to nothing but a series of (intrinsically) worthless objects, or, rather, objects that can accrue value only at the behest of dominant human subjects (i.e. omnipotent value-givers). The deep ecological position here runs the risk of lapsing into a kind of anti-technological romanticism.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, it is hard to see how such a static conception of what constitutes nature – namely, an organic unified totality that is perfectly self-regulating when left to its own devices – can avoid appealing to prelapsarian notions of a ‘return to nature’, that is, a better or purer (non-human) world which existed before our lamentable (techno-scientific) ‘Fall’. This is one of the central points of contention between the advocates of deep ecology and those of social ecology (I return to this issue in sections 1.2 and 1.3).

A further and related tenet of deep ecology is that of an altered and heightened awareness of intrinsic relations and value in the biosphere. Naess later offers an argument for a reconstructed and enhanced ‘Self’, which he believes can go some way towards achieving the development of consciousness and selfhood necessary for addressing the ecological crises and redressing the environmental balance. This additional notion of a reconstructed Self is, for Naess, essential for ecology, since basing one’s hope for ecologically viable policies and practices on a flimsy kind of altruism or haphazard individual sacrifices is, in his words, “probably in the long run a treacherous basis for conservation” (1995, p. 17). Not only will it be unpredictable and fluctuating, subject to external constraints and mutable contributory factors, but it will also retain the existing

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<sup>104</sup> Such an anti-technological position is not the exclusive preserve of deep ecologists. Recall that Herbert Marcuse remained, until very late in life, fundamentally opposed to technology on the grounds that it is detrimental to true societal relations, the pursuit of freedom, autonomy and cooperation. Martin Heidegger, however, is the philosopher more frequently and openly co-opted by the deep ecology cause.



understanding of relations between human being (as master) and non-human nature (as slave). Naess calls for a reconstructed, that is, *ecological* Self, which would extend to encompass – though not subsume – the wider cosmos in which it exists and subsists. Having taken such a step, self-interest, self-preservation and self-love actually become deepened to the extent that their enactment becomes actively conducive to the pressing task of ecological care and preservation. Naess refers to this as *self-realization*.<sup>105</sup>

On Naess' account of self-realization, then, no longer is the self an isolated, atomistic ego, preserved selfishly and antagonistically. Such a narrow conception of self leads to alienation affecting human/human and human/non-human relations. Preservation of the ecological Self, however, becomes affirmation and realization of all that co-constitutes a Self's being. Deep ecology's vision of self-realization is one of progression, inasmuch as a self can begin identifying with other human beings (beyond friends and family, that is, to include the entire species), but then move further still to include other species and, indeed, the whole non-human cosmos. Through the realization of this reconstructed Self a new ethic of responsibility and care may develop towards ourselves (now understood in the more expansive terms of universal interrelatedness) and the natural world. Naess notes that the "requisite care flows naturally if the 'self' is widened and deepened so that protection of free Nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves" (1995, p. 26).

A further basic principle of the deep ecology discourse, and one which is seen as complementary to the aim of self-realization, concerns the *richness* and *diversity* of life forms. The flourishing of the entire biosphere is measured in

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<sup>105</sup> Devall and Sessions note that self-realization – in addition to biospheric egalitarianism – constitutes one of deep ecology's "ultimate norms" (1985, p. 66). These norms are "not derivable from other principles or intuitions", and are instead "arrived at by the deep questioning process [. . .] [and] cannot be validated, of course, by the methodology of modern science based on its usual mechanistic assumptions and its very narrow definition of data" (ibid.).

terms of the amount of complexity and diversity of life forms within it. Diversity in the biosphere is not merely valuable to the extent that it provides conditions conducive for greater flourishing of life forms. Rather, diversity is also deemed by deep ecologists to be intrinsically valuable. Potentialities of survival and of new forms of life emerging are enhanced through biospheric diversity. Holding that self-realization requires optimized diversity, complexity and symbiosis, deep ecologists thereby oppose any action that reduces the multiplicity of life forms (and the concept of 'life' here should be understood as extending to what biologists would classify as 'nonliving', that is, landscapes, rivers, ecosystems, and so forth). As Naess puts it, "'Live and let live' is a more powerful ecological principle than 'Either you or me'" (1973, p. 96). Having no superiority within the complex biosphere, humans are said to have "no right" to reduce the richness and diversity of life "except to satisfy *vital* needs" (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 70). Clearly, the deep ecology discourse is heavily loaded both normatively and politically. Indeed, its proponents are forthright in their demands that those who subscribe to the principles of deep ecology "have an obligation to try to implement the necessary changes" (ibid.). Yet, despite its potentially laudable motives, the deep ecology discourse is certainly not without its problems. I will draw attention to some of the most pertinent ones (in section 1.3), before proceeding to a discussion of Adorno's dialectical conception of nature (in section 2).

## ***1.2 Social Ecology***

The development and dissemination of the social ecology discourse can be largely attributed to the work of one man, Murray Bookchin (1921-2006). His voluminous output, coupled with his revolutionary activist stances and engagements over decades, has had a major influence on ecological theory and practice. The discourse of social ecology is Bookchin's most notable legacy and

it stands as one of the earliest theoretical discourses to bring ecological concerns to wider public consciousness (certainly in the USA).<sup>106</sup> In its subsequent development and refinement, social ecology can be understood as an important response, and critical opposition, to the discourse of deep ecology.

The main aim of social ecology – as the name implies – is to focus on social and human forms of organization and interaction as a way of understanding and responding to the ecological crises with which we are confronted. Social ecology starts out from the concrete conviction that “nearly all of our present ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems” (Bookchin, 2007, p. 19). The natural world, for social ecologists, should not be seen as a harsh, ‘indifferent’, limited and homogenous realm of brute and blind determinism, but instead as a wellspring of heterogeneous symbiotic interrelations, spontaneity, fecundity and diversity. In contrast to the traditional Darwinian conception of evolution as essentially a sequence of competitive antagonisms between individual species amid a ‘survival of the fittest’,<sup>107</sup> on the social ecology account, natural evolution is better construed as a process through which diverse species not only coexist but often mutually support each other’s flourishing (Bookchin, 1997, p. 40). The dynamic movement towards greater complexity and variety is, for social ecologists, what maintains an ecosystem’s integrity and unity. Ecosystems are stronger and more unified through diversification and mutual interdependence. As Bookchin puts it, “Ecological wholeness is not an immutable homogeneity but rather the very opposite – a dynamic *unity of diversity*” (2005, p. 88).

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<sup>106</sup> Indeed, Bookchin’s *Our Synthetic Environment*, published in 1962 under the pseudonym ‘Lewis Herber’, predates Rachel Carson’s well-known and seminal work, *Silent Spring* (1962). Bookchin’s work reportedly received scant attention at the time of its publication, perhaps because, while both he and Carson argued against the use of pesticides, his work was politically far more radical and expansive in its critique of capitalism and advocacy of wholesale social transformation.

<sup>107</sup> This notion is, of course, frequently transposed into the societal realm and invoked in everyday parlance, particularly in reference to the quasi-mythical ‘market’ and the concomitant ‘grow or die’ mentality (anthropomorphically) imparted to it.

The social ecological view of nature itself, then, is not one of naive and passive reverence toward a static wilderness, in other words, that which is untouched by human hand (such as is the case in deep ecology). Instead, nature is seen as consisting in dynamic evolutionary progress and ever-increasing variegation. The natural world in its evolutionary development gives rise to greater forms of complexity, flexibility, and even, on Bookchin's account, self-consciousness. The latter finds its highest expression, of course, in one of the unique and most sophisticated products of natural evolution: the species *homo sapiens*. As a result of natural evolution, human beings are endowed with unprecedented and unparalleled capacities to purposively intervene in and alter, what Bookchin calls, *first nature*. First nature refers to the biological and evolutionary roots of our existence. Out of this first (primeval, biological) nature arises a *second nature*. This second nature consists of increasingly complex social and cultural phenomena, forms of symbolic communication, interaction, innovation, institutions, production, and so on. In contrast to the deep ecology approach – which points to the grand capacity and propensity of human beings to (detrimentally) intervene in nature as the basis for defending an ecological position of non-interference – social ecology views the progressive development of second nature, and humanity's enhanced ability to affect first nature, in a more positive light. The onset of second nature does not mark a lamentable glitch in natural evolution, whereby human beings have become nought but a damaging parasitic nuisance to the realm of first nature, but rather must be seen as part and parcel of nature as a whole: "The human species, in effect, is no less a product of natural evolution than blue-green algae" (Bookchin, 1999, p. 298); "Society itself [. . .] stems very much *from* nature [. . .] The emergence of society is a *natural* fact that has its origins in the biology of human socialization" (Bookchin, 1997, pp. 46-47). Social ecology, then, conceives of both the natural world (first nature) and society (second nature) as inextricably interlinked through evolution.

In addition to this re-coupling of nature and society, Bookchin makes a semantic distinction between ‘*environmentalism*’ and ‘*ecology*’. Environmentalism he takes to mean “a mechanistic, instrumental outlook that sees nature as a passive habitat composed of ‘objects’ such as animals, plants, minerals, and the like that must merely be rendered more serviceable for human use” (2005, p. 85). This rendering of environmentalism has something in common with mainstream interpretations of Marx, inasmuch as the idea prevails that nature constitutes nothing but the ‘raw material’ and resources for utilization by human beings in their labour and ongoing development.<sup>108</sup> Bookchin criticizes environmentalism on the basis that its limited ecological perspective allows for the perpetuation of the subordination of nature, unquestioningly, in order to merely minimize the environmental damage caused by existing social relations and behaviour.<sup>109</sup> This is to be resisted because it fails to deal with the underlying issues that bring about such environmental destruction in the first place. On the social ecology account, these fundamental factors that bring about unnecessary ecological destruction are directly related to hierarchical social arrangements and gross inequalities in access to resources (both social and natural).

In contrast to the limited purview of piecemeal environmentalism, *ecology* “deals with the dynamic balance of nature, with the interdependence of living and nonliving things” (Bookchin, 2005, p. 86). Given that human beings are a part of nature, ecological thought cannot simply put to one side, or universally condemn, humanity’s relations with other species and the wider biotic

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<sup>108</sup> Marx’s (later) work is generally considered to have, what might be called, an *ecological deficit*, to the extent that his account of nature is said to be reductive and anthropocentric. For an important reappraisal and repudiation of such claims, see John Bellamy Foster’s *Marx’s Ecology* (2000). See also the set of essays collected by Ted Benton in *The Greening of Marxism* (1996).

<sup>109</sup> One might recall here the growing market in supposedly ‘environmentally friendly’ or ‘ethical’ consumer products and services that are on offer today, all of which merely help to promote a continuation of existing behaviours rather than challenging the fundamental structures within which they take place. Put differently, so-called ‘green capitalism’ simply functions to sustain the unsustainable.

environment. Indeed, it is precisely humanity's sophisticated and highly developed forms of thought, rationality, communication, foresight, self-consciousness, and so forth, which lend the species a unique and privileged ability to, at least in part, supplant mere instinctual actions. Such attentiveness to the interrelations between differentiated species is indicative of the holistic or organismic elements of the social ecology discourse, that is, its concern with *wholeness*. As I alluded to previously, for social ecologists, wholeness does not equate to oneness, that is to say, it does not consist in a homogenous totality within which individual parts are subsumed amid enforced uniformity. Rather, wholeness – in both natural and social evolution – at least on Bookchin's (Hegelian-inflected) account, should be seen as moving inexorably towards *unity in diversity*. Evolution in its natural and social forms, then, consists of a multiplicity of life-forms unified by their co-determination and reciprocity. Unity in diversity is "not only the determinant of an ecosystem's stability" and fecundity, but is also, as a principle, the basis of society's actualization "in the form of richly articulated, mutualistic networks of people based on community, roundedness of personality, diversity of stimuli and activities, an increasing wealth of experiences, and a variety of tasks" (Bookchin, 1997, p. 42).

According to the social ecology approach, what prevents the spontaneous development of such unity in diversity – at least at the social level – is *hierarchy*. True to his anarchist roots, and taking much influence from the ideas of Peter Kropotkin, Bookchin regards hierarchical structuring as the most formidable obstacle to achieving an ecological society. In this regard, while retaining an anti-capitalist position, social ecology cannot really be classed as a Marxist discourse as such, for it opposes capitalist societies not on the basis of class struggle and exploitation but on account of its inherently hierarchical status.

I do not wish to diminish the importance of class rule in explaining present-day ecological problems, but class rule must be placed in the much *larger* context of hierarchy and domination as a whole (Bookchin, 2005, p. 28)

Bookchin's opposition to hierarchy stems from his anthropological studies of bygone communities that significantly predate the development of class society. The earliest 'organic' societies, Bookchin argues, were largely egalitarian and accepting of differences in individual members of the community, seeing in this diversity a complementarity and mutuality. Co-operation in non-hierarchical relations pertained in these organic societies, whereas, by contrast, the development of hierarchies in subsequent societies – through gerontocracy, patriarchy, shamanism, chiefdoms, and eventually state-like formations – has led to institutionalized relations between people characterized by "command and obedience" (ibid., p. 26). As a result, one of the clearest objectives of social ecology is the abolition of all hierarchy.<sup>110</sup> This is believed to be the grounds for bringing about an ecological society. For Bookchin, it is not the case that an abstract 'humanity' dominates, plunders and abuses nature:

One can no longer speak of 'humanity' the way one can speak of species of carnivores or herbivores [. . .] [T]o ignore the hierarchical and class divisions that second nature has produced [. . .] is to create the illusion of a commonality that humanity has by no means achieved (2005, p. 33)

For the social ecologist, the "very notion of 'dominating nature' has its roots in the domination of human by human" (1991, p. 129). Domination itself, as a concept, is something that only exists when human beings come into hierarchical social contact with one another. As we noted at the outset of this section, social ecologists seek out the origin of environmental crises in the human-made structures and inequalities of existing society. Thus, for Bookchin and advocates of social ecology, the most urgent task for the fostering of an

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<sup>110</sup> Bookchin is explicit in this aim: "it is crucial for students of society to fully understand these forms [of hierarchy] and to eliminate hierarchy per se, not simply replace one form of hierarchy with another" (2005, p. 27).

ecological society is the complete removal of hierarchy in all its forms, and a radical transformation of social (human/human) and natural (human/non-human) relations. Anything less would be seen as falling hopelessly short of the mark.

Before proceeding to examine an Adornian conception of nature in contradistinction to the discourses of deep ecology and social ecology, it will be worth our while to briefly highlight some theoretical antagonisms and weaknesses of these leading ecological discourses, since such divisions between the two have ostensibly resulted in an impasse.

### *1.3 Limitations of the Dominant Discourses*

Despite the notable influence of deep ecology and social ecology, respectively, to the environmental movement over the past few decades, both discourses contain significant limitations. It will be useful to explore some of these theoretical shortcomings before considering how Adorno's more dialectical conception of nature may offer valuable insights for the enhancement of contemporary ecological thought.

As Horkheimer notes, it is a "typical fallacy of the era of rationalization" to debase reason and exalt raw nature (1947, p. 126). Precisely this exalting of nature is only too apparent in the discourse of deep ecology. The humanity-nature dualism is not only posited undialectically, in the sense that there is no appreciation of the ongoing and complex *mediation* between human beings and the natural world, but it is also presented in a decidedly *hierarchical* fashion. The hierarchical ordering is self-defeating inasmuch as it places human beings in an unquestioning position of submission in relation to an all-powerful nature. Following Horkheimer's observation, it appears that deep ecology conceives of



‘nature’ as a total, self-sustaining, organic system that is *inherently* valuable and good. Meanwhile, ‘humanity’ is seen as an undifferentiated and superfluous (if not outright malign) species, whose proclivity to reproduce and consume far beyond the ‘naturally given’ boundaries of its environment – often referred to, somewhat euphemistically, as the Earth’s ‘carrying capacity’ – serves to devalue and pollute the otherwise pristine natural world.

The argument for ‘biospheric egalitarianism’, that is, the idea that all life-forms have an equal right to live and flourish, may well help to acknowledge the complex interconnections and mutual interdependence between different species and matter, but it also casts human beings as no more morally significant than, say, dung beetles or, indeed, the HIV virus. In hypostatizing ‘nature’, deep ecology lapses into dubious and self-defeating positions whereby the expansive ways in which humanity can and does intervene in and alter the natural world are seen as a threat to a mythical, almost spiritual, order of nature. If fatal epidemics should break out, deep ecologists would struggle, within the existing tenets of their discourse, to justify any human intervention that would prevent the suffering and demise of millions of people. This is all the more baffling given that many people would argue that to speak of nature’s ‘*intrinsic*’ value or rights presupposes the existence of one who *bestows* value and rights on things: in short, no thing can be valued in lieu of a thing that does the valuing (i.e. human beings). Bookchin articulates this point forcefully:

For with the disappearance of human beings, *value too would disappear*, and the biosphere would be left with no basis for *any* ethical evaluation or discussion of ‘intrinsic worth’, much less ethical agents who can appreciate wondrous qualities (2005, pp. 39-40, original emphasis)

It is probably misguided, then, to approach the world’s rapidly intensifying ecological and environmental problems from a single, narrativistic and notably anti-humanistic perspective, such as appears to be the case in the discourse of

deep ecology. The general impression one gets from the literature is that of a nature harmonious, pure, perfectly self-regulating and self-reproducing, while human beings subsequently intervene in nature, carelessly and selfishly plundering and abusing it.<sup>111</sup> On this view, the course of development within the natural world would simply go about its way unfettered, continually flourishing and renewing itself, were it not for the pesky interference of human vanity. Following the approach of deep ecology, it becomes impossible to construe the existence of human beings on the planet as anything other than profoundly detrimental to the natural environment. The humble walk through a woodland area necessarily tramples and encroaches upon certain forms of plant life, insects, bacteria, and so forth. Moreover, in merely breathing we take in and use up valuable oxygen from the atmosphere, contaminating it upon release with a higher concentration of carbon dioxide. The deep ecological view – particularly through its adherence to biospheric egalitarianism – leads to untenable (and unpalatable) conclusions, such that only the most ardent misanthrope or irrationalist could maintain.<sup>112</sup> Such an approach not only

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<sup>111</sup> I use the pronoun 'it' in this instance, but many people when speaking of nature employ the highly evocative substitute 'her' (or even 'Mother Nature') in order to rhetorically impose a particular narrative. This, of course, owes much to the legacy of Romanticism, perhaps most notably in the work of Schelling: "it is what we call reason, whereby nature first completely returns into herself" (1978 [1800], p. 6). Towards different ends, Walter Benjamin approvingly invokes Fourier's work when he imagines a new kind of labour, one that "far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations that lie dormant in her womb as potentials" (1996 [1940], p. 220). It is not possible to make further comment on such evocative turns of phrase here, but it is certainly an issue worthy of critical attention.

<sup>112</sup> Regrettably, within the discourse of deep ecology there are some highly regressive and reactionary elements. In an interview with Bill Devall from 1986, David Foreman (co-founder and former leader of *Earth First!*) explained how famine, poverty, environmental catastrophes and epidemics hitting the 'Third World' offered an opportunity to reset the natural balance and lower human population: "When I tell people how the worst thing we could do in Ethiopia is to give aid – the best thing would be to just let nature seek its own balance, to let the people there just starve . . . they think this is monstrous. But the alternative is that you go in and save these half-dead children who never will live a whole life. Their development will be stunted. And what's going to happen in ten years' time is that twice as many people will suffer and die" (Foreman & Devall, 1986, p. 43). Foreman later regretted and attempted to clarify these ethically abhorrent comments (see Foreman, 1991). Yet, putting ethics to one side, there are inconsistencies on this issue within the deep ecology discourse. For example, when Bill Devall and George Sessions discuss the need for a considerable decrease in human population, they focus not on the 'Third World' but on *developed* countries: "it is also absolutely crucial to curb population growth in the so-called developed (i.e. over-developed) industrial societies. Given the tremendous rate of consumption and waste production of individuals in these societies, they represent a much greater threat and impact on the biosphere per capita than individuals in Second and Third World countries" (1985, p. 72).

betrays an overly simplistic view of humanity's active engagements with nature (which can be both negative *and* positive), but also overlooks nature's unpredictable and often chaotic development and internal devastation.

In addition to this limited view of nature and humanity within deep ecology, a paradox arises out of Naess' notion of an ecological Self. Recall that Naess' enhanced conception of the Self requires an increased awareness of one's ecological existence, namely, as encompassing all of the natural world and its diverse interrelations that co-constitute us. Yet, deep ecologists also wish to preserve vast regions of wilderness, that is to say, areas in which no human activity has intervened. In doing so, deep ecologists ossify the split between humanity and nature. The result of these two key points within the deep ecological discourse is the following paradox: (1) the Self should be understood (holistically) as created and sustained through the unfathomably complex relations between diverse organic forms; yet, at the same time, (2) human beings should remove themselves from large areas of the natural world, so that the latter may flourish, uncontaminated by the work of human hands. Thus, the ecological Self should be both completely *in* nature – as an indispensable and mutually interdependent part of the biosphere in which it exists – and *removed* from nature – since human beings irrevocably disturb the balance in, and do great harm to, the natural environment. It seems problematic, if not impossible, to reconcile these dual objectives of the deep ecology discourse. The adherence to a biocentric perspective, as Bookchin notes, appears as “bluntly misanthropic and less an ecological principle than an argument against the human species itself as a life-form” (1995a, p. 116). The denigration of human beings that marks the culmination of deep ecological thought is one of the discourse's most significant problems, and one which would appear to make Bookchin's social ecology the more fruitful approach.

Social ecology is also not without its difficulties, however, and in the interest of fairness it is worth drawing attention to some of these problems before continuing. Perhaps the most curious discrepancy within Bookchin's social ecology discourse is the way in which hierarchy – a major causal factor in the precipitation of ecological crises – appears to seep back in to the argument, in particular by way of an undialectical inversion. While *deep* ecology advocates the superiority of nature over and above humanity (the latter being primarily conceived of as merely an unexceptional species among millions of others), *social* ecology, in construing the sophisticated abilities and social arrangements of human beings, through powers of communication, thought, culture, interaction, and so on, as entirely *natural* outgrowths ('second' nature from 'first' nature), reverses the original hierarchy, now positing humanity as a superior species over and above mere nature. Thus, in spite of his remarks eschewing the dualism of biocentrism versus anthropocentrism, Bookchin's social ecology appears to slide into the latter. In its avowed belief in the species *homo sapiens* as an evolutionary vanguard, social ecology reaffirms the hierarchical division between humanity and nature, construing the latter as subordinate to the former.

Related to this ostensible lapse into forms of hierarchy that are otherwise contrary to the discourse of social ecology, Bookchin's thought exhibits a strongly teleological understanding of natural evolution, as an inexorable movement towards ever-increasing complexity, diversity and consciousness. Such a view is surely a case of wishful thinking on the part of social ecologists. In a decidedly Romantic and idealistic vein, Bookchin views humanity as constituting the profoundest manifestation of nature's inherent fecundity and progressive flow toward self-consciousness.<sup>113</sup> This is exemplary of the (explicit)

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<sup>113</sup> In this view, Bookchin echoes the likes of Fichte and Schelling, both of whom saw the potential in subjective reason for rendering nature fully conscious of itself.

teleological and (implicit yet overtly denied) anthropocentric core of social ecology. In regards to teleology, Bookchin writes:

Social ecology, in effect, recognizes that – like it or not – the future of life on this planet pivots on the future of society. It contends that evolution, both in first nature and in second, is *not yet complete* (2007, p. 47, my emphasis)

Bookchin's Hegelian teleology does not seem conducive to the ecological perspectives he otherwise advocates, since human beings are clearly seen as both the highest present achievement and future end of natural evolution. As someone who is relentlessly critical of the ways in which deep ecology hypostatizes nature, Bookchin should know better than to do precisely the same in the case of evolution. The latter is by definition an *ongoing process*, not a point of arrival. Evolution is a journey with no terminus, and it is human hubris to presume absolute knowledge of this process. Moreover, such teleological, Enlightenment-centred, progressive conceptions of both natural and social evolution seem to conflict somewhat with Bookchin's frequent and appreciative backward-looking analyses of bygone social orders. In particular, he is quick to make use of examples from the supposedly non-hierarchical – or, at the least, benignly hierarchical – (pre-industrial) communities of the past as a way of criticizing capitalism's hierarchy, domination, exploitation, division of labour, 'grow-or-die' economies, and so forth. In addition, he elsewhere chastises teleological understandings of human history and development, highlighting the ways in which "notions of social law and teleology have been used to achieve a ruthless subjugation of the individual to suprahuman forces" (Bookchin, 2005, p. 88). Presumably, given the positive evaluations of such examples, particularly when considered in contrast to the universally damning verdicts on contemporary capitalist societies, Bookchin's overarching belief in an unerringly positive progression (in both natural and social evolution) is in conflict with his own analyses. Again, what is needed is a more dialectical

understanding of progress, evolution, the domination of nature, and suchlike. This dialectical deficit in the preeminent discourses of deep ecology and social ecology is what prompts me to constellate these approaches with that of Adorno and Tarkovsky, with the aim of challenging the discourses' shortcomings and supplementing their potential theoretical strengths.

As a short prelude to my discussion of Adorno's thinking on nature, I would like to recall some of Bookchin's comments on the Frankfurt School. His remarks are somewhat erratic and, for the most part, derogatory. Yet, this was not always the case. For example, in the original edition of *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, Bookchin includes some glowing references to the Frankfurt School theorists, particularly in relation to the latter's staunch critique of positivism and instrumental reason. However, in the second edition, Bookchin explicitly admits having removed "favorable references to the Frankfurt School and Theodor Adorno" (1995a, p. ix), further claiming:

I have come to regard much of Adorno's work as intellectually irresponsible, wayward, and poorly theorized, despite the brilliance of his style (at times) and his often insightful epigrams (ibid.)

What is more, Bookchin refers offhandedly to the Frankfurt School's theories as fashionable "academic commodities" that have "fostered postmodern views" (1995a, p. 183). These rather cheap pot-shots, which are in no way out of step with the tone of the vast majority of Bookchin's output, do not warrant a sustained scholarly rebuttal. In response to such remarks, it suffices to say that since critical theory contains self-reflexive arguments as to precisely the inevitable incorporation and commodification of revolutionary ideas and theories, the complaint that such theories have become fashionable commodities seems to further *validate*, rather than undermine, the claims of critical theory. The fault is surely with commodification and contemporary

academic practices under capitalism rather than the theoretical ideas themselves. Moreover, only a cursory reading of the Frankfurt School could conflate their theories with a kind of proto-postmodernism, although, in all fairness, Bookchin is not alone in this respect.<sup>114</sup>

Proponents of both deep ecology and social ecology make reference (albeit passing) to Adorno's thought, which is enough to at least suggest its relevance for ecological theory and practice. However, neither discourse adequately reflects upon the dialectical manoeuvres of Adorno's understanding of humanity and nature. This lack of engagement with critical theory is regrettable, since it is my contention that Adorno's thought offers much that might be of value for the ecological cause. To his critical theory we shall now turn.

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<sup>114</sup> To an extent, Habermas also unjustifiably follows this accusatory line by conflating Adorno and Horkheimer's work with a Nietzschean affirmation of anti- or post-modern irrationality (see Habermas, 1987).

## 2. ADORNO'S CONCEPTION OF NATURE

In this section, I will attempt to provide a reading of Adorno's conception of nature. This is no simple task, for his invocations of 'nature' – like many other terms within his corpus – are diffuse and diverse. However, despite the differences in the surrounding context of each usage, I believe there is at least one important thread running through each invocation of the term, which may be termed the *dialectical intertwinement of humanity and nature*. This dialectic is at work in Adorno's thought from an early speech he gave in 1932, through to the classic *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, right up to his most notable late works, *Negative Dialectics* and the posthumously published and incomplete *Aesthetic Theory*. I begin by examining Adorno's understanding of 'natural history' (2.1), before analyzing the conception of nature (and the domination thereof) in relation to self-preservation (2.2). The latter constitutes a key feature of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which gives a quasi-anthropological account of natural history and the development of human reason that shares – in its concerns, if not in its conclusions – much with Bookchin's social ecology. The section closes with an argument for the re-conceptualization of nature along Adornian lines (2.3). Ultimately I hope to show how Adorno's dialectical conception of nature allows for a greater appreciation of the complex interrelations of human beings and their environment than is offered through the leading contemporary ecological discourses.

### 2.1 *On the Idea of Natural History*

As we have seen in the previous section, there is a tendency within ecological discourses towards dualistic thinking and undialectical conceptualization. Both deep ecology and social ecology rely upon certain hierarchical forms of thought that posit nature and humanity as two distinct categories, with each discourse



ultimately claiming priority for one side over the other. Since this hypostatization acts as an obstacle to an acknowledgement of the *mediation* between nature and humanity, it will be of value to consider how Adorno's critical theory renders this mediation more explicit.

In July of 1932, Adorno delivered a speech at the Frankfurt division of the *Kantgesellschaft*, entitled 'The Idea of Natural History', in which he presents an early glimpse of his notion of "dialectical nature" (INH, p. 117). Adorno explains in this speech that his use of the concept of nature seeks to dissolve that which most resembles 'myth', that is, the extent to which all being becomes mere 'second nature' and is comprehended as "fatefully arranged" and preordained (INH, p. 111). Nature and history, then, rather than consisting as ontologically stable categories, instead can function to demythologize the existing reality.<sup>115</sup>

[T]he real intention here is to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history. Therefore, wherever I operate with the concepts of nature and history, no ultimate definitions are meant, rather I am pursuing the intention of pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference (INH, p. 111)

There can be no legitimate conception of nature without taking into account its partial definition, cultivation and mediation by real material (human) praxis. Equally, there is no history that exists independent of the natural, material, objective world in which all events must take place. As Buck-Morss notes, Adorno's insistently dialectical position refuses "to grant either nature or history the status of an ontological first principle" (1977, p. 49). Or, in Adorno's own terms:

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<sup>115</sup> The notion of demythologization is, as one should expect from the likes of Adorno, also conceived of dialectically. Later, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer attempt to show how enlightenment's persistence in destroying myth can become in itself a new form of mythology, an unquestioned, uncritical position (which, of course, undermines the original aims of enlightenment in the process). I discuss this important element of Adorno's work further in subsequent sections.

Every exclusion of natural stasis from the historical dynamic leads to false absolutes, [while] every isolation of the historical dynamic from the unsurpassably natural elements in it leads to false spiritualism (INH, p. 117)

A more nuanced and dialectical configuration of the concepts of nature and history – towards an idea of ‘natural history’ [*Naturgeschichte*] – is thereby a necessary theoretical move in order to avoid the Scylla of a total historicization of nature and the Charybdis of a naturalization of history. In doing so, the existing material reality can be shown to be contingent, transitory, unessential, and, as such, open to transformation.

This de-mythification of the present is closely linked with the notion of ‘second nature’, which, for Adorno (following Lukács), is a pejorative term for the reified forms of life under a naturalized social order. Second nature is to be criticized for its suppression of the historical conflicts, contingencies, movements, and so forth, of which the current state of affairs are a result. Clearly, this negative understanding of second nature is in stark contrast to the subsequent uses of the term in Bookchin’s account, whereby second nature constitutes an evolutionary outgrowth [*Naturwüchsigkeit*] of first (biological) nature. Adorno’s socially critical perspective and dialectical construal of ‘natural history’ puts paid to the idea of an unwaveringly positive and progressive development of world history, as though the unfolding of historical events were merely reason coming ever more into its own over time.

As mentioned in the previous section, this unerringly progressive position can be identified as the overt belief of Bookchin’s decidedly Hegelian flavoured discourse. Despite its professed ecological credentials, social ecology places human beings at the pinnacle of evolutionary development and as the motor force of history. This presents a possible problem for the ecological discourse,

for if the domination of nature is seen as damaging, irrational, unsustainable, and so on – as both Adorno and Bookchin argue – then it appears questionable for Bookchin to affirm the superiority of humanity and the necessity of even greater control and alteration of nature (both first *and* second). Bookchin views our capacities for adaptation *of*, not merely *to*, first nature, as naturally given and necessary. Thus, his solution to ecological crises is to more radically and purposively alter first and second nature so that both better serve the needs of humanity but in a way that will also be non-hierarchical and ecologically sound. This appears contradictory, for surely to intervene in such a significant manner in first nature presupposes the superiority of human beings and perpetuates the very domination of nature Bookchin elsewhere criticizes. The positing of humanity as the ultimate teleological agent of world history is a notable shortcoming in the discourse of social ecology, and it is one of the key points at which the dialectical subtlety of Adorno's critical theory can act as a corrective.

Adorno argues that the unchallenged valorization of human spirit (so prevalent in post-Kantian idealism and subsequently repeated in Bookchin's social ecology) is damaging to the extent that it serves to intensify the division between humanity and nature, more specifically, the *subordination* of natural material and non-human life to the domineering powers of humanity. This is a recurring idea in Adorno's work, which finds one of its most sustained expressions in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a quite eccentric text which perhaps more than most frequently induces a troubling combination of senses in the reader – ranging from bemusement and frustration to dizziness and profound wonder. In their quasi-historical account of the development of enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that reason, which from its very beginnings aimed at liberating mankind from fear, has become almost wholly *instrumental* and has resulted in calamity and barbarism on an unimaginable scale. In

relation to nature, enlightenment ushers in an age of disenchantment [*Entzauberung*]. In a pre-enlightenment context, that is, in their mythic relations to nature, human beings conceived of themselves as being a part of nature, and ritually (and mimetically) related to and celebrated its mystery and mastery. The natural world at this past historical stage, Adorno and Horkheimer aver, invoked respect, worship even, as a sacred order radiating meaning, connection, harmony and awesome power.<sup>116</sup> Yet, with the onset of enlightenment and the disproportionate value accorded to instrumental reason, human interactions with nature mutate into ones of domination and manipulation. Since enlightenment is synonymous with demythologization, the older attitudes towards nature, which produced mythic accounts of natural phenomena (and the causes thereof) in lieu of knowledge of them, are seen as immature and inadequate, for they do not address the causes of humankind's primal fear: that of the unknown. Given that humanity imagines itself "free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown" (DE, p. 16), this determines to a large degree the course of enlightenment.

Epistemological accumulation is part and parcel of the enlightened mindset, as is demythologization. Mixed in with these historical processes, whether intentionally or not, are elements of control and domination. Human subjects come to view nature as one more thing to be tamed and put in its place, namely, squarely in the service of human beings: "What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men" (DE, p. 4). The demythologization of nature leaves the latter devoid of the kind of *intrinsic* value that deep ecologists would subsequently make the focal point of their own critique. No longer is meaning seen to reside in the natural world. To the enlightenment understanding, everything is deemed intelligible, accessible,

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<sup>116</sup> One might note the similarities between this holistic, pre-enlightenment conception of nature as pure and self-regulating, over and above human beings, and the deep ecology discourse which seeks to rejuvenate these ideas with minimal qualification.

malleable and, ultimately, controllable. In the rigidity of this worldview, enlightenment reverts to myth, leaving its own presuppositions, motivations, historical contingencies, and so forth, unquestioned and ritualistically repeated. In this, enlightenment lacks recognition of the co-determining facets of nature and history – the fact that both the natural world and our concrete historical praxis dialectically work in and through one another. Recognition of this natural-historical mediation is the first important point which Adornian theory brings to bear on existing ecological thought. Yet, the nature-history dualism is not the only one in need of deconstruction (if you will excuse the blatant anachronism). More persistent is the dualistic split between nature and humanity, which, on Adorno's reading, has its origins in the drive for self-preservation.

## *2.2 Self-preservation and the Nature-Humanity Dualism*

The original catalyst for human beings' attempts to tame nature lies within the drive of the species for *self-preservation*. Nature is seen as overpowering, unpredictable, fearsome, and as such a threat to our continued existence. Hence it must be controlled to the highest degree possible. Yet, the ironic twist that Adorno and Horkheimer note here is that the kind of self that is preserved through the subordination of nature to humanity is thoroughly deformed and diminished. Only after having imposed upon itself rigorous demands for renunciation is the self able to secure its own 'preservation', though, of course, in light of such drastic deformations, it makes more sense to speak of *self-destruction*. The cost of self-imposed renunciation is disproportionately high, and is paid for by the subject's annihilation of all that would be worth preserving in itself. The costly initial outlay never produces a fair return. In the act of renouncing we give away more than will be given back to us. Through such processes of renunciation, reason loses (or suppresses) its entwinement

with and dependence upon nature. Since the bourgeois or enlightened individual<sup>117</sup> first invoked reason in order to subjugate nature, forgetting in the process the mimetic moment within reason itself (as discussed in Chapter II), the deleterious effects on our conceptions of life and self have been, on Adorno's and Horkheimer's account, catastrophic.

As soon as man discards his awareness that he himself is [part of] nature, all the aims for which he keeps himself alive – social progress, the intensification of all his material and spiritual powers, even consciousness itself – are nullified, and the enthronement of the means as an end, which under late capitalism is tantamount to open insanity, is already perceptible in the prehistory of subjectivity (DE, p. 54)

The relationship of humanity to nature is, of course, not merely one-way, namely, human subjects dominating natural objects. While it is important to acknowledge the fact that, as Schechter aptly puts it, humanity is a part of nature yet not reducible to or identical with nature (2005, p. 156), it is also necessary to go further and consider the possibility that nature itself is similarly irreducible to its human conceptualization. In fact, this recognition of irreducibility recalls an important point mentioned elsewhere in the thesis, specifically, Adorno's argument for the "preponderance of the object" [*Vorrang des Objekts*] (ND, p. 183).

The idea of the preponderance of the object is absolutely essential to Adorno's critical theory, and as such warrants our attention again. The thought here is representative of Adorno's underlying materialism, which holds that the object – in this context, external/material nature – takes material precedence over the subject. This is the case since objectivity is also a part of the constitution of subjectivity, yet subjectivity is not to the same degree a necessary moment of

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<sup>117</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer famously argue that Odysseus represents "the prototype of the bourgeois individual" (DE, p. 43), whose combination of cunning reason and renunciation is utilized in order to affirm his subjectivity.

objectivity. In other words, a subject contains an element of objectivity in its unavoidable physicality, its very *thing*-ness, while an object can exist without a subjective element. As Adorno puts it:

An object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains something other than the subject, whereas a subject by its very nature is from the outset an object as well. Not even as an idea can we conceive a subject that is not an object; but we can conceive an object that is not a subject (ND, p. 183)

Human activity – both theoretically and practically – requires “something physical which consciousness does not exhaust, something conveyed to reason and qualitatively different from it” (ND, p. 229). Nature could be said to be a (partial) manifestation of this distinct otherness, since its objectivity routinely exceeds subjective attempts at achieving any complete conceptual ordering of it. Empirically, nature is not a fixed, chartable system. Rather, it is dynamic and constantly evolving. Meanwhile, conceptually, it eludes our grasp time and time again. Our knowledge of nature always remains, of necessity, incomplete. But the dichotomy of choices between dominating nature, on the one hand, or simply leaving it be, on the other, appears falsely posed, since neither option is easily achieved. To merely subordinate nature to the (socially determined) wants and desires of human beings is extremely problematic, as Adorno and Horkheimer fervently argue (and, on this point at least, deep ecologists would agree). Yet, equally problematic it would be to try to ignore, conceal or suppress humanity’s place, engagement and fundamental embeddedness in the natural world. Frequent recognition of this latter point is given by Adorno and Horkheimer, particularly in their references to humanity’s *Naturverfallenheit*.

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* contains numerous references to the disenchantment of nature and while this has prompted some commentators and activists to appropriate such comments in support of the ecological cause – calling for a

kind of 'return to nature' – such appropriations can only be cursory and unconvincing at best, and downright misleading at worst. Of course, there are numerous points at which Adorno and Horkheimer discuss the manipulation and domination of nature [*Naturbeherrschung*] at some length. However, there are two notable discrepancies between their account of *Naturbeherrschung* and that of the dominant ecological discourses. The first is that Adorno and Horkheimer formulate their ideas at the utmost abstract philosophical plane. When they discuss the domination of nature, it is without reference to concrete, practical examples such as one would find in an anthropological account. Their primary concern is with the forms of thought and reason that give rise to certain exploitative relations between subjects and objects, in addition to those between subjects and other subjects. The second divergence can be seen in the fact that, while critical of human exploitation and disenchantment of the natural world, at no point do Adorno and Horkheimer advocate a simple *re-enchantment* of nature as such.<sup>118</sup> To do so would be idealistic, unsophisticated and myopic, particularly in light of the ways in which organicist imagery and Romanticism have routinely been co-opted for the promotion of highly reactionary political goals, a fact of which the authors are only too aware.

Taking both of these discrepancies into account – (i) the abstract criticism of thought forms conducive to domination, and (ii) the rejection of a simplistic re-enchantment of nature – it would appear that Adorno is striving for a *re-conceptualization* of nature (and humanity's relation therewith) that neither hypostatizes humanity, on the one hand, nor nature, on the other. Indeed, Adorno has little patience with Romantic notions of a 'return to nature' that in ontologizing nature and deriding civilizational progress seek to reinstate a

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<sup>118</sup> This marks an important point within the dialectical conception of humanity and nature, which contrasts with the incessant inversion of hierarchies so representative of the deep and social ecology discourses, respectively. Indicative of this theoretical tug o' war, witness the following book titles: Morris Berman's *The Reenchantment of the World* (1981) and Murray Bookchin's *Re-enchanting Humanity* (1995b).



(mostly imagined) condition of organic unity, harmony, oneness, and so on. The thought of a prelapsarian 'natural' state in which human beings were perfectly at one and reconciled with nature is a delusion, and a potentially dangerous one at that. Adorno is well aware of this and duly avoids falling into such a position. Not only is there 'no way back', so to speak, but, moreover, there is no place to which we might return in any case. The idea of the 'origin' is, on Adorno's account, an ideological one that usually works in the service of the established order and those already in an ascendant position:

The category of the root, the origin, is a category of dominion. It confirms that a man ranks first because he was there first; it confirms the autochthon against the newcomer, the settler against the migrant. The origin – seductive because it will not be appeased by the derivative, by ideology – is itself an ideological principle (ND, p. 155)

Any re-conceptualization of nature, and humanity's place within it, then, has to begin with an acceptance that there is no original instantiation of reconciliation which can be simply duplicated, reinstated or relied upon as a guide. The dynamic aspect of such a re-conceptualization lies in the fact that we have to work with the existing conceptual frameworks but not be entirely bound to them. In this respect, Adorno's dialectical understanding of humanity-nature provides an important corrective to the leading ecological discourses which bind themselves to hypostatized categories – deep ecology to an *ecocentric* position that hypostatizes and exalts nature; social ecology to an *anthropocentric* position that hypostatizes and exalts humanity. Neither discourse gives much, if any, attention to the necessary mediation and co-determination of the human and the natural. This dialectical deficit constitutes the discourses' most notable limitations.

### 2.3 *Re-conceptualizing Nature*

At this stage, it is worthwhile further investigating this notion of a re-conceptualization of nature and what it might entail. To begin with, such a re-conceptualization should critically reflect upon the ways in which certain kinds of thinking and interacting (potentially or tendentially) foster relations of domination and instigate suffering. To this end, the important recurring theme of the *non-identical* within Adorno's philosophy takes on a central role. Regardless of whether or not the term itself is explicitly deployed, one senses throughout much of his work an almost impossibly acute sensitivity towards all manner of suffering, exclusion, forced assimilation, reductions of difference or otherness, the exilic condition, and suchlike (or, in more general terms, what is 'left over' from attempts to fully capture an object through conceptualization). The non-identical is Adorno's choice of phrase to refer to the irreducible residue that eludes consciousness; it stands for the irreconcilable distance or epistemological gap that remains between concept and object. In this sense, while Adorno clearly takes much influence from Hegel in terms of his understanding of mediation, when it comes to epistemology and respecting the non-identical Adorno follows Kant in invoking the idea of a 'block' to our knowledge of the objective world. Indeed, in his lecture series, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, Adorno claims:

This barrier [the block] prevents something which is deeply embedded in nature from behaving as if it were a transcendent category, utterly superior to nature. We may well say that the spirit that forgets that it is rooted in nature, and that consequently truly asserts its own absolute status, is committing an act of hubris that condemns it all the more to fall victim to its own roots in nature (KCPR, pp. 75-76)

There is, however, an important difference between the Kantian block and the Adornian gap, as it were. Where the Kantian *Ding-an-sich* appears static and

wholly independent in its sheer unknowability, the Adornian object, by contrast, stores up historical meaning within it and so avoids becoming “hypostatized, magically transformed into an invariant” (SO, p. 246).<sup>119</sup> As such, while a gap (or ‘*chorismos*’) will always pertain between subject and object, the extent of the separation will alter through the ongoing mediation between subject and object. Shifting subjective positions and contexts, as well as diverse and evolving meanings, uses and relations, are historically sedimented within the object. In light of this socio-historic compound of meanings, critical thought occurs:

The history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects [. . .] Cognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object (ND, p. 163)

Adorno’s appreciation of and sensitivity towards the irreducible gap between subject and object, or the remainder that exceeds subjective identification, that is, the non-identical, are in some respects hardly surprising given his many years in exile during the period of Nazi rule in Germany. But it is not only the brutality of *physical* and *human* forms of suffering that Adorno so aptly examines and criticizes. He also extends his critical insight to include suffering<sup>120</sup> of *non-physical* things (i.e. concepts and thought) and *non-human* material (i.e. natural objects). While there are perfectly good reasons why much attention is given to Adorno’s salient critiques of fascism and other forms of oppression and violence, I believe it will be useful to consider the ‘other side’, if you will, of Adorno’s critical theory, that is to say, the side which explores the potential damage and suffering inflicted upon *non-physical* and *non-human* objects, since it is arguable that both sides relate to and inform one another in a

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<sup>119</sup> I made a similar distinction in Chapter I in the discussion of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s respective understandings of the object within a constellational arrangement.

<sup>120</sup> If the term ‘suffering’ appears inappropriate to the discussion of the non-physical and non-human, then perhaps ‘deformation’ or ‘domination’ may be substituted to make the same point in less evocative language. Nicholas Joll gives an interesting account of these latter terms (see Joll, 2010).

number of key ways. Moreover, such an understanding of this element of Adorno's thinking will undoubtedly aid us in grasping his dialectical understanding of nature and humanity.

The following passage provides a useful starting point for defending the position that Adorno's critique of domination also applies to the non-physical and non-human realm:

Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation over that which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them (DE, p. 9)

The controversial dictator metaphor should not be read as mere hyperbole. Rather, it aptly exhibits the scope of Adorno's concern for *all* manner of domination and suffering. Some may feel uneasy at this and deem it misguided, anti-humanistic, or simply inappropriate to accord the same level of attention to the manipulation and domination of, say, an inanimate natural object, on the one hand, and that of real, physical, living beings, on the other. Of course, in Adorno's work ethical priority for human suffering is never in question. Yet, he is consistently wont to show just how an unbridled instrumental form of reason and conceptualization contributes to the perpetuation of suffering at both the human *and* non-human levels. The two elements cannot be disentangled, and, indeed, it is not farfetched to suggest that the ways in which we think about and interact with natural non-human objects are likely to have an impact on how we think about and interact with fellow human subjects. As such, it is clearly of ethical significance that we turn a critical eye to the modes of thought that predominate in a given time and place, as well as the suffering they might inflict.

What might it mean to say that natural objects ‘suffer’ in some sense? Suffering could be said to play a pivotal role within Adorno’s conception of truth, as he powerfully asserts in *Negative Dialectics*: “The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth” (ND, pp. 17-18). Of course, in the passage from which this quote is taken Adorno is specifically referring to the suffering of *subjects*. However, on the very next page his concern is more explicitly with *objects*:

While doing violence to the object of its syntheses, our thinking heeds a potential that waits in the object, and it unconsciously obeys the idea of making amends to the pieces for what it has done (ND, p. 19)

The uneasy sense of remorse that is aligned with this idea of ‘making amends’ betrays a strong *ethical* relation pertaining to thought and objects. It implies that in some way objects – though inanimate and always mediated – can be mediated in ways that are more or less damaging, stifling, domineering, and so forth, or in ways which are fundamentally or morally unjustifiable. Just as we always, to an extent, impose certain limitations upon subjects through the act of classification under general concepts, so we hasten the ignorance of sensuous particularities in relation to objects through the very same processes of identification. To speak of a tree *qua* tree implies the substitutability of one tree for any other. The particular objective instantiation becomes exemplary of a universal category. Such identitarian thinking – which Adorno refers to as “the mythological form of thought” (ND, p. 203) – plays an active role in instigating and perpetuating the domination of natural objects, as well as inhibiting what might be called an object’s spontaneous development.

This last point is important to clarify, for it could *prima facie* lend itself to precisely the sort of re-enchantment of the natural world we have previously dismissed. To be clear, Adorno is highly critical of reactionary environmentalist projects that merely call for unreflective reverence and awe in light of natural

objects, since such actions fail to acknowledge the necessary mediation of nature and humanity, and, furthermore, can actually be used in the service of perpetuating the extant domination of nature.<sup>121</sup> Adorno argues that “the question about nature as the absolute first, as the downright immediate” is delusive (ND, p. 359). Again, the issues here are around *development* and *mediation*. In thinking about natural objects in terms of development, we might say, following Jay Bernstein, that not only do our concepts of nature change over time, but that natural objects *themselves* change and develop in various ways (2001, p. 189). Indeed, Adorno denies the possibility of making any strict demarcation between human history, on the one hand, and natural history, on the other. To this end, he approvingly quotes Marx as follows:

We know only a single science, the science of history. History can be considered from two sides, divided into the history of nature and the history of mankind. Yet there is no separating the two sides; as long as men exist, natural and human history will qualify each other (cited in ND, p. 358)<sup>122</sup>

What can be conceptualized as nature develops with time and on account of subjective and historical mediation, just as the history of subjectivity is mediated through and through by nature. Yet, in the instrumentally rationalized world of modernity, a mistaken causal link is inferred from this development of nature and humanity, to the effect that human relations (in their current state) are seen to manifest a kind of ‘second nature’ deriving from the first. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that this mythification of existing relations comes about through enlightened thinking, which requires a strictly imposed division of labour in order to practically and rationally control nature.

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<sup>121</sup> Think of how national parks, zoos, bird sanctuaries, fenced-off hiking trails, and so on, appear to preserve the natural world ‘as it is’ but in actual fact routinely dominate nature, reducing it to the status of a museum piece for subjective contemplation. Moreover, that these ‘examples’ of ‘nature’ are preserved acts to conceal and perpetuate the domination of the natural world in every other realm of social activity: “Natural beauty is ideology where it serves to disguise mediatedness as immediacy [. . .] There is hardly anything left of it [nature] in organized tourism” (AT, pp. 89-90).

<sup>122</sup> This is a deleted passage that originally appeared in *The German Ideology*.

Without a strong hierarchical division of labour in place the control of nature would be less efficient and effective. As the motivation of our drive to control nature has its basis in self-preservation, to question the dominant enlightened methodology comes to be seen as irrational, naive, quaint or unreasonable: “Whoever resigns himself to life without any rational reference to self-preservation would, according to the Enlightenment [. . .] regress to prehistory” (DE, p. 29). In this way, enlightenment reverts to mythology, becoming unquestioning and dogmatic in its beliefs, practices and thought-forms, while enlightened social relations take on a false sense of naturalness, respectability and rationality. In order to break or at least challenge this spell or ‘second nature’, thought should attempt to redirect our focus towards the *mediation* between nature and humanity with a view to shifting the motivational foundations upon which so much of our practical activity is based (i.e. self-preservation). This does not mean ditching enlightenment thinking *in toto*, which some readings of Adorno might try to advocate as the logical conclusion of his arguments.<sup>123</sup> But rather it calls to attention the need to *enlighten* enlightenment, to use critical thinking *against* thought itself,<sup>124</sup> to re-inject into reason its most essential *critical* (and self-critical) faculties. In other words, to revitalize just those elements of reason which are often repressed in its instrumental application toward unquestioned ends.

We have said so far that the dialectical relationship between humanity and nature should neither be overlooked nor swept aside, for it introduces the important idea that objects not only ‘suffer’ (in my extended use of the term) but also contain within them a complex history, meaning and redemptive potential. It is my view that Adorno’s critical thought may provide us with

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<sup>123</sup> Indeed, this train of thought was propelled forward by Jürgen Habermas with the publication of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987).

<sup>124</sup> As Adorno later put it, philosophy “must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept” (ND, p. 15).

ways in which to re-conceptualize nature that would take mediation and development into account while retaining an openness and respect in relation to the preponderance of the object. This re-conceptualization, in my view, provides a necessary point of contrast to and criticism of the dominant ecological discourses – deep ecology and social ecology – both of which fail to adequately theorize the ongoing mediation between nature and human beings on account of which neither concept, that is, neither ‘nature’ nor ‘humanity’, can be defined statically.

I wish to now explore these issues further with reference to some of the enigmatic film works of Andrei Tarkovsky. It is my aim to show that, like Adorno’s critical theory, Tarkovsky’s filmic work presents us with a view of nature and humanity in which mutual constitution and dialectical mediation are essential and unavoidable. There is much in Tarkovsky’s work to promote and provoke a change in perspective, that is to say, a more open and non-violent understanding of the world and human beings’ place within it. Such a perspectival shift can provide a timely and more nuanced corrective to the fixed dualistic premises of contemporary ecological thought.



### 3. REFLECTIONS ON TARKOVSKY'S DIALECTIC OF HUMANITY AND NATURE

The complex interaction between nature and humanity is a recurrent theme throughout much of Adorno's thought, as previously examined, but it also finds aesthetic expression in much of the filmic work of Andrei Tarkovsky. The desire to reignite our understanding and recognition of the mediation between humanity and nature is pivotal for both Adorno, the critical theorist, and Tarkovsky, the artist. On further reflection, their respective approaches to this issue appear to productively complement one another, as I will argue presently, since both, in their own form, offer critical perspectives on overly instrumental relations between human beings and the natural world. What is more, Tarkovsky's films can be seen to avoid hypostatizing the dualistic split between humanity and nature, instead presenting the two as co-constituting, ever changing and irreducible. In this regard, his films follow Adorno's lead in avoiding the dual threat of anthropocentrism, on the one hand, and ecocentrism, on the other.

The extensive and varied use of imagery of the natural world in Tarkovsky's *oeuvre* has a range of effects, and cannot, or rather should not, be read in an overly simplistic manner. It would be easy to fall into the same position that characterizes some readings of Adorno whereby one cursorily concludes from the evocative images of nature that Tarkovsky is merely an ecologically aware artist – or even a 'deep ecologist' *avant la lettre* – who sees in the natural world a kind of pure, untainted harmony and peace that has been lost or progressively destroyed throughout the modern age. Indeed, this is precisely how the critic, Michael Dempsey, views Tarkovsky's work. In relation to the latter's complex semi-autobiographical film, *Mirror*, Dempsey observes a "deep longing for a state of Eden-before-the-Fall innocence and bliss" located in "exquisite images

of natural flux and flow" (1981, p. 15). Moreover, on Dempsey's account, Tarkovsky's films betray

a powerfully infectious belief in the natural world as the embodiment of a primal peace which we can regain. This vision of lost harmony is what haunts every aspect of Tarkovsky's work (1981, p. 13)

This broadly positive appraisal of Tarkovsky's supposed belief in the redemptive power of nature is given a far less positive rendering in the following comment from Fredric Jameson:

The deepest contradiction in Tarkovsky is [that of] [. . .] a valorization of nature without human technology achieved by the highest technology of the photographic apparatus itself. No reflexivity acknowledges this second hidden presence, thus threatening to transform Tarkovskian nature-mysticism into the sheerest ideology (1995, p. 100)<sup>125</sup>

Moreover, Jameson reiterates the prelapsarian interpretation offered by Dempsey, complaining that the director has transported the action to "a kind of pre-adolescent realm without sex or desire, before the forbidden fruit or the fall" (ibid., p. 93). Such views appear to be intuitively plausible, given the recurrence of representations of nature within the Russian film-maker's corpus. But, just as I believe that attempts to appropriate Adorno's work for the ecological cause are (at least in part) misguided and reductive, so too must we take care not to impose an overly simplistic (naturalistic) narrative onto Tarkovsky's films. The latter's ideas about nature are, like Adorno's, multifaceted and dialectical.

In this section, I will offer a reading of Tarkovsky's *Stalker* making use of the Adornian conception of nature presented hitherto, so as to explicate the manner

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<sup>125</sup> In this chapter I will be addressing the criticisms directed toward Tarkovsky's alleged 'nature-mysticism'. However, refer to Chapter II on 'Mimesis' for a refutation of the other part of Jameson's critique, namely, the idea that Tarkovsky's technique is non-reflexive and fails to acknowledge the 'second presence' (i.e. the photographic apparatus). In my view, this criticism is baseless and, somewhat surprisingly for a reader of Jameson's calibre, cursory.

in which film can contribute to the re-conceptualization of nature and further illuminate the dialectical mediation between human beings and the natural world (3.1). Related to and following on from this, I will undertake more thematic interpretations of Tarkovsky's work as a whole in relation to Adorno's idea of the remembrance of nature in the subject (3.2). Once again, such readings will contribute to the elucidation of the humanity-nature dialectic in contrast to the limited perspectives provided by the existing ecological discourses.

### 3.1 *Reading Stalker with Adorno*

In one of his later and best known films, *Stalker*, Tarkovsky's use of nature is more subtle and complex than either Dempsey's or Jameson's readings can accommodate. Loosely based on the novella, *Roadside Picnic* (first published in 1972), by the Strugatsky brothers, *Stalker* is set within an unspecified time and location in the not-too-distant future. From the opening sequences of the film, we sense that the atmosphere and appearance of the post-industrial (and possibly post-catastrophic) setting is stark, bleak, colourless and fractured. Near to this unidentified place there exists a forbidden region referred to simply as 'the Zone'. On account of its relative inaccessibility, the Zone has become the basis for the development of magic-inflected gossip and local folklore. The Stalker acts as an illegal guide for people wishing to visit the Zone, which attracts attention from curious punters aware of the rumour that somewhere within this mysterious area is a room that is said to contain powers capable of realizing one's innermost desires and wishes. In order to access the Zone one must – with the assistance of the Stalker – successfully navigate past the authorities, guardsmen and barbed wire that marshal the borders surrounding the forbidden region, in addition to avoiding the treacherous (yet invisible) dangers that will face them once in the Zone. The Stalker agrees to take two

men to the Zone: one simply referred to as 'Scientist', the other as 'Writer'.<sup>126</sup> Their reasons for embarking upon the risky venture to the Zone vary somewhat but they are not unrelated. The Writer is a heavy drinker and frequently exhibits disillusionment (with the world, his life, his work), self-doubt and self-contempt, a deep cynicism, as well as intolerance for all things metaphysical (at one key point, he says "No Gods, no goblins, no Bermuda Triangle"). Important to note here, however, is the impression that the Writer appears not at all comfortable in his radically cynical *Weltanschauung*, and in fact makes a habit of mocking the Scientist for the latter's dogmatic rationalism. The Scientist is similarly beyond metaphysics intellectually but has very little doubt as to the suitability and efficacy of his staunch pragmatism, rationality and materialism. His interest in the Zone appears to be more in keeping with that of a debunking exercise on behalf of science. Indeed, only later in the film do we discover that the Scientist's real motive for the visit is to plant a device that will destroy the Room once and for all.

After successfully managing to circumvent the border controls (and evading the guards' gunshots), the three men make their way towards the Zone on a small railroad trolley. After a dialogue-free four-minute collection of close-ups interspersed with glimpses of the scenery and background charting the group's journey, the Stalker brings the trolley to a halt. Accompanying a cut to the Zone, the stark black and white tones of the film's opening thirty-seven minutes give way to an abundance of colour. The layered greens of the foliage leap out at us after the extended use of black and white, affecting a distinct shift in mood and perspective. This shift may *prima facie* lend support to the interpretation that holds nature as 'other', in other words, an immediate haven of primal peace and tranquillity, an untainted repository of colours that are wholly absent from

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<sup>126</sup> Tarkovsky has stated that both characters, while not *merely* intellectual ciphers, as it were, can be seen to represent prevalent personality types within the modern, enlightened world.

the urban (post-) industrial habitat of late modernity so aptly represented in the initial images of and scenes set within the border town. Yet, on a closer reading, the idea of nature-as-redemptive-other (or, as argued against previously, nature-as-non-identity) becomes problematic, and one notices the various subtleties that lie within Tarkovsky's particular depiction of nature amid the Zone.

The initial visceral reaction we experience upon first glimpsing the Zone is a result of the (newly introduced) *colour*, and not to the scenery being depicted on screen. It is the *form* of the representation rather than any specific representative content that brings about the strong reaction. Indeed, one could argue that the effects would have been replicated whatever the contents of the shot in question. From what is depicted of the Zone, it does not appear to be typically breathtaking or outstanding in its beauty, certainly if considered along the traditional (Romantic) trajectories of natural beauty within aesthetic theory. Rather, what is shown consists of a landscape that is ragged, overgrown, uneven, an assemblage of degeneration and regeneration. There are rusting vehicles (including jeeps and tanks) amid the shrubs, long grass and crumbling walls, as well as broken telephone terminals and disused observation posts. It is also quite possible that the Zone contains vestigial elements of radioactivity.<sup>127</sup> And, of course, there is the enigmatic dilapidated building ('the Room') that the three characters eventually discover with the hope that their desires will be realized. The composition of Tarkovsky's arresting images – both beautiful and dissonant – aptly hold up Adorno's claim that an artwork's authenticity is guaranteed through its "[s]cars of damage and disruption", through which "art desperately negates the closed confines of the ever-same; explosion is one of its invariants" (AT, p. 29). Thus, a more open world of meaning is disclosed,

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<sup>127</sup> In the original story by the Strugatsky brothers, the Zones (plural) were brought about as a result of brief alien landings which left behind radioactive debris. Tarkovsky gives no clear indications as to the origins of the Zone in the film.

hinting towards what is routinely excluded from or not even acknowledged in established understandings of social 'reality' and 'nature'.

One of the most memorable scenes in the film consists of a long take dream sequence of the Stalker, in which the camera slowly and serenely tracks, or almost floats, above a shallow stream containing a number of objects. These include pieces of rusting metal (a spring, gun, tin boxes), some goldfish, a syringe, deteriorating photographs, a broken icon, coins, artillery, as well as other unidentifiable matter. Significantly, this scene is presented in sepia tones, evoking not only the obvious sense of remembrance and loss, but also (re)igniting a feeling of connectedness and socio-historical awareness. I would argue that in this shot we see Tarkovsky's (and, for that matter, Adorno's) dialectic of nature and humanity represented. As I noted earlier, there is a sense of ambiguity in the varied interactions of nature with humanity, inasmuch as they are neither wholly positive nor negative. The Stalker's dream sequence subtly recalls this ambiguity as we see how the misty natural water in the stream has not been unaffected by human interaction, just as the human constructions immersed in the water have not remained unaltered. In some cases, the water has rusted and decayed the objects, while in other instances it has cleansed the various items, rejuvenating their colour, form and appearance.<sup>128</sup>

The mediation is communicated through the physical interaction of the natural elements and manmade constructs over time. We cannot separate the natural world from our human activity, needs, wants and desires. These things

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<sup>128</sup> In an interview, Tarkovsky made clear his fondness for the cinematic qualities of water: "Water lives, it has a depth, it moves, it changes, it can be as reflective as a mirror, one can drown within it, one can drink it, one can wash oneself with it, etc." (Tarkovsky & Gianvito, 2006, p. 182). Similarly, the director's use of fire is always to show its ambiguity. While it can provide light, warmth, succour and symbolic value, fire can also be a terrorizing cause of destruction (as seen in, for instance, the burning of the house in *The Sacrifice*, or the dacha ablaze in *Mirror*).

intertwine and evolve over time. This intertwinement and evolution recalls the idea of natural-history, the co-determination of nature and the historical, the former in the latter, and vice versa.

Tarkovsky's *Stalker* can be read as an extension of what I have called the re-conceptualization of nature. Through its gentle and uncompromisingly slow pace, form, and unfolding imagery, the film allows us to view nature as something dynamic, mediated, enigmatic; something of which we are irreducibly a part, but to which we cannot be reduced. Tarkovsky's work, like Adorno's theory, refuses to fall into the simplistic dichotomy of nature (good and pure) and humanity (bad and impure). Nature as reflected in Tarkovsky's lens is complex – a sign of life and death, decay and renewal, destruction and construction. Following an Adornian line, as with all conceptual thought, attempts to define 'nature' as *this* or *that* will be partial and incomplete as our concepts come up against the limits of their application in the overflowing objectivity of the material. This gap between thought and its object is nothing other than *mediation*. The foremost experience of such mediation may be said to consist in human beings' relations with the natural environment that surrounds them. In our contemporary context, these relations are obscured or neglected as the forms of social life become increasingly reified. For Adorno, reification always entails a kind of forgetting. In the reification and domination of nature, the naturalness of human subjects is forgotten, while the utter contingency of the reifying social relations themselves is naturalized.

### 3.2 *The Remembrance of Nature*

In both *Solaris* and *Stalker*, Tarkovsky foregrounds the scientific obsession of an unencumbered 'progress' and enlightenment through his central characters. *Solaris* features a group of three scientists aboard a space-station, while *Stalker*

features a character simply referred to as ‘Scientist’ (or sometimes ‘Professor’, depending on the print). In both films, the scientific mindset appears as not only rational, methodical, unaffected by emotional, spiritual or religious sentiment, but also as unyielding, cold, anti-metaphysical and fearful of the unknown. Recall that, in *Stalker*, the Scientist plans to destroy the Room within the Zone, meanwhile one of the scientists in *Solaris*, Sartorius, explains to Kelvin that his ‘wife’, Hari, is just a synthetic copy created by the mysterious Ocean out of his own memories of her, and as such she could be destroyed.<sup>129</sup> In both films, Tarkovsky reflects Adornian concerns, portraying the unquestioned enlightenment rationality as dangerous and, ultimately, detrimental to the very purposes for which it ostensibly developed, namely, self-preservation.

In *Stalker*, what the Zone stands for may be best understood as the objective, natural conditions of existence, that is, the inescapable materiality in and of which our human lives are composed. The Stalker’s wariness of the environment’s powers and sensitivity may well be exaggerated, but it is borne out of a respect for the preponderance of nature. In doing so, the Stalker – like many of Tarkovsky’s characters – attests to, what Adorno refers to as, the ‘remembrance of nature’ [*Eingedenken der Natur*] in the subject. As noted previously, humans are a *part* of nature, but not *reducible* to nature. By the same token, human beings cannot extricate themselves entirely from nature either. It is not possible for a human to be completely *de-naturalized* as such. While reason allows us to rise above basic natural instincts and create institutions, social orders, values, traditions, art, and so on, reason must also (if it is not to become reified or instrumental) allow for reflection on and recollection of our very naturalness. Human beings are neither ‘mere nature’ [*blosse Natur*] nor wholly other to nature; therein lies the necessity of mediation.

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<sup>129</sup> Elsewhere, Sartorius reinstates the predominant scientific method: “Man was created by Nature in order to explore it. As he approaches Truth he is fated to Knowledge. All the rest is bullshit”.



As Adorno and Horkheimer write, critical, self-reflecting thought

allows the distance [between humanity and nature] perpetuating injustice to be measured. By virtue of the remembrance of nature in the subject, in whose fulfilment the unacknowledged truth of all culture lies hidden, enlightenment is universally opposed to domination (DE, p. 40)

Enlightenment, then, so often aligned with the scientific method of debunking myth and hastening the progression of humankind, is perhaps better geared towards achieving its overarching and commendable aim of universal emancipation by avoiding an unquestioning domination of the natural, non-human world, and instead retaining a certain humility, self-awareness and openness to otherness. Absent the remembrance of nature in the subject, enlightenment reverts to its opposite – a new dogmatism, exalting the human being severed from nature for the purposes of uncritical ‘progress’.

This dynamic between nature and humanity, as well as the remembrance of nature in the subject, are recurring motifs in the work of Tarkovsky. There are numerous moments in his films which reflect humanity’s urge to transcend its natural limitations, to escape from the brute matter of existence. One thinks of the opening dream sequence in *Ivan’s Childhood*, where the camera (representative of Ivan’s POV) soars through and eventually above the trees. Or, in *Andrei Rublëv*, the opening scene shows Yefim hanging on to a primitive hot air balloon in order to ‘fly’ above the crowds of people and animals. In *Solaris*, Kelvin is preparing to leave this earth entirely to conduct research on a space-station. Meanwhile, there are at least three levitation scenes in Tarkovsky’s oeuvre – in *Solaris*, *Mirror*, and *The Sacrifice*, respectively. Yet, while he is evidently not averse to acknowledging this all-too-human desire for transcendence, Tarkovsky never gives in to it, or, rather, he does not allow it to take precedence over the natural world. When characters experience significant moments of recognition, spiritual (re)awakening, reunion, and so forth, these

occur firmly within the material conditions of immanence. People look to the earth, not the skies, for epiphanic inspiration. Ivan's dream flight ends and he is shown happily running along a path through the forest, shortly before waking up in the bleak, harsh and dark surroundings of his war-torn reality. Yefim's balloon flight ends in a crash landing, a sharp return to earthly existence. When Kelvin goes to the space-station, he takes some soil with him in a box. Also, recall once again the *Stalker's* dream sequence: despite the recitations of extracts from the Apocalypse during the scene, the central visual focus is *material*, namely, the various objects in, and elements of, the shallow stream. In this scene, as in many others, the natural and the humanly constructed inexorably intertwine.

Tarkovsky's overarching sensibility is towards our immanent world, and for all the spirituality imbued in his films, it is always to be found in reconciliation between human beings and nature, and not between humanity and God. Robert Bird shares in this view, when he writes:

[Tarkovsky] treasured the security of standing firmly on the earth – in social and professional systems, in aesthetic and spiritual tradition, and in the spaces of home and nature (2008, pp. 222-223)

This 'materialist' reading, I believe, offers a more interesting and relevant interpretive avenue than those afforded by predominant religious interpretations of his work – in particular, *Stalker*.<sup>130</sup> As Mark Le Fanu notes, if Tarkovsky is "friendly to the idea of religion and miracles [. . .] the ethical significance of life is still to be found in the concrete ordeals of experience" (1987, p. 98). Furthermore, in *Stalker*, allusions to the supposed manifold dangers and mysterious powers within the mythically-charged 'Zone' turn out,

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<sup>130</sup> Cf. Jameson's uncharitable summation: "This novel [*Roadside Picnic*] Tarkovsky made over into the most lugubrious religious fable" whose protagonist exudes an intolerable "drearly suffering Christ-like solemnity" (1995, p. 92).

ultimately, to be unsubstantiated. Throughout the entire film nothing supernatural or beyond material explanation actually occurs.<sup>131</sup>

This surprising negation of overt supernaturalism is true of Tarkovsky's work as a whole. As is well highlighted in Chris Marker's documentary on Tarkovsky, entitled *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich*, even the angles of the director's shots are ordinarily constituted so as to produce a slight downward-looking perspective, as if from above the subject gazing toward the earth, rather than from below the subject looking towards the sky as was the standard mainstream technique of the time (Marker, 1999). Once again, the material rootedness of Tarkovsky's figures in their natural world is communicated not only through the content of the frame but also via the formal construction of the shot. Throughout his oeuvre, Tarkovsky's demanding approach to his projects is such that the actors are deprived of the usual supports – such as detailed character histories, psychological information, narrative progressions, not to mention the technical conventions of shots/reverse-shots and close-ups – which normally serve to foreground the character on screen and focus (and, in a sense, *limit*) the spectator's concentration to certain ways of seeing.

Utilizing the full scope of his cinematic eye, Tarkovsky will often seek to fully situate people in their objective surroundings, creating images with a coherence and density that not only recognizes but celebrates the inextricable mediation between humanity and nature. One can think here of Boriska in *Andrei Rublëv*, lying on his back amid the mud and pouring rain, taking the wet earth into his

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<sup>131</sup> There is much debate over and ambiguity in the final scenes of the film which shows the Stalker's previously disabled daughter appearing to walk across the room, before the camera pans out to reveal that she is actually sat upon her father's shoulders. Shortly after this, she is shown sat at a table on which lay three glasses. She stares at them intently and, in an apparent feat of telekinesis, the glasses move. However, we shortly hear the rumblings of a passing freight train (in a reprise of the opening scene of the film in which a glass of water is disturbed by a train's vibrations), thereby destabilizing any notions of the supernatural and leaving us uncertain as to the cause of the glasses' movements.

hands and embracing it. Elsewhere in the same film, pagan couples take themselves deep into the foliage to copulate. In *Stalker*, the eponymous guide, on more than one occasion, almost sinks into the natural surroundings of the Zone, first lying face down on the boggy ground, and, again, among the tall overgrown grass. In the opening scene to *Solaris*, after a slow moving series of close-up shots of a pond, we first see Kelvin enveloped by the lush vegetation near to his family home. Notably, as he walks through the forest from left to right on screen, the camera gently pans in mimicry of Kelvin's walk until our view of the protagonist is obscured briefly by a tree trunk in mid-shot. We expect Kelvin to duly re-enter the frame at the other side of the trunk, but instead a few extra seconds pass and he reappears much further to the right of screen and seemingly out of the bushes. This perhaps can be seen as reflecting the director's tendency to reject the conventional positioning of the subject over against the objective surroundings. In this unexpected repositioning, Tarkovsky reminds us that the entire frame is made up of richly diverse and meaningful matter. Indeed, it is fair to say that landscapes in and of themselves play active roles in Tarkovsky's films,<sup>132</sup> while the actors (and the characters they portray) are usually treated as just another part of the landscape. In *Mirror*, as Synessios also notes, nature is "not a backdrop, but the protagonist" (2001, p. 65). Once more, then, the dialectic of nature and humanity is played out in Tarkovsky's aesthetic form. In such works, human beings are neither extricated from nature and exalted as eternally superior, nor subsumed under an all-powerful and utterly external nature. Both nature and humanity feed into one another, each co-determining its other to the point at which their independence and isolation are replaced by interdependence and mediation. If ecological thinking today can be enhanced and released from its hierarchical inversions, dichotomous

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<sup>132</sup> In *Solaris*, of course, this is more pronounced due to the creative powers of the Ocean, which apparently gives life to subconscious desires based within the memories of the space-station's occupants. While the idea of this semi-conscious Ocean lends the film its 'science-fiction' credentials, at the same time it reminds us that our own world is itself unfathomably creative and life-giving.

thought patterns, and disciplinary impasse, the dialectical understanding as evidenced in Adorno's critical theory and Tarkovsky's films can go some considerable way towards achieving this end.

### SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have examined two leading ecological discourses in deep ecology and social ecology, and found them wanting on a number of issues. The main problem was shown to consist in their limited acknowledgement of the mediation between humanity and nature, which leads both discourses to hypostatize categories and hierarchically posit one as superior to the other. I offered a reading of Adorno's critical theory with particular attention given to his dialectical conception of nature, arguing that this may serve as a corrective to the shortcomings of deep ecology and social ecology. Throughout the chapter, I have tried to demonstrate how Adorno criticizes the instrumental forms which reason has taken, and the forms through which he argues for a critical awareness of the dialectical mediation between humanity and nature. Such a shift in attitudes toward ourselves, others and (both internal and external) nature, I argued, could be glimpsed in Adorno's critical theory and certain moments within the filmic work of Andrei Tarkovsky. Central to both their respective approaches is a concern with the detrimental effects of an unbridled instrumental rationality on not only intersubjective relations between human beings, but also those relations between human subjects and natural objects. The pre-eminence of instrumental reason, powering forward under the ideological banner of legitimacy provided by the originary drive for human self-preservation, allows for an unparalleled domination of nature, which for Adorno cannot be neatly separated from its potential to transpose into the domination of some human beings over others. As such, it is the duty of critical thought to work against instrumentalization, both in the practical realm and its

theoretical counterpart. My contention is that Adornian theory and Tarkovsky's films effectively illuminate the mediation of nature and humanity. In this effort, both work towards enhancing our interactions with and understandings of both inner and outer nature.

# CONCLUSION

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To conclude this study of Adornian theory and film, I will offer brief reviews of the arguments presented, before remarking on the current social and political climate in and out of which the arguments have been formulated. In the first chapter, I sought to survey the terrain covered by some of the most prominent readings of Adorno and highlight the possible limitations such readings reveal. The primary shortcoming of existing commentary was found to consist in the search for, or active construction of, a single coherent 'Adorno', through which the various transitions, contradictions, tensions, and so on, were interpretively smoothed over or explained away. In contrast to such approaches, I argued for the necessity of maintaining the dialectical movement and forces within Adorno's thought, focusing on particular concepts and themes in his work as opposed to erecting a monolithic theoretical edifice.

The chapter then moved on to analyze and criticize the disciplinary divide between political economy and cultural studies, whose conflicting methodological approaches towards cultural objects were shown to be inadequate. While theorists of political economy routinely treat culture as epiphenomenal to the marketplace and overlook its symbolic value, those of cultural studies overemphasize the polysemic meanings, appropriations and experiences of cultural objects by diverse consumers giving insufficient attention to the significant influence of productive forces and ownership. The absence of any serious consideration of Adornian theory in both camps was shown to be regrettable, since his notion of dialectical cultural criticism offers a contrasting and more nuanced alternative to the prevailing techniques

deployed by both political economy, on the one hand, and cultural studies, on the other. By both participating and not participating in culture, the critical theoretical approach engages enough so as to understand the motivational, economic, productive and distributive factors that go into the making and dissemination of certain cultural artefacts, but not so much as to become affirmative or over-optimistic with regard to culture's emancipatory or democratizing potential. Once again, this tension in Adorno's cultural criticism – the dialectic of participation and non-participation – can be seen as productive rather than hampering, and as such, so I argued, should be upheld rather than resolved.

The opening chapter closed with an examination of Adorno's position on film, and an attempt to defend the applicability of his critical theory to filmic works. The ontologized (negative) conception of film evident throughout the vast majority of Adorno's texts was shown to be one of the most notable lacunae in his oeuvre. Misconstruing the contingent cinematic forms that had developed in his lifetime as ontologically dictated by film *per se*, Adorno uncharacteristically failed to appreciate the social and political conditions that had brought about the development of film in such limited studio-led directions. Only in 1966 did Adorno officially moderate his views on film, and even then not without qualification (see TF). Nevertheless, I went on to argue that there is no reason to restrict the application of Adornian categories to only those aesthetic realms of which he overtly approved, particularly since critical theory – more so than other forms of thinking – maintains a resolute awareness of its own contextual embeddedness, entwinement and partiality. Thus, to rigidify a theoretical position, as an insect seized in amber, is to diminish its movement and potential. As such, it was deemed necessary to find new configurations for the chosen concepts within Adorno's work, to reignite their critical spark, and film provided an appropriate means through which to do so, for not only were



Adornian concepts shown to be valuable in the interpretation and analysis of filmic artworks, but the latter were also found to helpfully illuminate the former.

The second chapter of the thesis reconsidered and attempted to defend the intriguing if difficult concept of *mimesis*. I began with an analysis of the various deployments of mimesis in Adorno's thought, with particular attention to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In that text, Adorno and Horkheimer offer a quasi-anthropological account of the development of the subject and reason in relation to mimesis. The first phase of mimesis, the archaic, was characterized by the rigid imitation of brute nature in order for human beings to (nominally) escape nature's unpredictable and uncontrollable threats. Archaic mimesis represents simple adaptation, whereas the second phase, the magical, marks a development in the emerging subject as 'organized control' (fledgling forms of rationality) show themselves in repeated rituals and sacrificial practices undertaken with the aim of adapting and bending (if not entirely controlling) nature toward particular human interests. The final and ongoing phase of mimesis has culminated in the latter's suppression amid industrial modes of production that prohibit as violent regression any residue of mimetic comportment. Nature is rationally controlled and the natural foundation of the self is systematically forgotten. Self-preservation moves toward self-renunciation as the absolute split between rationality and mimesis is hypostatized, with the former banishing the latter to a position of not mere irrelevance but pre-civilized savagery.

In the next part of the chapter, this rigid division between rationality and mimesis was shown to be replicated (somewhat surprisingly) in the seminal and paradigm-shifting work of Jürgen Habermas, whose 'communicative turn' has contributed significantly to the banishment of mimesis from recent critical

theoretical discourse. For Habermas, the existing forms of reason and enlightenment are sufficient means through which subjects can effectively communicate and construct arguments. As such, by Habermas' account, there is no need to have recourse to mystical, pre-rational (or irrational), ineffable concepts such as mimesis. These mere impulses, or 'others' of reason, wrongly divert our attention from the gradual and progressive unfolding of modernity and enlightenment which, for Habermas, remain valid if unfinished projects. In trying to fashion an Adornian response to the communicative paradigm of intersubjectivity, I went on to defend the 'preponderance of the object' as a crucial element of a critical materialism that rejects the positing of a transcendental subject over against objects. Adorno's more modest construal of subjective powers of cognition points the way toward a greater reflexivity in consciousness, which is to say that in order to fully realize itself the subject should reconnect with and give itself over to the object. In so doing, the subject does not fall into the traps associated with hypostatizing itself *qua* subject, while the object remains freer from domination within such a relation. The survival of mimesis feeds into subjective experiences with nature and art, whereby non-conceptual affinities arise between things (both produced, that is, as artifice, and natural).

The final section of the chapter continued the defence of mimesis through analyses of Tarkovsky's filmic work, which I argued displayed a distinctive mimetic method. In both form and content, Tarkovsky's work enacts the kind of assimilation to the object that characterizes the non-violent practice of mimetic comportment. Rather than unreflectively embracing new technological innovations and ever increasing possibilities of the apparatus at his disposal, Tarkovsky instead follows the contours, tempi and rhythms of the filmed material itself. Yet, this is not to view the artist's job as simple reproduction of 'reality', since the cinematic image is the result also of rational construction by

the subject. The mimetic moment occurs amid the complex relations between the rational (subjective) arrangements of (objective) material, all the while retaining the priority of the latter. A result of such mimetic technique in film is a form of non-conceptual, non-linguistic, and, one could even say, constellational communication, which is neither irrational nor fully communicable via existing pragmatic-linguistic categories. The mimetic method was finally also shown to inhere in the act of viewing Tarkovsky's films, inasmuch as one has to assimilate to the cultural object rather than impose subjective frameworks and conceptual systems onto the object. Through interpretation of Adorno's theory and Tarkovsky's films, my aim was to challenge the dominant Habermasian communicative paradigm and reconsider the critical potential within the concept of mimesis.

In the third chapter, I sought to defend a position of marginality as conducive to social critique through an analysis of Adorno's theoretical work and Haneke's filmic work. The first half of the chapter looked at the totalizing macro-level criticism that occurs in the renderings of late capitalist society found in both Adorno and Haneke. In contrast to many readings that put psychological categories on a par with social ones in the context of the development of critical theory, I argued for an anti-psychological interpretation of Adornian theory by emphasizing the prioritization of society (i.e. objective conditions) in his work. What became of psychoanalysis, for Adorno, was seen to be nothing but therapeutic practices that indefensibly aided the individual in adapting to and becoming increasingly 'functional' within a false social world: "In adjusting to the mad whole the cured patient becomes really sick" (SP1, p. 78). This movement against the explanatory concepts of psychology and psychoanalysis was also found in the filmic works of Haneke, whose visions of anonymous capitalist societies, and unremarkable and interchangeable characters, testify to the predominance of objective social forces reducing

individuals to functional parts in a systemic machine. When certain characters in his films subvert societal forces in some way – usually through a violent transgression or senseless lashing out – Haneke refuses to offer the conventional psychological apparatuses with which viewers normally comprehend such events. When confronted with such shocking and unrelenting coldness on screen, the viewer is tempted to look towards individual biography or psychic abnormality in order to cognitively absorb the shock. Instead, the social criticism of Adorno and Haneke forces us to accept the systemic nature and causes of violence (not only physical but psychical, and against both the self and others).

After defending an anti-psychological reading of Adorno and Haneke, I went on to note the ostensible disappearance of a collective revolutionary subject and how this features in Adorno's critical theory. In contrast to traditional Marxist teleological trajectories, Adorno countenances no hope for substantive social transformation through the rousing of class-consciousness. Late capitalist society is materially reproduced through not only unification but also fragmentation, such that individuals are cast into the role of antagonistic atoms, each imbued with the inconsistencies, contradictions and tensions characteristic of the social world as a whole. Having noted this apparent lack of a collective subject, the chapter then turned to consider the possibility of a *marginal subjectivity* that might provide a critical distance from societal forces and facilitate critique of the latter. The first argument for a marginal position was made with regard to estrangement. My contention was that in order for one to adopt a critical standpoint in relation to existing society, it is necessary to become estranged from its prevailing norms, demands, behaviours, products, and so on. Estrangement was differentiated from alienation, since the latter invokes a notion of absolute otherness or externality, whereas estrangement denotes a gradual process through which something once familiar becomes de-

familiarized. This distinction was shown to be crucial, for too great a distance from the social world negates the motivational forces that provoked recognition of the necessity of undertaking critique in the first place, while too great a proximity binds one to extant practices and forms of thought such that the potential for critical reflection is hugely diminished. Estrangement, then, is conducive to a marginal position whereby one is neither entirely *inside* nor *outside* society. The critical subjectivity advocated throughout the chapter is a liminal figure, like Simmel's 'Stranger', whose social proximity is optimal for the possibility of effective critique. The marginal perspective, as neither wholly faithful nor completely alien to social phenomena, allows for the prospect of estranging our common, everyday surroundings, finding them to be no longer one's own.

The third chapter closed with an exploration of what I called conscious unhappiness and the dialectic of bourgeois coldness. The marginal subjectivity provides the conditions for recognizing and intimately knowing the socially produced and pre-approved forms of 'happiness', while retaining enough distance to be properly critical of them. In opposition to readings of Adorno that try to draw upon an ethic of care or love in opposition to the prescribed indifference and coldness of society, my argument held that both Adorno and Haneke can be said to utilize this socially induced coldness as a means of rigorously criticizing the ersatz comforts and false instances of love so prevalent amid the present. The coldness demanded for survival today not only inevitably turns in on itself, but also towards the hollow offerings of commodified catharsis that are meant to temper or restrict coldness to the market. I argued that running through the social critique of Adorno's theory and Haneke's filmic work one senses both the inescapability of coldness *and* the possibility of its dialectical overcoming [*aufhebung*] which would bring coldness to full "consciousness of itself, of the reasons why it arose" (EAA, p. 202).

The final chapter examined the shortcomings in existing ecological discourses, and moved to defend an Adornian account of the dialectical mediation between humanity and nature. To make the argument, I began by looking at two prominent discourses in ecological thought, namely, deep ecology and social ecology. Recall that deep ecology adopts an ecocentric approach that counts biospheric equality as one of its primary tenets. The 'self-realization' advocated by Arne Naess (usually accredited as the founding thinker of deep ecology) entails an expanded notion of 'Self' that would encompass the unfathomable interrelations between the individual being and all the cosmos. As a result of this complex co-constitution and diversity of the biosphere, human beings are given no precedence in the deep ecology discourse. This culminates in one of its most unpalatable conclusions, namely, that due to its advocacy of biospheric egalitarianism deep ecology offers no justifiable grounds for human intervention to prevent, say, the breakout of a deadly virus. This irrational adherence to such an extreme and self-destructive ecocentric position was shown to be inverted in the discourse of social ecology. In contrast to deep ecology, *social* ecology (which Murray Bookchin is usually given as instituting) restores the species *homo sapiens* to the position of primacy within evolutionary progress. The results of this inversion – from an ecocentric to an anthropocentric perspective – were shown to be just as problematic, for while social ecology takes hierarchical relations to be the leading cause of domineering relations towards the natural world, hierarchy appears to slip back into the discourse in its placing of humanity at the pinnacle of evolutionary development. This argument was shown to lapse into an anthropocentric teleology whose falsity becomes only too apparent when one recalls the necessary incompleteness of evolution, the fact that it is a never-ending process.

In response to the noted shortcomings of both deep ecology and social ecology, respectively, the chapter then sought to offer an analysis of Adorno's dialectical conception of nature. The first section looked at Adorno's early speech on the idea of natural history, which argued for a more dialectical understanding of both categories in contrast to any position that would posit either one as an ontological first principle. For Adorno, nature is historical to the extent that it is comprehended and acted upon in concrete, contingent circumstances, yet, at the same time, this historical and material context cannot exist outside of nature: hence, the need for a more expansive conception of *Naturgeschichte*. Following on from this, I returned to the issue of self-preservation and considered its relation to the onset of the dualism between nature, on the one hand, and humanity, on the other. The instinct of self-preservation was shown to originate in the species' fear of the unpredictable and uncontrollable threats posed by brute nature. This split between human being and nature finds expression in acts of self-preservation which ultimately turn into acts of self-renunciation, as that which would be worth saving in the first place is routinely destroyed or suppressed: "As soon as man discards his awareness that he himself is [a part of] nature, all the aims for which he keeps himself alive are nullified" (DE, p. 54).

My reading of the nature-humanity dualism brought our attention back to the materialist core in Adorno's thinking, which can be found in, firstly, the thesis of the 'preponderance of the object', and, secondly, in respect of the 'non-identical'. These two elements of Adornian theory feed into the dialectical conception of nature, since the latter stands as not only the objective realm by which subjects are asymmetrically co-determined, but also as the irreducibly non-identical, that is, the material excess that cannot be fully exhausted by conceptual thought. Just as human beings are a part of nature but not reducible to nature, so nature must be understood as surpassing our paltry

conceptualizations, incapable as the latter prove to be in trying to adequately capture the dynamic movements, mutations and develops of the natural world, of which we are nevertheless a constituent part. This intertwinement of humanity and nature marks the properly dialectical perspective of which Adorno was, in my view, a leading proponent.

The last section of the chapter was given to a consideration of Tarkovsky's films in further support of the position outlined in my reading of Adorno. In contrast to prominent interpretations of Tarkovsky's work, which locate in his imagery a valorization of nature as a lost place of primal peace, I argued that his films engage the dialectical mediation between humanity and nature in a manner which attests to their mutual determination. Through a reading of *Stalker*, highlighting the numerous scenes in which nature is portrayed with due appreciation of its diverse relations with humanly produced objects, I demonstrated how Tarkovsky's form and content stands as an aesthetic complement to Adornian theory and the latter's understanding of the natural world. Tarkovsky, like Adorno, refuses to fall into the simplistic dichotomy of nature (good and pure) and humanity (bad and impure). The nature reflected in Tarkovsky's lens is complex, a sign of life and death, decay and renewal, destruction and construction. Maintaining and respecting the tensions and complexities within nature is to speak against domineering conceptualizations that serve to reify objects (both natural and artificial). Tarkovsky's films exhibit a critique of unencumbered enlightenment and scientific rationality, combined with a repositioning of the objective world as taking precedence over humanity, while not reducing the latter to mere nature. Instead, I argued, Tarkovsky's works recall the natural-history bound up in human existence. Remnants of such natural-history are scattered among, and sedimented in, the objects presented within the Tarkovsky's expansive and mimetically-led cinematic frame, reminding the viewer of her much-maligned and suppressed origins in



nature. Human beings are neither mere nature nor wholly other to nature, and therein lies the basis of the inextricable mediation between them.

Having recapped some of the major ideas put forward in each chapter, I wish to now bring the thesis to a close by commenting on the broader contemporary social and political conditions, as well as drawing out some overarching themes of the thesis which, although not made explicit until now, can be seen to connect and unite the chapters in all their diversity of subject matter.

We live within an age and society in which it appears more 'rational' to conform and adapt to prevailing modes of behaviour than to rebel against them. The pervasiveness of this rationality of adaptation is such that it seeps into every area of the social world. Efficient marketing executives utilize their trawling demographic networks that leave no-one unprocessed, unidentified, uncategorized. Any activity, whether individual or communal, that is not directly and demonstrably quantifiable (usually in economic terms) is looked upon with suspicion, derision or bemusement. Individuals are now cast as isolated atoms, of which the 'social' is merely an agglomeration. Such perspectives significantly shape the recent discourses of politics, education, healthcare, employment, crime, economics, and more besides. The horizons of the contemporary political imagination are lamentably limited by the tacit (if not covertly coerced) consent of subjects for whom there seems to be no alternative to the way things are. Any attempted resistance or conscious maladjustment to the status quo will be confronted with, what we might term, diagnostic neutralization, whereby such 'aberrant' subjects are seen as merely suffering from some sort of pathology, abnormality, or an irrational and paranoiac aversion to something so 'obviously' benign. In order to be rid of such hindering pathologies, so the current ideology advises, one need only submit to the comfort and relief afforded by the endless procession of

commodities on offer. The “injunction to enjoy”, to adopt Žižek’s apposite phrase (2006, p. 310), is built in to the consumer mindset. To be overly concerned with massive (and rising) social inequalities – both at the national and international level – is to somehow fail as a consumer and to become voluntarily ostracized in the process. Thus, the irrational accumulation of evermore commodities of negligible value has become almost entirely rationalized.

This deplorable state of affairs demands thoughtful and critical responses from those who remain not entirely engulfed by the irrational. Honouring my initial motivation of wanting to draw out the relevance and potential of Adorno’s work, in this thesis I have sought to contribute to these much needed critical responses to the woeful existent. My search for crucial insights has entailed revisiting, taking up and defending certain themes and concepts within Adornian theory. Undertaking such a task required rejecting the view that the relevance and potential of Adorno can be presumed from the outset on account of his standing as a major thinker of the twentieth century. As any critical theorist worthy of the name must acknowledge, ideas cannot be analyzed without due appreciation of the socio-historical context of their formulation. Yet, by the same token, ideas cannot be reduced to mere historical contingency, as if they were nothing but epiphenomena of particular epochs and events. To read Adorno today means neither transposing his ideas *in toto* as ready-made solutions or analytical frameworks for our contemporary society, nor casting and reifying them as outdated intellectual relics of a bygone era. Thought *moves*. The possibility and history stored up in certain concepts and objects changes over time, dependent upon their varying configurations and interrelations. Recognition of this latter point is what prompted my opting for a constellational method for this thesis. To the extent that it is feasible in such a project, I have tried to follow the contours of Adorno’s own work, since one of the main

advantages of his dialectical theory arises from the fact that it “does not exclude those forms of knowledge which do not follow rigorous rules of epistemological grounding” and the formal-pragmatic logics of rational argumentation (Hohendahl, 1995, p. 251). While Adorno is cognizant of the benefits of this minimally violent representation and openness unto objects, too many of his interpreters – both defenders and detractors – have tried to diminish its movement, tensions, paradoxes and contradictions, with a view to rendering a coherent and consistent body of thought (or thinker). Or, alternatively, if such coherence is deemed unobtainable, Adorno’s critical theory is cursorily dismissed as succumbing to irrationality and hyperbolic eschatology.

It should be clear that, throughout this thesis, I have tried to avoid these dual pitfalls. Instead, my aim has been to reconsider Adornian theory and discern what is of most pertinence for us today. In order to achieve this end, it has been necessary to discard or, at the least, correct certain facets of Adorno’s thinking. In the first instance, it was essential to challenge the rather idiosyncratic and ontological aversion to film as an artistic medium exhibited in the vast majority of Adorno’s output. Not content with simply highlighting this lacuna in his work, I sought to utilize it as a catalyst for further illustrating the critical potential of the themes and ideas under consideration. My use of film has thereby worked simultaneously *with* and *against* Adorno. With him inasmuch as I deploy certain films in order to *defend* Adornian arguments; against him to the extent that my defence of film as authentic art stands in *opposition* to Adorno’s unduly negative pronouncements on the medium. Bringing the films of Tarkovsky and Haneke into constellations with Adornian theory has served two other overarching purposes. Firstly, it has shown how specific filmic artworks can assist an appreciation and redemptive critique of Adorno’s critical theory. And, secondly, it has drawn attention to and made use of the mostly

uncharted richness of Adornian theory for the analysis and interpretation of film.

In addition to these aims, there is a common thread running through the thesis as a whole, despite the relative independence of the respective chapters. This thread has to do with shifting perspectives, a task whose urgency intensifies with every unsatisfactory election debate, every diminution of political will and honesty, every outburst of anti-intellectual media rhetoric, every threat to the hard-won rights that guarantee the basic liberties of every human being. The arguments presented in this thesis are in no way meant to provide an exhaustive model for achieving such perspectival changes. To suppose one could access some pure epistemological position free from influence and error would be sheer hubris. The arguments herein serve more as possible avenues toward attaining altered and, more importantly, *critical* perspectives. Through *constellations* objects are brought into new configurations and formations that modify our perception of each unique item as well as its multifarious intertwinement with others. The revisiting of the important if complex concept of *mimesis* contains within it a fresh awareness of the limitations of predominant epistemological rationales which assume that concepts neatly, accurately and exhaustively envelop their predicates. My advocacy of *marginality* is founded upon the belief that it is only at a remove from the heteronomy of the existent that the latter can be truly seen in a critical light. In the case of *nature*, a wider perspective is needed to appreciate the dialectical co-constitution of human beings and the natural world, a vision capable of going beyond the myopic dualisms of prevailing ecological thought. In each case – constellations, mimesis, marginality, and the nature-humanity dialectic – a distinct shift in perspective is called for as a prelude to, or rather as a primary stage in, an altered, improved, more rational praxis. Marx's overused and abused eleventh thesis on Feuerbach must not lead to the forestalling or subordination of

interpretation to the demands of urgent action. Rather, the perspectival horizons of subjects living under oppressive conditions should be expanded to the point at which the preordained praxis insisted upon in contemporary society begins to appear wholly invalid, destructive, undesirable and unsustainable. From a sufficiently critical interpretation of and orientation towards the existent a new or reformed praxis emerges. It has been my aim throughout this thesis to demonstrate the crucial value and critical potential of Adornian theory and film to the future realization of such transformative ends. If you also feel compelled to resist the heteronomous forces of the present time, or at least obtain a more critical perspective on them, *move toward the margins*.

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