JOURNAL OF
French and Francophone Philosophy | REVUE DE LA
philosophie française et de langue française

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Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XXVII, No 2 (2019) pp 127–141

Vol XXVII, No 2 (2019)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2019.896
www.jffp.org

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Throwing out Aesthetics with the Bathwater of Critical Theory?

Interviewers - Before specifically addressing Adorno's aesthetic theory, which is the theme of this volume, we would like to return to your relationship with critical theory in general.[1]

You have made numerous pronouncements on the Frankfurt School of critical theory. On the one hand it appears that, for you, it emerges from the inegalitarian and paternalistic logic that broadly defines critical theories, from Marxism to the sociology of Bourdieu, which you view as having affinities with Platonism. As you suggest in multiple texts, such as "The Method of Equality" that appears in the volume on your exchanges with Axel Honneth, the concept of emancipation that undergirds critical theories must be completely redefined. The tradition of critical theory effectively starts from the inequality of human beings and projects a future equality (in Adorno, it is perhaps the dimension of the promise, which goes hand in hand with the horizon of a common human sensibility), and it supposes a logic of disclosure at the heart of which domination is understood as ignorance of the laws governing individuals. It is ultimately a "method of inequality" that unceasingly reproduces the distinction between the knowledgeable and the ignorant. In opposition to this, you defend a "method of equality" and redefine emancipation as what must be immediately and materially presupposed. On the other hand, you attempt to grasp the specificity of the Adornian dialectic: in "Dialectic in the Dialectic" you differentiate Adorno's project from those who lay claim to it, and attempting to remain faithful to the specificity of his

critique, you ultimately locate the problem in the absence of a thinking of a politics of emancipation.

From Plato to Deleuze and Guattari, by way of Marx, Schlegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Adorno, and Horkheimer, you examine the "small theatres of memory" highlighted by "contradictory scenographies" and "confused topographies." On one hand, we build mystical oceans of sound (Bachelard, Stockhausen, Sun Ra), on the other we see the return of romantic sirens in modern and disfigured forms (Varèse, Aragon, Broodthaers). Yet, this overlapping of sound and image, mythology and technology, economics and emancipation, form and experience can already be found in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Is it a matter, for you, of offering a rereading of the primal scene of the grand narrative of the Frankfurt School? Do you seek to proceed with a revision of the "critique of political economy" of *Capital* or, in a perhaps more radically contemporary way, with a critique of the Althusserian project of *Reading Capital*? In this case, what would be the relationship between the Frankfurt School and Althusser?

Jacques Rancière – Let us start by saying that the presence of sirens and the marine imaginary in several of my books owes nothing to a recovery of the primal scene of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and even less to Bachelard. It comes from my work on the politics of writing and its romantic forms: the idea of the poem written in things themselves. This is why I read Aragon's passage that transforms the store window into an aquarium where sirens swim with reference to the living poem constituted by Balzac's antique shop, through the filter of the extraordinary pages of Michelet's *The Sea* on the figures of the underwater faun. For its part, the "politics of the siren" that I studied in Mallarmé refers to the idea of fiction as the inscription [*tracé*] of writing in space, an idea that contests traditional forms of narration. This reflection on the politics of writing that lies at the center of my work is entirely independent of the Adornian opposition between the man of economic rationality and the siren song. But I did not seek to establish a parallel between a critique of Althusserianism and a critique of the Frankfurt School. At the time of the great Althusserian theoretical enterprise, Adorno and the Frankfurt School were far from the French landscape. I read Adorno much later when I was compelled to rethink what was politically at stake in the modern concept of aesthetics. I first read him as an antidote to the sociological reduction of the stakes of aesthetics carried out by Bourdieu, and later as a step on the path of the radical inversion of the aesthetic promise initiated by Schiller, [and] ultimately dissolved by Lyotard. This also means that if I became interested in his work and eventually critical of it, it was not at all within the framework of a criticism of the "critique of political economy." That said, we can say that my relationship with Adorno presupposes a rupture with Marx that is very different from his. Adorno questions the complicity of Marxism with bourgeois instrumental reason, which is a way of saying that Marxist science rests on an original gesture of repression shared by the economy it critiques. I question

Marxist scientificity in another way, concentrating on forms of worker emancipation and their dissimilarity to the way that Marxism deduces the opportunities for emancipation from the process of economic exploitation itself. This means that we share a common preoccupation with the limits of Marxist rationality but also that we have a different way of approaching it. Adorno thinks things in terms of the relation to the object of repression [*refoulement*]. He seeks to correct Marxism by establishing an arc between a primacy of the object that undermines economic rationality and an aesthetic experience retains and sublimates its power. I have preferred to think things from the point of view of time and the fight against a hierarchy of temporalities. That which corresponds to the original scene of Odysseus would then be the description of the work-day and the day of leisure of Gauny the carpenter, whose work day and day of leisure construct a temporality that eludes the process of exploitation.

Interviewers – Your "dialectic without the dialectic" betrays a complex position. If the reading of Odysseus as *homo economicus*, suggested by Adorno and Horkheimer, confines them within a post-Marxist position, it is because their denunciation of the "bourgeois" Enlightenment thinkers fails to overcome the illusion that there will one day be a truly non-compromised art. Adorno and Horkheimer thus fall back into a "melancholy of Marxist critique" that wishes to return to a state prior to alienation. You nevertheless underscore the fact that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* eludes "the silliness of the tearful who periodically decry the destruction of art by business and cultural politics." Why then do you reproach them on the grounds of melancholy, of a "poetics of the re-mythologization of the world in place of revolutionary nostalgia"? Do you not promulgate a philosophy of history that rests on the foundation of an origin, one which is not really present in the work? Must we no search instead for another position, namely that of the historian who would be, according to F. Schlegel, "a prophet turned toward the past"? What do we make of Odysseus in this case, this economic man who alone has the privilege of listening to the sirens?

Jacques Rancière – I do not think that I have portrayed Adorno as a thinker of origins. I underscored the kinship of his critique with a larger notion of the original sin of Western reason most notably represented by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. But there can be an original sin without a paradise lost. I do not think that I have attributed to any naïve thoughts about a return to a state prior to alienation or about an ideal, non-compromised art, nor for that matter have I imputed a romanticist will to remythologize the world. Rather, I tried to situate him in relation to a dependence on the Schillerian problematic of an *aesthetic* education of man which is as distinct from the simple progressive vision of the education of humankind as it is from the counter-revolutionary lamentation of the crimes of reason. I underlined the fact that Adorno breaks with all naïve conceptions of the aesthetic promise, to the point of seeing in deception itself the essence of its subversive power. But

this also means that he tends to focus on the relationship between the rationality of the work of art and the dominant economic rationality and on repairing this relationship via an avant-garde capable of creating and appreciating those works which carry this power of deception. Odysseus is criticized, but there remains the idea that aesthetic enjoyment is reserved for the few who know how to enjoy the deception of the chant. What my research led me to claim, however, is that this capacity does not simply belong to a privileged few. Rather than focusing Odysseus' sin—that objectifying reason—I concentrated on the distribution [*partage*] of forms of life and modes of sensing the it presupposes. I was especially interested in his oarsmen—those men destined to a single routine of using their hands—whom Odysseus reduces to their practical activity in the encounter with the singing sirens. I contended that their emancipation begins with the desire to taste the pleasures that the dominant wisdom declares were not made for them. In fact, these common men and women did not only desire to enjoy the sirens' singing but also to taste the very charms of their deceptive character. This capacity of common men and women to taste the deceptions of art, which Clement Greenberg sees as art's great peril, is perceived by Adorno, but only as a mere detour of the work and at the price of a singular conception of common virtues [*vertues populaires*]. I'm thinking of his very Nietzschean text on *Carmen* in *Quasi una fantasia*. Commenting on a trio of maps, he celebrates a kind of plebian *amor fati* amongst the Latin peoples. The aesthetic capacity of any and every one is not brutally rejected, as it is by Greenberg. Rather, it is recovered by the great schism that characterizes the very "work" of the work of art [*le travail de l'oeuvre*]: the most sophisticated art is the art that carries, in the very perfection of its objectification, the trace of the primitive shudder in the face of objectification. The "common" [*populaire*] is present in the work as this "primitive" that it must conserve even as it does away with it. It is ultimately artistic sublimation that assures its presence.

Interviewers – In line with your critique of the melancholic discourse on the market standardization of the world, which is an obverse of a supposedly authentic relation to the world, you deploy a conception of art that undergirds Adornian critique of culture as a machine for the satisfaction of needs: the emancipatory potential of art lies, as you write, in its force of deception. When it comes to the comprehension of the work of art, the line of divergence between you and Adorno might very well be the question of negativity. This question appears to be alien to your work. Apart from the question of the political significance of Adorno's thought, is the ultimate target of your critique not a certain "work of the negative" executed by the work of art, according to Adorno?

Jacques Rancière – My problem is not so much the work of the negative as much as the ethical function—which replaces a political function—that Adorno ascribes to it. That which he thinks through the concept of negativity can be understood, in my own way, through the concept of "dissensus," that

is to say the production of breaks and disruptions in the dominant regime governing the presentation and formalization of sensible experience. The concept of dissensus refers to a tension between heterogeneous regimes of the sensible that do not bring about a dialectical resolution. Certainly, the Adornian dialectic is itself without resolution. But this absence of resolution is again understood from a teleological perspective. On the one hand, this teleology is, for him, objective: art cannot but contradict itself, since its very appearance involves its negation. This contradiction in the work of art, which is never objectively surpassed, nonetheless imposes a task: that of maintaining the negation which itself maintains the promise of reconciled life for as long as it refuses all reconciliation. The radicality attached to the Marxist conception of the dialectic finds itself attributed to the work as such. In the end, the work becomes a moral subject which must answer for its relation to domination, and it is ultimately on this that Wagner, Shoenberg, or Stravinsky are questioned. On the one hand, dissensus is dialectical insofar as it is negative. On the other, it consists of a very specific negativity, a negativity that must evade any return to positivity and which takes therefore of a categorical moral imperative: in all works, at all moments of all works, it is the whole world of domination that is at stake, which will be affirmed as a whole or repudiated as a whole depending on the choice of this or that chord or means of expression.

Interviewers – Adorno's thought is often considered apolitical. We have reproached Adorno for not affirming revolutionary eschatology, for neither engaging with the theorizing of political organization nor with the thinking of political praxis. If you take up these criticisms, it is by underlining the absence of any thought of emancipation and democracy in his thought, a consequence of the fact that—despite himself—he reproduces the opposition between the masses and the elites. There are, however, several of Adorno's texts that undermine this opposition, such as "Reflections on Class Theory" from his *Introduction to Sociology*. Must we not refuse the idea of an elitist and hermetic Adornian philosophy in order to more precisely examine his critique of domination, and make evident the political significance of his aesthetic theory? Do you think that, all things considered, Adorno's position is compatible with the "method of equality," given that this method rejects the role of the intellectual, all teleological perspectives, and "eventuality" as a horizon of emancipation?

Jacques Rancière – The problem is not so much that of his elitism as that of his lack of interest in politics as a collective practice of the oppressed. His writings scarcely address this subject. His ambivalence toward Marxism betrays in fact a twofold lack of interest in it. He participates in the underestimation of politics that is inherent in the Marxist tradition, and his analyses seek to short-circuit this underestimation by situating the meaning of works in a given context of class struggle. On the one hand, he explains that a given state of capitalism creates social contradictions that is reflected in the attitude of artists and texture of their works. Thus, he faithfully follows Marxist

logic, and his analyses of works of art and musical forms as effects of socioeconomic determinations can be as inflexible as those of Lukács. On the other hand, he denounces Marxism's dependence on bourgeois instrumental rationality. At the same time, however, he tends to locate emancipatory potential in the mode of activity directly opposed to economic rationality, the mode of activity that is no longer directed toward an external end for which art provides the model. Here we find one of the essential elements of a thinking of emancipation. Emancipation marks the end of the separation of means and ends, which is also to say the end of the separation between those who are destined for action and those consigned to the realm of necessity, between those who are supposedly active and those are said to be passive. This is how Schiller defines the human potential of aesthetic experience and how the young Marx conceives of communism. Marx, however, postpones the end of the separation of means and ends to a future that is itself determined by the success of a strategic action, whereas Adorno tends to confine emancipatory potential within the work of art. It is these works that bear witness to alienation and preserve the promise of emancipation. I have sought, conversely, to release the general significance of this "aesthetic" experience of the refusal of the separation of means and ends. I tried to show it at work in practices of social emancipation, in the practices of men and women of the people who refuse their consignment to a certain type of experience, in collective practices focused on the reclaiming of time and space: the work of art, as a distinct kind of "fabrication," the worker who refuses to follow the normal rhythms of work and rest, and the worker collective that reapproriates time and space by way of a strike. These are diverse ways of constructing possible worlds instead of policing the line separating the impossible from the possible.

Adorno's Aesthetics: Unforeseen Convergences?

Interviewers – Focusing more specifically on Adorno's aesthetic theory, there are points of convergence that compel us to nuance your opposition to the critical tradition. In "La Métamorphoses des Muses," you develop an extraordinary idea for the thinking of music, that of a real equality that coincides with the end of muses and the de-hierarchization of song and instrument. From this perspective, you reconstruct a genealogy of the musical hierarchy that distinguishes between that which emanates from the spiritual subject versus that which emanates from the communal and the vulgar. This hierarchy justifies itself *a priori* through the Platonic ethical prescription that dictates the legitimate sounds within the city [*cité*]. You also maintain that this Platonic prescription is reflected in Adorno, as both seek to normatively exclude certain music. His criticism of Stravinsky's music in the *Philosophy of the New Music* illustrates this similarity between him and Plato. Nevertheless, in *Quasi una fantasia*, which is perhaps his work that has the most affinity with your own writing on art, Adorno echoes your commentary on Stravinsky. He insists on a realism of spatial and rythmic configuration, a realism of musical

stasis as opposed to the subjective artificiality of dynamism in the twentieth century. In the latter text, Adorno—at a distance from Plato—appears to neutralize the Muses. With this text in mind, do you think that ending the influence of ethical prescriptions on perception necessitates, in the medium of sound, this material realism you describe?

Jacques Rancière – I do not think that this question bears on the materiality of music. The "music" of which I speak is not so much a particular art as an idea of art: an idea of the sensible manifestation particular to art and which is inscribed in a determinate distribution of activities and capacities. It is not just Plato's prescription of musical forms that conform to the well-ordered city. It is also the opposition between souls made of gold and souls made of iron and, correspondingly, the opposition between two forms sensible expression: living speech, capable of "helping," versus the dead letter of writing and its "painted pictures." It occurs to Adorno to take up this very opposition as he seeks to understand the impasses of musical development in Wagner. Indeed, the concept of reification is itself dependent on this tradition. Following this tradition is of course the dialectic which brings meanings back, turning the apparent reification of the work itself into a means for fighting reification, thereby showing the higher order complicity of the opposition between dynamism and reification with the very reification it had appeared to challenge. Consequently, the virtue attributed to Shoenberg—against Stravinsky—can in fact also be attributed to Stravinsky.

The "ethical prescription" can, in fact, take many forms. There is the Platonic prescription of an order with every individual, every kind of activity, and the uses of sound are in their corresponding and suitable place. And there is the Marxist dialectical prescription, according to which the uses of sound are judged by their either progressive or regressive character, but which also unceasingly shows that the progressive reveals itself to be regressive precisely in its refusal of the regressive, and likewise the regressive which proves progressive precisely by questioning and challenging the progressive. It is true that Adorno does not draw a definitive line between acceptable and unacceptable music. He engages in a dialectical analysis that always allows him to exercise the play of opposites in other ways. Thus, he says apropos of Wagner that we do not end up with a distinction between white sheep and black sheep. There remain many kinds white sheep and black sheep and this very confusion of colors will be judged according to instances of black or white, alienation of emancipation. If *Aesthetic Theory* insists on the necessary contradiction of works, this contradiction can be judged entirely differently when we pass to concrete scenarios: when he claims that Stravinsky at once furnishes the bomb attack and the police life-insurance, he is not really praising him. As distant as he is from state Marxism and its tribunals, he uses the same dialectical resource that allows one to read contradiction in one way or in another, to demonstrate that the line which appears left-wing is actually right-wing, and vice versa.

Interviewers – In *Aesthetics and its Discontents,* you examine the influence of Adorno on Lyotard and on the "ethical turn" of modernity in general. Could Adorno's role not be summarized as the presentation of an argument from authority precisely where, several decades earlier, such arguments served equally as imprecations against resignation? Is there not in the thinking of twentieth century modernity a political instrumentalization of Adorno's thought that belies its conceptual substrates, similar to the instrumentalization of the dialectic of reason that you examine in "Dialectique dans la Dialectique"?

Without this theoretical instrumentalization, which reads through the glasses of transcendental appearance that Adorno criticized in *Negative Dialectics*, would the Adornian aesthetic not be consonant with the project *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, to see the end of the power of the intelligible over the sensible in political and aesthetic experience that inform our ways perceiving?

Jacques Rancière – For me, the question is not primarily that of the domination of the intelligible over the sensible but rather their way of relating to each other. What Kant and Schiller conceptualize is a mode of their relation that has two related characteristics. First, it is a relation without domination. The power of form over matter is suspended and not simply inverted as the power of matter over form. The difference between the two is not however abolished. Rather, it becomes a tension without resolution. Second, it is a relation without determination. There are no longer rules determining how their assemblage must be actualized, nor are there norms determining how the effects of their assemblage are to be felt and appreciated. The whole question is thus that of knowing how to interpret the relationship between these two criteria, between equality and indeterminacy. We could say that, for me as for Adorno, art productions become experimental processes, singular ways of approaching the relationship, which only an immanent analysis can appreciate.

There remains in Adorno, nevertheless, another kind of normativity that reintroduces itself in the idea of the truth content in the work and in negativity. The singular configurations displayed by works of art can be judged according to their truth content. And this truth is itself twofold: it is a bearing of witness to the existence of alienated social relations, and the bearing of witness to the possibility of a reconciled, non-alienated life. Yet it is also true that he rejects the illusion that this promise of reconciliation will be realized. It is this criteria of negativity that Lyotard absolutizes, and he does so by separating irreconciliation from the promise that Adorno gave him the mission of conserving. He places modern art under the sign of the sublime, which is to say of an originary irreconciliation. He changes its meaning entirely by collapsing the dialectical tension between autonomy and heteronomy on the side of a radical heteronomy. At the same time, negativity no longer targets domination but rather the promise of aesthetic emancipation. Yet it seems to

me that even this very inversion remains faithful to the way Adorno ties aesthetic content to an ethical evaluation. For my part, I addressed the relationship between equality and indeterminacy completely differently. I did not seek to evaluate works based on their "truth content" and their power of negation. I sought analyze the type of common world they construct and what kind of sensible experience they appeal to. This is why, in *Aisthesis*, I systematically related works or singular artistic events with modes of interpretation constructed specifically for the apprehension of this singularity. I thus considered the revolution brought about by critique in the aesthetic regime: critique no longer foregrounds the making of the work in conformity with rules of perfection, but seeks to describe the sensible world that it constructs and the mode of sensible experience that it projects. For me, this also implies the impossibility of establishing a harmonious relationship between modes of construction of works and their ethico-political value. Therefore, I have constantly underlined the unresolved tension between aesthetic democracy and political democracy. I believe this tension renders vain the will to decide the political significance of a work.

Interviewers – Adorno's writings devoted to works from after the 1950s are rare. Yet it is at this moment that a predominant realism in art works brings to light the aesthetic turn that you theorize *a posteriori* in cinema, for example. In those rare instances where he comments on more recent works, Adorno underscores their realistic character, whether with respect to Beckett, or the Darmstadt conference entitled "Toward an Informal Music" where he declares: "The appearance of a work of art that could not not be what it is [*ne pourrait pas ne pas être ce qu'elle est*] must be denounced at every turn because of its very reality. In desiring to add to their necessity, as fictional as it is, a literal character, art works sin, by their concern with the positive, against their proper realism."

This realistic character of art, supported at length in *Aesthetic Theory*, supported by the abandonment of the appearance of fictional necessity in a work in the service of an aesthetic appearance of contingency in the thing itself. The apprehension of reality by the work passes, for Adorno, by way of the double neutralization, on the one hand, of "the pretension of the fictional as real and the real as fictional," and on the other the "phantasmagoric aspect" of the end of the appearance that "reinforces the illusion of the in-itself," whereas, "a flawless being-in-itself to which the pure work of art is abandoned is incompatible with its definition as something made by humans." Each of these two sides attributes an artificial unity to the meaning of the work, whereas the latter resides in the very tension that thwarts an inevitably identifying unity—a unity, incidentally, that he rebuffs in committed art and didactic works. The thread which articulates the tension between appearance and reality in the work without falling back on a unity of meaning equally underlies your readings; one almost hears an echo of the dispute [*litige*], as political as it is aesthetic, in the Adornian expression of the tour de force. In a

passage from *Fil perdu*, you write, "the real does not need a reason to be there. On the contrary, it demonstrates its reality in the very fact that it is of no use, and therefore no one had any reason to invent it." You are attached to seeing the aesthetic in eruptions of the invention that has no need of being invented, such that invention brings to light the *free appearance* that, itself, as you say in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, belongs to the categories of the distribution of the sensible. Based on this, we wonder what nuances differentiate your rescue of appearance from that of Adorno.

Jacques Rancière – Personally, I do not think things through the category of "rescue." What we find in both cases, it seems to me, is the refutation of Platonism. It is not about opposing appearance to reality, but rather differentiating modes of appearing and hence thinking the figures of the real at the heart of these differentiations. There is the real that is constructed by the dominant consensus as a certain agreement between sensible givens and intelligible meanings. This real rejects as appearance all that does not enter into its grid. Against this identitarian real constructed by the consensus logic, political or artistic dissensus creates modes of appearing: "free" appearances, appearances that resist being reduced to the appearance of something elsewhere and that imposes neither a form of interpretation nor a determined affect. Free appearance thus comes to encounter another figure of the real that is obviously its contrary and yet with which it shares certain traits: the real defined as that which resists all signification, that which is there for no reason, and which was not created for any determinate end of use. This identity of the appearance and the real can be conceived in diverse ways. We can think of it as artifice. This what Barthes does in his text on "the effect of the real." The sentence from *Fil Perdu* that you cite does not express my thinking, it precisely distills Barthes's analysis. He takes Madame Aubain's barometer as artifice seeking to absolutize the real, to subtract its fabricated character. And he contrasts this with a "modern" law of the autonomous work that affirms its wholly constructed character in relation to all realistic reference. Against this, I show that the needle of the barometer records the encounter of two reals [*reels*], two antagonistic sensible worlds: the world of consensus, the world of a real without appearance where the order of meanings [*significations*] is in harmony with an order of social conditions which is an allegorical representation of a harmony of work and of days, and there is a world where this "harmony" is overcome, where the servant's sentiments and behaviors no longer obey a "normal" correspondence of conditions and ways of being, where common men and women claim the right to appearance. This positive conflict between two "reals" and two "appearances" is, in spite of it all, quite different from the dialectic of appearance in Adorno. For him, free appearance is immediately seized by a play of oppositions: appearance/reality, appearance/truth, made/not made, being/non-being. On the one hand, free appearance takes the form of a self-sufficiency of the work, of an autonomy that is opposed to the reality of the technical and administered world, but must also as a result assume the character of the object. This autonomy must

therefore negate itself, make manifest its status as an appearance, its non-reality, to denounce this thinghood [*choséité*]. But in doing so, it faces the risk submitting itself to a superior form of technical reification. There is, in Adorno, an infinite dialectic in the relationship between aesthetics and politics in that aesthetic analysis is centered on the concept of the work, on this form of "fabrication" that negates itself but must also let this lie be seen. To preserve its integrity, the work must unceasingly resolve the paradox of being a thing without being one, and of negating its thinghood without making it disappear. I analyzed not so much the structure of things [*structures chosales*] as kinds of events, fictional modes, [and] structures of sensible moments. In a certain way, thinking the multiplicity of regimes of the sensible and their combinations freed me from the double obsession with reification and its negation. From his point of view, this undoubtedly implies a shameful positivism. I would counter that this fixation on the negative is itself lost either in cultural banality of the critique of culture, or in the hyperbole of the sublime which ultimately finds itself in the service of other forms of barbarism.

Interviewers – Both of you are against a "naïve realism" (Adorno). For you, this takes the form of an analysis of nineteenth-century literature ("The daughter of a farmer and the daughter of a banker were caught in the equal force of style as "an absolute manner of seeing things," Flaubert; "All of these forms of cancellation or reversal of the opposition between high and low not only antedate the powers of mechanical reproduction, they made it possible for this reproduction to be more than mechanical reproduction," *The Distribution of the Sensible*). Both of you distance yourselves from a particular characterization of reality: naturalism and socialist realism. In view of this relationship to the real, we would like to ask what you make of the mode of "as if," which throws us into the paradox of the in-between: between impossibility and necessity, between unreal and real. What margin remains in this paradoxical experience of the impossible possible (*Aesthetic Theory*)? The "as if" thus becomes the condition of art, where appearance dissolves in reality and (dissensual) aesthetics and politics disappears (*The Distribution of the Sensible*). It is perhaps precisely at the threshold of this evident characteristic of art that your paths diverge: For Adorno, aesthetic appearance remains implicated in a problematic that is concealed in your work, where the "as if" is conceived as a strategic verification of that which is (until then) possible. Such a verification must be affirmed against the consensus of the police order. But Adorno never stops insisting that the autonomy of art is but the visible being of that which is not. Art remains struck by a "Makel der Nichtexistenz" ("the mark of the non-existence of the subject"). It is therefore not simply a promise of happiness, but is also charged with a guilt, namely its distance from practice and being there [*l'être là*]. Utopian art is at once benediction and malediction (*Aesthetic Theory*). Are there any of these dimensions in your work?

Jacques Rancière – The whole question is effectively that of knowing how we think the "as if". I have thought it in relation to that which informed my

work on emancipation and which I sought to conceptualize in the idea of the distribution of the sensible: the "as if" is the polemical putting into action of a capacity that is not recognized within given order of sensibility: the plebeians reunited on the Aventine act as if they possess the power of speech that the patricians do not recognize in them; the striking workers in the 1830s act as if work were a public matter where the dominant order, equally inscribed in perceptions as in laws, only sees a matter of private relationships between individuals. The first militant feminists act as if women are political subjects, etc. Each of these actions are ways of rendering the impossible possible. In short, the "as if" is the local and circumstantial construction of alternative sensible world. It is the opposition not to reality but to a certain reality that is itself the product of a fiction, which is to say a node of relations between places and competences; between practices, perceptions, and meanings. It is not specific to art and does not grant it a special mission, nor does it place the failure of this mission on its shoulders. Adorno thinks the "as if" within the duality appearance/reality. On the one hand, he tends to localize power in a well-defined practice: that of artists. This ends up according a monopoly on the creation of "non-real" things, a monopoly of a concrete monsration [*monstration*] of the impossible as possible ("The fact that works of art are the demonstration that the non-existing could exist"). On the other hand, he thinks this practice from out of the question of the lie. Demonstrating the impossible as possible is thus not only a capacity reserved for artists, but a failing indissociable from this capacity. Art bound to the production of an appearance whose truth—the true life, the reconciled life—is radically absent from our world. It is also bound to denouncing the illusion that this truth that it shows is there. It must show its character as an appearance. But this denunciation itself tends to chase from the world the very truth of which it is an appearance and must be denounced in its turn. Art is always guilty of presenting a redemption that can only be mendacious. Therefore, it is always guilty. The idea that art is "impossible after Auschwitz" is, in the end, confirmation of a structure of guilt determined a priori by the place given to an art that is obliged solely to bear witness to false life and cannot do this without lying about this fact. Personally, I believe that the thinking of emancipation involves a responsibility for what we do and for the world we construct through configurations of words, images, movements or sounds, a responsibility that has nothing to do with problematics of fault, guilt, and redemption.

Interviewers – With respect to perception, the rare moments where Adorno comments on contemporary art are a perfect illustration of your critique of the *representative regime of art*, starting with his affirmation of the progress from arts to art. It allows us to go back over all the categories that have historically shaped perception. Beyond the modernism that you identify and critique, does Adorno's aesthetic theory share with yours the desire for a perception that is different from the one that is prescribed by this regime and its fictional extension today? Better yet, is there here a common position vis-

à-vis metaphysics and the theory of knowledge, which in itself constitutes and orientation toward an emancipation of the sensible?

Jacques Rancière – Certainly, we can identify some affinities: the acknowledgement of art as a specific sphere of experience, the idea of a revolution that acts on modes of perception and sensible affection, and attention to the emancipatory potential of such disruptions. There is a shared attention to the dissensual aspects of artistic practices in relation to the dominant regime of experience, as well as to the paradoxical connection between the autonomization of the artistic sphere and the promise of the assimilation of art and life. Starting from this, we can identify two traits that are specific to Adorno's thought: First, the translation of dissensus into the Hegelian terms of negative dialectics, and second, the translation of the paradox of art's autonomy into a concept of redemption. These translations are themselves connected to the fact that his examination of the emergence of aesthetics is tied to an understanding of the Enlightenment as an original sin. This preoccupation is absent from my work. I have never connected the aesthetic promise to a critique of Enlightenment reason or to the metaphysics of identity. I'm not sure if we could even speak of an "emancipation in sensibility" in Adorno. In any case, these are not the terms in which I think. I am not preoccupied with emancipation in or by sensibility because my aim is not to rehabilitate sensible experience but rather to destroy the hierarchy of forms of sensible experience, the hierarchy of forms of life.

Politics of Aesthetics?

Interviewers – Continuing the rapprochement that we have attempted to sketch between Adorno's aesthetics and your own, we would like to return to the entwinements of aesthetics and politics that have been at stake throughout the discussion. In effect, it is the indissociability of aesthetic, philosophical, and political ideas that brings this entwinement into relief. The postulate of the equality of intelligences, the de-hierarchization of sensibility and intellect, the realism of works faced with subjectivistic regimes of identification, and the distribution of the sensible as a mode of sensed equality between the work of art and the city (*cite*), are all rooted in a theoretical gesture that Adorno, for his part, carries out through a critique of the logic of the understanding and the modes of perception it involves.

Similarly to your critique of the logics of the critical tradition and their implications for our perception of emancipation, new readings of Adorno's thought—independent of questions concerning the relationship between modernism and post-modernism—tend to see in aesthetic theory the basis for a renewal of social and political theory. On the other hand, as you demonstrate in *The Edges of Fiction* empirical observation clearly shows the contemporary intensification of tensions between fiction and reality in the epistemologies of the social and human sciences. In this context, do you think that aesthetics promises a new thinking of emancipation?

Jacques Rancière – I am not too familiar with the lectures of Adorno that you allude to, but I essentially think that the present moment necessitates a rethinking of the relationship between aesthetics and politics because of the breakdown of the objectivistic vision that based its hopes for egalitarian transformation on the objective historical evolution of technology, economic processes, and social relations that would follow. The idea of emancipation as the result of actions grounded in the science of history and society is obviously quite distant from us. The failure of the promises made by science with respect to a future equality throws two things simultaneously into relief: firstly, social science is itself a fiction, which does not mean that it is an illusion but rather that the reality it examines is produced by a variety of descriptive and interpretive procedures. Secondly, this fiction, in its dominant form, has been to a large degree linked with a hierarchical distribution of the sensible: there are those who know and then there are the many. Political thought has thus moved from the conflict of forces and arms that science is presumed to address, to the conflict of worlds of sensibility. The significant political movements of the last ten years, from the Arab Spring to Occupy, have involved the construction of alternative spaces and times and in doing so have reminded us of the aesthetic foundations of revolutionary thinking. Underlying the elaboration of the Marxist science of historical evolution is a conception of the "human revolution" manifest in the concept of communism one finds in the young Marx, which is directly dependent on the idea of aesthetic revolution: a critique of the division of labor and the idea of a revolutionary transformation of experience as opposed to a mere revolution of the institutions of power, a conception of this revolution as the exercising of an equal capacity of feeling and thinking that is distinct not only from instrumental reason but also the hierarchical division of forms of life. It is this aesthetic foundation of modern revolutionary thought that appears again in the collapse of social science and avant-gardist programs. Evidently, this does not mean that aesthetics is a science of emancipation.

Interviewers – Finally, must we not admit that the border between politics, which is emancipatory and affirmative, and critique, which must be radical and dialectical, is never really a tidy one?

Jacques Rancière – We have, here, two related problems. The first concerns the role given—within a distribution of tasks—to a specific activity called critique. The second concerns the opposition between the affirmative and the negative. Critique is not the destructive negation that prepares the way for reconstructive action. Critiquing, in the world of modern aesthetics and politics, is not destroying but reconfiguring, narrating and describing differently. The "critique of political economy" is not the destruction of classical economic science but a redescription that makes apparent that which lies at the heart of economic transactions: the purchase of labor force. The critique of art, transformed in the age of the Goncourt, alters the appearance of painting by narrativizing the adventure of the paintbrush and pictorial

material to the detriment of the history that the painting recounts. The critique of musical works, in the way that Adorno practices it, brings melodic and harmonic operations of music into proximity with the social relations that are inscribed in the materiality of the instruments. These are also "affirmative" interventions, acting on the perceptible and the thinkable, which are inscribed in larger modes of the reconfiguration of the possible that politics equally engages in. What defines political dissensus in particular is not that is "real" as opposed to "fictional," or affirmative as opposed to negative. Political dissensus is defined by the fact that it involves the invention of a form of collective subjectivity. While we must call into question the separation of "spheres," this also means that "critique" is not an independent activity devoted to the labor of the negative.

Translated by Owen Glyn-Williams

1 This interview was originally published in French as "Que faire de la théorie esthétique d'Adorno?" in *Où en sommes-nous avec la Théorie esthétique d'Adorno?* (Pontcerq, 2018). The English translation is published here with permission.