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“I can’t describe it”: Some observations on the déjà vu experience and dreamy state, as well as language and memory

With a retrospect on Walter Benjamin and Wolfdietrich Schnurre

*Rüdiger Lorenz*¹

Abstract: In the miniature piece “News of a death”, Walter Benjamin describes a déjà vu -experience from his childhood. Through this experience, he felt himself bound to a search for something that had been silenced. In this way, for him, the déjà vu experience was oriented toward a future in which the present had become complete. Reading the miniature expanded my own sense of déjà vu, my approach to it simply as a “once beforehand”; and only Walter Benjamin’s understanding of the phenomenon allowed me to grasp a particular experience of my own. With Benjamin, Wolfdietrich Schnurre, and several former patients, I entered into a search opening up basic questions: of time, memory, the limits of language, problems of translation, and the expressive capacity of art.

Introduction

The accounts of dreamy states and déjà vu experiences by some of my earlier patients with migraine and epilepsy continue to attract my attention. These accounts were a basic element informing my interest in both Walter Benjamin and Wolfdietrich Schnurre, and in what they wrote on déjà vu. Something that seemed to have escaped the notice of

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literary and cultural studies soon became clear: Benjamin and Schnurre themselves suffered from migraine.² Benjamin's short text "News of a death"³ included in his *Berlin Childhood*, has contributed in a crucial way to my preoccupation with this theme: for it has confronted me with a significant experience of my own.

Walter Benjamin's "News of a Death" and a personal experience

In "News of a Death"⁴, while saying goodnight, the father of 5-year-old Walter mentions, circuitously and "perhaps half against his will", that a cousin has died. The child has the feeling the information is incomplete, which makes him "pull up short". The miniature piece ends with these sentences: "But I did take special note, that evening, of my room and my bed, just as a person pays closer attention to a place when he has a presentiment that, one day, he will have to retrieve from it something forgotten. Only after many years did I learn what that something was. In this room, my father had kept from me part of the news: my cousin had died of syphilis."⁵

When I was a child – maybe a bit older than 10 – my parents gave me an edition of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales. At one point the book lay open on my table while I was busy using glue. A drop fell on the book and glued two pages together. In trying to separate them with a knife, a sentence became unreadable. Wanting to know what the sentence was, I wrote the publisher and received an answer: "The Goths considered the possibility that it was more merciful to preserve their children by selling

2 This is not meant to suggest that the déjà vu experience is always an expression of migraine, of epilepsy, or in fact of any pathological phenomenon whatsoever.

3 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, translated by Rodney Livingstone, Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, et al., Volume 3, (Harvard U. P., 1996-2003).

4 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*.

5 Jean-Michel Palmier sees the importance this cause of death had for Benjamin as based in his strong interest in Berlin's prostitutes. See Jean-Michel Palmier, *Walter Benjamin. Le chiffonnier, l'Ange et le Petit Bossu*, (Klincksieck, 2006), 85.

them than to kill them by keeping them." This sentence left a nearly literal stamp on me for decades. And as an image, the place this happened also left its stamp on me, with me in the picture. In my memory, I see myself statically as in a photo, my view extending from the situation into the distance. As a grown man, I engaged in a search for my mother's unclear origins. I learned that during the Great War, when she was a few months old, her mother had placed her forever in other hands because she was so poor that her child's life was threatened.

In both these narratives, what is at stake is the imprint of an event and its place. In little Walter's narrative, it unfolds more actively – he commits something to memory; in my narrative, more passively – something is committed to my memory. But in both cases, more or less consciously an inkling emerges that something requiring supplementation or uncovering is at work there. This inkling, this "pulling up short" is the crux.

The theme is only understood retrospectively. At one point Benjamin writes: "Like ultraviolet rays memory shows to each man in the book of life a script that invisibly and prophetically glosses the text."^{6,7}

Wolfdietrich Schnurre⁸ writes: "There are signs, no doubt about it. But they are not given to me; I give them to me."

Notable in "News of a Death" is the question narrator-Benjamin poses of whether the term "*déjà vu*" is really "felicitous," *glücklich* – whether it isn't rather an "echo...awakened by a sound."⁹ Clinicians continue to face that question. Hence Dieter Janz¹⁰ observes an "indecision" on the part of his patients as to whether "an image, an idea, a memory, or even a sound or...a thought" is really at work here.

6 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser et al. (eds.), (Suhrkamp, 1987), IV-1, 142.

7 Benjamin treats such retrospect elsewhere as well: in observing a wedding photo of Carl Dauthendey and his bride, he asks whether it reveals, belatedly, the fact that after the birth of her sixth child, she would commit suicide. See Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 510.

8 Wolfdietrich Schnurre, *Der Schattenfotograf*, (Ullstein, 1992), 252.

9 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 129.

10 Dieter Janz, *Die Epilepsien*. (Thieme, 1969), 183.

In order to understand what constitutes a déjà vu experience in the episode Benjamin describes, Ernst Bloch's essay "Images of Déjà Vu" is helpful. In the essay, Bloch offers an account of conversations he had with Benjamin in the 1920s¹¹, with déjà vu treated as involving forgotten, broken, neglected material needing completion, riddle-solving.

The fact that, in the miniature "News of a Death," the child Walter commits to memory the place where he is confronted with what has been forgotten and is pulled up short, can be interpreted as a construction meant to make it possible to later discover what was forgotten. In this way it corresponds to a déjà vu constellation.

We also find a decipherment effort in the dreamlike state of a patient with a déjà vu experience of epileptic origin, described in 1888 by John Hughlings Jackson¹². The patient reports: "I woke up in the night with an impression that I had succeeded in recollecting something I wanted to recollect, but was too sleepy to give any attention to it, and had no definite idea of it." Here memory and forgetting seem juxtaposed.

Delusions of memory and perception of the present

Theodor Reik, by contrast, opposes the concept of *Gedächtnis*, translatable as "memory," to the concept of *Erinnerung*, translatable as "reminiscence." He supports this with a succinct sentence from Franz Werfel's novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*: "I've got a good memory because I'm bad at reminiscence."¹³ For Reik, "memory," *Gedächtnis*, has the function of protecting impressions; in opposition to it, reminiscence is "destructive," signifying a "perforation of unconscious memory." "Only what has become reminiscence is subject to the process of exhaustion common to all organic life."¹⁴ Reik sees the function of

11 Ernst Bloch, Images of déjà vu, *Literary Essays*, translated by Andrew Joron et al., (Stanford, 1998) 200.

12 John-Hughlings Jackson, On a particular variety of epilepsy (intellectual aura), (*Brain*, 1888), 11, 202.

13 Franz Werfel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, translated by Geoffrey Dunlop, (Modern Library, 1934) translation modified, 523.

14 Theodor Reik, *Surprise and the Psycho-Analyst: On the Conjunction and Com-*

"reminiscence" as a "liquidation of impressions", hence processing and change.

Several references reinforce the idea that reminiscence signifies change:

Speaking of the images in his "Imperial Panorama", Walter Benjamin recounts the following¹⁵: "And so it happened that the longing [they] aroused spoke more to the home than to anything unknown. Thus it was that, one afternoon, while seated before a transparency of the little town of Aix, I tried to persuade myself that, once upon a time, I must have played on the patch of pavement that is guarded by the old plane trees of the Cours Mirabeau." Janz reports on a patient¹⁶ who in a *déjà vu* state received a "homey image, as out of good old days" from an aunt she never met in a house she never saw. Here again we have the intertwining with a place, but now not with what has been forgotten – rather with a feeling. The place, however, had never been seen.

Sigmund Freud, as well, was concerned with the illusions of recognition, *fausse reconnaissance*.¹⁷

I will choose one of the relevant stories he presents in his work, the manifestation of *déjà vu* – he uses the term – in a young girl.

"The patient, who was at that time a twelve year-old child, was visiting a family in which there was a brother who was seriously ill and at the point of death; while her own brother had been in a similarly dangerous condition a few months earlier. But with the earlier of these two similar events there had been associated a phantasy that was incapable of entering consciousness – namely, a wish that her brother should die. Consequently, the analogy between the two cases could not become conscious. And the perception of it was replaced by the phenomenon of "having been through it all before," the identity being displaced from the really common element on to the locality."¹⁸

prehension of Unconscious Processes, translated by Margaret M. Green, Trench, Trubner & co, (1936), 132.

15 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 347.

16 Janz, 183.

17 Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Volumes XIII, (Hogarth Press 1953-1978), 201-210.

18 Freud, 203-204.

In his story “A Light Tug in the Heart Region” (“Ein leises Ziehen in der Herzgegend”¹⁹), Ralf Rothmann also writes about such illusions. Here we find a man and his wife searching for a place from his childhood. When he mistakenly thinks he has found it, “he again recognizes what he never saw.” When he then finds the real place, we read: “It was exactly like that...but it’s also not it.”

Max Frisch sees an invention in every personal history, including one’s own: “Sooner or later everyone invents for himself a story which he regards as his life.”²⁰ He very precisely ascertains our forgetting, not so much of our “non-deeds,” what we could have done, but of our real ones.²¹

Hence it is no coincidence that F., who suffers from migraine since early childhood, is writing her MA thesis on monuments to state repression, hence culture of remembrance; it is no coincidence that as a young woman she is concerned with the history of her family as a “project centered on recollection.”

Illusion of perception of the present is also at work in *déjà vu*. Henri Bergson maintained that all perception was permeated by memory. Benjamin observes that things in the present are considered from out of a veil or wrapping.²² Janz speaks of a patient who sees “everything through other spectacles.”²³ Schnurre similarly speaks of a *schon einmal*, a present as past and past as present, in *déjà vu*.^{24, 25}

19 Ralf Rothmann, *Ein leises Ziehen in der Herzgegend*, in *Hotel der Schlaflosen*, (Suhrkamp, 2020), 201.

20 Max Frisch, *A Wilderness of Mirrors*, (NY Random House, 1966), 47.

21 Frisch, 56.

22 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV-2, 995.

23 Janz, 181.

24 Schnurre, 441.

25 I learned that Wolfdietrich Schnurre suffered from migraine in conversation with Marina Schnurre.

Temporal doubling

According to Gabriele Brandstetter²⁶ a "doubling of a perception in a time-lag" takes place in a *déjà vu* experience.

In the miniature "The Moon"²⁷ Benjamin mentions remarkable phenomena he experienced as a child. These are connected with an alteration of time. The Earth, "deceptively" illuminated by moonlight, is transformed into a "counter-earth or alternate earth." "[T]he noise," we read, "with which I put down first the carafe and then the glass – it all struck my ear as repetition." The present becomes past. From a medical perspective experiencing this is the expression of a migraine.²⁸

But the future also becomes the present. "When I returned to my bed a moment later, it was invariably with the fear of finding myself already stretched out upon it." O., who suffers from epilepsy, speaks of a temporal lapse of such a nature that she "suddenly, like in an attack" can look into the future. She thus has the feeling a blue auto is standing there that she's never seen, and there it is. This is connected to a simultaneity of contrariness: "I see it from above, not from above." A well-known woman suffering from migraine and acquainted with *déjà vu* explains that "I haven't yet clearly experienced it, and still I know it exactly and know what one or another person in this scene says and will do." Bloch²⁹ writes: "in *déjà-vu* one has the impression of knowing exactly what will happen in the next instant (but never beyond that)." Schnurre³⁰ likewise

26 Günter Oesterle, *Déjà vu in Literatur und bildender Kunst*, (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003), 151-162.

27 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 382.

28 A 31 May 1935 letter of Walter Benjamin to Theodor W. Adorno can be read as confirming this hypothesis. In the letter Benjamin explains that "severe migraine headaches remind me of my precarious existence often enough." See Walter Benjamin, *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (eds.), translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 490.

29 Bloch, 237.

30 Schnurre, 440.

discusses a “punctual knowledge of the future” and consequently sees a “nervous and mental special state” that initially overtaxes consciousness with the processing of an “experience that is later perceived as recognized,” so that a “real construction” can only proceed in delayed fashion.

But such phenomena also prompt us to think about time as described by Bergson. It is another time than that of distinct, isolated, sequential events.³¹ Rather, it is a time marked by change in an “endless flow”³², “moments of which permeate one another”³³. In this way, with an “inattentive ear”, the strokes of a tower-clock fuse, in his perception, into a “kind of musical phrase”³⁴ and he becomes aware of “a quality and not...a quantity”, a “duration”³⁵ but not a quantity, which would signify a “process of addition.”³⁶ The “continuity of the melody” is impossible to break apart³⁷.

It is not surprising that Bergson illustrates the time of endless flow through music. For we can readily identify the turbulence, rapids, and hesitations of the time Bergson refers to in music’s *ritardando* and *accelerando*, advances and returns, resumptions, merging, and pauses that are not full stops. And in the temporal framework within which Bergson writes, music and *déjà vu* are one and the same.

Present in both music and *déjà vu* are both Bergson’s sort of time and that of sequential events. A philosopher has told me of an experience

31 Concerning the latter, Cees Nooteboom elegantly proposes it is a “system meant to ensure that everything does not take place at once.”. See Cees Nooteboom, *Die folgende Geschichte*, (Suhrkamp, 1991), 47.

32 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell, Palgrave, (2007), 2.

33 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* [original: *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*], translated by E.L. Pogson, (Dover, 2001), 110.

34 Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 127.

35 Paul Valéry observes that duration is a “sensation” and “always an attribute of something”. See Paul Valéry, *Cahiers / Notebooks*, Brian Stimpson (ed.), translated by Brian Simpson et al., Volume IV, (Peter Lang, 2000-2010), 392.

36 Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 128.

37 Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 176.

without time in an auditorium while time continued to pass on the stage. In his postscript "Music and Time", Gadamer finds in music a "bringing to stand" "in the middle of the entire movement", as a "passing-movement" that "in all duration, does not cease to have a temporal shape."³⁸

The time of both *déjà vu* and music is a time not alien to a simultaneity of things that are opposed.

But the relationship between *déjà vu* and music is not only manifest in the time they share: Nietzsche³⁹ finds primordial oneness in the lyric poet, primordial pain in its first reflection as a music mood, facing "a series of pictures, with a structured causality of ideas." This mood appears, in turn, as a "second reflection."⁴⁰ I interpret *déjà vu* as a dream image in this sense. It is basically musical mood.

Doubling of the person and seeing oneself

Another aspect of *déjà vu* is a doubling of the person experiencing it. Benjamin speaks of rooms that have been forgotten, "from which, for want of light, no image appears on the plate of remembrance... until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixes the room's image on the plate." We ourselves stand at the center of these "precious" images and thus of that space. We stand there in a doubling: as seeing and seen. Which means: the "moments of sudden illumination are at the same time moments when we are beside ourselves." The ego, appearing in the *déjà vu* as a snapshot, is not like "our waking, habitual, everyday self...involved actively or passively in what is happening."⁴¹ We cannot see, Bloch ob-

38 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Music and Time: A Philosophical Postscript*, translated by Cynthia R. Nielsen and David Liakos, (Epoché, 2021), Volume 26 No 1, 471-478.

39 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, translated by Ian Johnston, <https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Nietzsche-The-Birth-of-Tragedy.pdf>, (2008), 21 .

40 I understand Walter Benjamin's thesis in "The Task of the Translator" that translation involves arriving at the "prototype" of a "model" against this backdrop. See Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 262.

41 Walter Benjamin, A Berlin Chronicle, in WB, *One-Way Street and Other Writ-*

serves, “the exact instant as it is being lived; neither the self that lives it, nor the immediate content that it presents.”⁴²

For Benjamin, seeing oneself is a form of recognition. Something similar is expressed by F. She speaks of dreams “like a film.” What is involved here is a persecution. “From which eyes” things are seen is here questionable – eyes of the pursuer or of the pursued or even “from an upper perspective.” The seeing person “is not me, but also nobody else.” We here find the two interrelated motifs of self-seeing and the attendant. The patient speaks of her need to locate herself spatially so as to be aware of everything (!) and thus have the feeling of being able to describe it.⁴³

Benjamin⁴⁴ mentions the phenomenon of “little images” passing by people who are dying or are in mortal danger. These little images represent the collected ego-aspects of a lived life.

The little images are of the sort that the “little hunchback” has of that life. In the same miniature⁴⁵, an attendant surfaces: Benjamin writes that the little hunchback is a “messenger from the realm of forgetting.”⁴⁶ He performs pranks. He is already present when little Walter arrives somewhere. During the day the boy peers through a light-shaft into basements. And then: “Sometimes, though, after I had looked for these sights in vain during the day, I found the situation reversed the following night: in my dreams there were looks, coming from just such cellar holes,

ings (pp. 293-348), translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 343.

42 Bloch, 208.

43 For Paul Valéry seeing oneself is fulfilling a task: “It often happens that if I’ve forgotten something specific, I set about observing myself to grasp this state and this lacuna. I wish to see myself forgetting...” See Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres*, (Gallimard, 1957-1960), Volume I, p.933. Hans-Georg Gadamer sees in the actor a self-seeing aimed at conveying a “meaning to be understood”. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheier and Donald G. Marshall, (Continuum, 2011), 102.

44 Walter Benjamin, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Burkhardt Lindner and Nadine Werner (eds.), (Suhrkamp, 2019), Volume II, 84.

45 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume III, 384.

46 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II-3, 1241.

that froze me in my tracks—looks flung at me by gnomes with pointed hats."⁴⁷ When he encounters the verses in a children's book, it seems to him that the gnomes know more about this little man. But he never saw the little man. "It was he who always saw me."⁴⁸

This sentence "fascinated me greatly" F. writes me. It thus seems to identify something typical.

But who is the person who surfaces in the self-seeing? Valéry distinguishes between the "personality" – "created from memory and habit" – and the "I," "always formed in the present."⁴⁹ I think it probable that either one or the other can appear: in an ongoing involvement, one demanding an overview, the I (in the story of F.); in a contemplation that can also occur later, the person (in my story).

An attendant suddenly appears in the following story as well. V., a boy – notably, the oldest brother in a set of triplets – had celebrated his birthday with other children in a swimming pool. On the way home, he suddenly had the feeling such an attendant had attached himself to him; this figure did not leave him for some days – until the distance increased and the figure vanished. The boy was at least evidently not very upset by this experience. Later, as a young man, he told me that the attendant was not "really familiar" to him but also did not "seem completely alien." He could not "connect him with a face or name." But the attendant knew who *he* was. His own perception was, he indicated, more a kind of "feeling-seeing" than a "real seeing"; he "felt" the presence "of the attendant." It was a feeling "like when we see a room and let it sink in and then close our eyes and after some steps know and physically feel that there are objects in the room. Except I felt I couldn't simply open my eyes and look at what objects were in the room and at what distance."

When later, as a young man, V. writes me "of the windows that offered a possibility to observe him from them", he reminds me of something Benjamin wrote: "An agonizing question slumbers silently at the

47 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume III, 384.

48 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume III, 385.

49 Valéry, *Cahiers / Notebooks*, 322.

base of the story of the little hunchback: what does the little hunchback know about us?"⁵⁰ "Whoever is looked at by this little man pays no attention. Either to himself or to the little man"⁵¹ is the way he puts it in the miniature. With the omission of the subject-pronoun, the sentence-construction seems to me to point linguistically to an interconnection between little Walter and the little man. "The little man preceded me everywhere," just as the child who, stepping up to his bed in the night, fears to see himself already stretched out there. Such an interconnection is also evident in the story of V.

Howard Eiland sees, as he has explained to me, a "dialectic of following/ being followed (Hamlet and the ghost)" in Benjamin's writing. This dialectic seems helpful for understanding the miniature "The Little Hunchback" and the patient's F. dream.

Neuropsychology

Familiarity with a small part of a situation can suffice to give a much broader situation a sense of also being known. Schnurre⁵² likewise does not presume that a seemingly familiar situation can be known in its entirety: "How is the auto accident that up to the last detail I believe I once experienced meant to fit into my past life? This type of auto has existed for 3 years."

Libet⁵³ has shown that the neuronal processes endowing stimuli with consciousness need time. Backdating emergence into consciousness works against this delay. It is conceivable that the temporal lags that Benjamin reports in his miniature "The Moon" are tied to similar processes.

Schnurre's observation – already mentioned in connection with temporal lag in *déjà vu* – that in the case of overload through an experience's immediate processing, consciousness will occasionally only produce a

50 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II-3, 1241.

51 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume III, 385.

52 Schnurre, 276.

53 Benjamin Libet, *Mind time: The Temporal Factor in Consciousness*, (Harvard U.P., 2004), 73.

"real construction after delay", closely approximates neurological findings.⁵⁴ Here as well we find an alignment with Reik, who sees the possibility of "impressions that were too intense or too sudden to be assimilated mentally within a given time" being set aside "for later assimilation."⁵⁵

In my present comments, seeing oneself has been described as both a view of one's own body and that of an attendant. There are indications that the temporal lobe is involved in both phenomena.⁵⁶ Susan Blackmore⁵⁷ sees the impact of memory and imagination at work in the experience of viewing one's own body.⁵⁸

F. responds as follows to the question of whether she sees connections with her biography or a play of neurons in her dream life: "I lean toward the play of neurons." But in her next sentence she concedes "that we likely don't consciously recall all our experiences, though they unconsciously play a role." This comment brings to mind the "hypermnesia" that Freud sees as present in dreams.⁵⁹

Remarkably, the time about which Bergson writes is also in accord with neuropsychological findings. Hence Libet⁶⁰ finds "an overlapping

54 Schnurre, 440.

55 Reik, 129-130.

56 William Mayer-Gross sees a preformed functional response of the brain in depersonalization experiences ("changes of the self"). Although self-seeing cannot be considered a depersonalization experience in the strict sense – this because awareness of being the person doing the self-seeing is retained – the phenomena are related. Consequently I consider it possible that such preformation is at its base as well. The evolutionary advantage could lie in a more complete grasp of a situation. See William Mayer-Gross, *On depersonalization*. (British Journal of Medicine and Psychology, 1935), 15, 103-126.

57 Susan Blackmore, *Beyond the body. An investigation of out-of-the-body experiences*, (Academy Chicago Publishers, 1992), 243.

58 Blackmore sees the following as necessary preconditions:

1. Vivid and detailed imagery;
 2. Low reality testing so that memories and images may seem 'real';
 3. Sensory input from the body reduced or not attended to;
 4. Awareness and logical thinking maintained.
- (See Blackmore.)

59 Freud, Volume IV, 46.

60 Libet, 148.

of the different mental events” corresponding to the idea of Bergson’s endlessly flowing change. Libet points expressly to this correspondence.

Déjà vu – pleasing or alarming

Let us place a biographical note of Walter Benjamin before the history of O. Looking back at the year 1932, in 1938, he wrote the following in the foreword to “Berlin Childhood”⁶¹: “...when I was abroad...I deliberately called to mind those images which in exile, are most apt to waken homesickness: images of childhood.”

As a young woman, O. came with high hopes to Germany from Kazakhstan; but the hopes had partly foundered. Dreams had emerged, she explained, where she did not know if she was awake or sleeping: “I wanted to wake up but couldn’t...I probably was also awake.” In these dreams, she saw her parents as young people. “We were all together in the kitchen...mentally I feel very good in these attacks ...I feel really there.” She sees the doorknobs of the house in Kazakhstan, which she loved, and which her mother removed without keeping one for her. Concerning the “feeling of happiness” she experiences in this way, she says: “It’s always the past... Earlier I could do it on purpose, now it comes really easily by itself.” Already in the feeling of happiness, she knows she is going to feel bad right away.

What is sealed off is not so alien to what has been forgotten. I associate this with the doorknobs. The doorknobs are interwoven with home and happiness.

“The situation... imposed itself on us; we wrapped ourselves in it” is the way Benjamin puts it⁶². “On purpose” or “comes by itself” – this is O.’s formulation. We see how helpful Benjamin’s images of imposition and enveloping are in connection with déjà vu.

Something similar is at work in Schnurre. There we find a grown man’s “reminiscence” of his listening father and himself as a snowman-building 4-year-old – the “epitome of a feeling of togetherness.” We further read that “constantly, although there was little to hope for in war” he

61 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 344.

62 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV-2, 995.

"tried to switch to this Frankfurt winter day." And then a "dream-feeling" is present⁶³.

The experience during déjà vu can be very happy, as in these two stories. It can also be very frightening, as in the story, cited by Janz, of a man who recurringly begged his father not to beat him, "please don't beat me!" His first epileptic attack had been preceded by blows with a poker^{64,65}.

Speech limits

Considering the dreamlike states in which patients experience déjà vu would be incomplete without some reflection on human speech.

Nearly all patients say they cannot describe (rather than: cannot impart) this experience after they try to do so. Often it seems easier for them to describe what this experience is not. Janz writes as follows: "Each time, what is difficult to describe is reflected in the embarrassment and helplessly wandering eyes of the ill individuals when they begin to describe their sensations....experiences for which words are lacking."⁶⁶ And for this reason at some point they end their efforts at description.

And it becomes a task for some of them to reflect on language and its general limits.

F. once writes me: "Finding or even understanding the limits of language, how this system made of limits and infinite usage makes itself graspable, has always interested me."

Perhaps Benjamin also reflects on language-with these language limits in mind. In the journal-collection "On Hashish", treating experiments with drugs between 1927 and 1934, we find this striking sentence: "I'd like to write something that comes from things the way wine comes from grapes."⁶⁷ He may be concerned with the same thing when he speaks

63 Schnurre, 367.

64 Janz, 213.

65 Strictly speaking, what is in play here is not déjà vu but "captured arousal"; more on this in the cited passage in Janz.

66 Janz, 180.

67 Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, translated by Howard Eiland, et al., (Harvard U.P., 2006), 69.

once – in connection with translations – of a difference between “what is meant” and the “way to mean it.”⁶⁸ (To try to describe a déjà vu experience means trying to translate the semiotics of dream-language into our ordinary language of communication.)

In language, Gadamer⁶⁹ discovers the capacity “to imagine something without being delivered to it.” But déjà vu has the status of being delivered. This, as well, may contribute to the impossibility of describing déjà vu. When Valéry similarly writes: “Language enables us not to *see*”⁷⁰ then Thomas Stölzel is certainly correct in interpreting this as “pushing the designation, like a black object, before the designated object.”⁷¹

The aforementioned philosopher explained the indescribable nature of her dreamlike states to me as follows: “I’m lacking the language games, the shared language, to allude to something that other people could have also experienced.”

F., to whom I gave my draft to read, wrote me as follows: “Time and again I find it fascinating that I consider the word-choice of other patients fitting and think I’m able to understand them well. I here assume that the statements of others aren’t understood because they somehow sound vague and are hard to grasp. The statements seem ‘simply read’ not really saying much, but for me many spark a real feeling, just because I know it from somewhere.”

But for Benjamin more is there than simply “objective writing” connected to an “elimination of the “unsayable” and that remains closed to “an entirely different magic.” In a letter to Martin Buber dated July 1916, he distinguishes this from the poets and prophets.^{72, 73}

Both Benjamin and Schnurre became virtuosos of language.

68 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV-1, 14.

69 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, (Mohr, 1993), Volume 8, 355.

70 Valéry, *Cahiers / Notebooks*, Volume IV, 103.

71 Thomas Paul Valéry Stölzel, *Ich grase meine Gehirnwiese ab*, (S. Fischer, 2016), 333.

72 Benjamin, *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, 79.

73 I recognize something of this language in much of Friedrich Hölderlin’s unity of sound and image; for instance in “Hälfte des Lebens,” Hölderlin ono-

Notably, Benjamin was interested in children's etymologies, and for his part Schnurre sees in his nearly four-year-old son Nenad one of his "most incorruptible sources for the well-based assumption that names involve a not at all exhaustible formula hermetically taking in the essential core of the bearer. He hears himself in them, listens to the humming of consonants, inquires into the depth of the vowels....The name alone produces color, life, contour."⁷⁴

A kindergarten-age child P. describes what he experiences as "*die Kraft kommt*." I find in it the expression of blowing (aura) as well as of somewhat overwhelming. None of my patients could better describe dream-like experience. Gadamer⁷⁵ analogously describes the richer approach children have to language so: a limitation is tied to a greater degree of "discerning what is characteristically significant" and "forming what is general."

Images where language reaches its limits

A great-great-aunt of F. likewise had a migraine. Her child had died when still an infant. After she had failed in an effort to verbally describe her life, she tried to do so in pictures.

In the middle of one of her pictures (see next page) a child's head can be made out in a flower. The child's head has a shadow-like appearance; the view is veiled. On the picture's left side a fairy or princess has her head turned caringly toward the child's head.; her view is also veiled, and she also seems a shadow. She stands, perhaps, for death. From the right side, a witch waves or beckons in the head's direction. Her gaze is alert; in any case, it is turned toward the child's head less than is her left hand. She is carrying a smiling teddy bear on her back. Highly alert and almost threatening, the eyes of an owl and beast of prey are directed at viewers.

matopoetically (which is to say musically) expresses life's winter as follows: *Die Mauern stehn/ sprachlos und kalt, im Winde/ klirren die Fahnen* ("The walls stand/ speechless and cold, in the wind/ the weathervanes rattle").

74 Schnurre, 356.

75 Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Volume 8, 350.



We know that pairs of eyes repeatedly appeared in the painter's dreams. This picture thus leads us to consider seeing, for reflection about déjà vu is incomplete without reflection about seeing.

Seeing

That seeing is important in déjà vu is already clear in the stories of F. und V. and in the "Little Hunchback" miniature. Occasionally an asymmetry of seeing and being seen may be present, as in both the miniature and story of V. As is the case in the story of F., sometimes it may prompt deliberate confusion. Valéry⁷⁶ writes of "exchanging looks." I believe it is something else, and more than a response. Looks create a "chiasmus." Valéry sees the following in play for dreams: "What I see sees me as much as I see it."⁷⁷ His reference is to *équation*⁷⁸; I also find the

76 Paul Valéry, *Analects*, translated by Stuart Gilbert, (Princeton U.P., 1970), 26.

77 Valéry, *Analects*, 301.

78 Valéry, *Oeuvres*, Volume II, 729.

concept of entanglement at work here.⁷⁹ When Valéry⁸⁰ finds in dreams "as it were a consciousness of things instead of a consciousness of oneself (of the 'body?')"⁸¹ and what "explains and expresses"⁸² is an incursion of the ego, then we may very well find an equation in the sense involved here. An ego, an "I," is present in dreams and in *déjà vu* – how can anxiety, happiness, trust have their place in them otherwise? Waking from a dream means recognizing oneself (as a self)⁸³.

With the capacity "to be attentive," the dreamer "invests" in things⁸⁴; I think we can equate those who dream with the poet spoken of by Benjamin.

It is the image that renders the somewhat obscure Valéry-citation somewhat more understandable for me. And both the image and the citation come even closer when I read and follow what Valéry writes elsewhere: "When, as a child, I used to draw little men in my exercise books, there was always a very solemn moment. It was when I gave them eyes. And such eyes! I felt I as bringing them to life and felt the life I was bringing them. I felt like someone breathing life into clay."⁸⁵

The view of things is hard to understand. Benjamin sees things "invested" by the poet "with the ability to look back at us"⁸⁶. As suggested, I

79 In waking, by contrast, Valéry discovers an *égalité*. I think this involves the following conceptual distinction: when something changes in an *égalité*, an inequality results; but a change in an *équation* leads to an identical change in all terms.

80 Valéry, *Cahiers / Notebooks*, Volume III, 480.

81 Involved here is consciousness of the self. Valéry defines the self so: "The basis of the self is therefore the belief that one doesn't differ; that in fact one departs a little from oneself but one comes back again; and that what does change even in the most intimate, close and sensitive areas, that precisely is not 'I'". See Valéry, *Cahiers / Notebooks*, Volume I, 331. Presumably, a lack of consciousness of self also explains the lack of clarity facing Patient F.

82 Valéry, *Analects*, 301.

83 Valéry, *Cahiers / Notebooks*, Volume III, 481.

84 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume II, 348.

85 Valéry, *Cahiers / Notebooks*, Volume II, 31.

86 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume II, 338.

think that in this context the poet should be equated with the dreamer. In another passage, Benjamin speaks of a view of things that have “a questioning existence”⁸⁷: “Things perceive us; their gaze propels us into the future.” Here openness for the view of things is ascribed not to the poet, not to the dreamer, but to youth. The three are relations.

An alternative earth

Benjamin introduces the miniature “The Moon”⁸⁸ with the following words: “The light streaming down from the moon has no part in the theater of our daily existence. The terrain so deceptively illuminated by it seems to belong to some counter-earth or alternative earth.” The idea of such an earth stems from the philosopher Philolaos. It serves to “balance out the universe.”⁸⁹

In Benjamin’s “Sylvestergeschichte ... Das zweite Ich”⁹⁰ the focus is on non-deeds, on things that are stuck in intentions. Behind this, I find something like: could just as easily have happened, hence potentiality. Tellingly, this story takes place in dim light; and just as tellingly, concerning the protagonist we read as follows: “Maybe he simply isn’t walking; maybe he’s simply dreaming that he’s walking.”

I thus understand the “alternative earth” as a place of potentiality and also indeterminateness, the earth as a place of facticity and causality. The two places are intertwined – after all, “balancing out” involves intertwining. Earth and alternative earth together constitute reality but alternative earth is experienced in dreams.

Once more, my own experience

Memory alters us, leaves behind traces of use: this is also doubtless the case for memory of scraps of dreams or a déjà vu experience. It is also the case for the memory of one’s own experience, as conveyed in these comments. I thus consider it possible that a photograph showing me at a

87 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume I, 12.

88 Benjamin, *A Berlin Chronicle*, 382.

89 Benjamin, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Volume II, 231.

90 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII-1, *Nachträge*, 296.

later time has pressed itself into my memory.

Benjamin writes that there is a "not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has taken place whose advancement has the structure of awakening."⁹¹ Benjamin vividly illustrates what he means: "The coming awakening stands like the Greek wooden horse in the Troy of dreams."⁹² In my experience, we can find such not yet conscious knowledge.

But we are left with a mysterious remainder: why was the unreadable place in the book precisely the place where I confronted myself with my mother's story? Here we need a decision: whether the remainder is understood as "chance" or "fate." Don't we have a longing for meaning? I think I find something of this longing in Schnurre when he writes: "Walter Benjamin would like to rescue déjà vu. I do as well."⁹³

Closing comments

Following this outline of various themes, déjà vu continues to be a riddle. But I hope I've succeeded in naming some of its main features. Its relation to music, the significance of looking, and the structure of intertwining it possesses are important to me; also that it contains "precious images" and is at the same time illusion, together with the observation that our language reaches its limits when trying to describe it, and why that is.

I began a review of such themes years ago with the aim of finding references in Walter Benjamin that could help me to retrospectively better understand déjà vu experiences of my patients with migraine or epilepsy. Later, I continued the review with Wolfdietrich Schnurre. It is certainly no coincidence that both these authors suffered from migraine.

Something riddling remains.

Perhaps through rendering the limits of language tangible in a special way, experiencing déjà vu can serve as motivation for interest in philosophy of language; and through its inherent illusion for reflection on our memory. Here as well, it can manifest itself as a task.

91 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V-1, 491.

92 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V-1, 495.

93 Schnurre, 276.

These comments have thus involved an effort to expand a medical view of déjà vu with a literary-artistic counterpart—as well as an effort to expand the medical view itself.

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--Translated from the German by Joel Golb

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In respect to the history of Patient F., I refer readers with medical training in particular to my article "Ungewöhnlicher Verlauf und ungewöhnliche Therapie einer kindlichen Migräne," *Zeitschrift für Epileptologie* 23, 2010, 119-121.

Mimesis and Concept Subsumption: the Dialectic of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Stefan Bird-Pollan¹

Abstract: The Dialectic of Enlightenment has often been condemned a bleak work, one which gives up on rationality entirely (Habermas). We can avoid this conclusion by attending to the Kantian dimension of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Kant supplies Horkheimer and Adorno with a model for thinking that myth construed as mimesis is not simply fused with enlightenment in the totalizing way Habermas has argued it is, but rather continues to provide a dialectical antipode to reason's totalizing tendencies. Here it is especially Kant's theory of schematization, the ability of mind to encounter sensibility, that is central. Mimesis represents our first order uptake of nature, that which, for Kant, produces intuition and can be subsumed under the universal. These two forms of cognition stand in an antagonistic relationship in enlightenment thinking.

Central to Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of enlightenment is that enlightenment, most prominently the culture industry, seeks to eradicate the mimetic element in thinking. Thus enlightenment threatens to colonize even our (mimetic) ways of seeing before they are made into concepts. This would make any concept deployment potentially ideological because it would not be based on experience. On such a view, concepts would simply give rise to more concepts, becoming totalizing. Yet on the other hand, Kant's insistence that sensibility and conceptuality are fundamentally heterogeneous, means that this colonization can never become total but is rather dialectical mind and nature are irreducible to each other. I propose that the dialectic between mimesis and concept subsumption can be understood in terms of Kant's theory of reflective and determinative judgment. The result that mind is structured on a continuum between mimesis and concept subsumption means that the pervasiveness of ideology in modern society is not

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necessary but is rather a historical development. This ideological moment can potentially be reduced by paying attention to the forms of non-conceptual thinking we habitually engage in.

I. Introduction: Ideology Critique and Totalization

Ideology critique is a delicate business. It carries with it a particularly modern danger, the danger of opening up a bad infinite of reflection. While for thinkers from Plato to Bacon and Descartes, the errors of thinking could generally be attributed to failures to use the right method, the question of method began to take on a particularly problematic turn with Kant's move away from transcendent philosophy to a transcendental philosophy.² For Kant, transcendental philosophy is an approach to nature which takes into account the necessary situatedness *in* nature of the subject doing the investigating. The Copernican turn's concession that "objects must conform to cognitions" rather than other way around means that any method the subject chooses for their investigation will bring with it the danger that the empirical subject's own interests and motivation rather than the subject's formal cognitive capacities will be the ground of the results of any investigation. (Bxvi) Hence we must learn to distinguish between science and philosophy. For what Kant has irrevocably achieved in the Copernican turn is to place the subject in conflict with themselves by internalizing the division between mind and nature:

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett 1996). A296/B352. The first *Critique* will henceforth be cited in text according to standard convention of A/B pagination. Kant's other works will be cited according to the *Akademieausgabe* pagination, volume: page. Adorno's two main texts under considerations here will be cited in text according to volume: page of the *Gesammelte Schriften*. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: philosophische Fragmente*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 3, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970). (DA) and Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, vol. GS 6, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970). (ND) the English editions will be cited following the German simply by page number, using: Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1992).

the nature over which we now have limited control and knowledge is *our* nature. Ideology critique is based on the idea that that what is plainly evident to mind as the source of its action is, in fact, subject to hidden forces. Putting it this way, I hope, captures the senses given to mind by the three modern masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.³

Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* stands in the tradition of ideology critique and as such stands *also* in suspicion of having overreached, of having become dogmatic in its skepticism of reason and hence of having offered a totalizing critique of reason. For while it is always controversial to suggest that a particular empirical condition licenses a certain method without further methodological consideration about what licenses *that* claim, we may, in this case, suppose that the devastation wrought by fascism in the 1930s and 1940s makes it reasonable to claim that something had gone wrong. Yet post-war, that is, in the years of hegemonic liberal consensus, Adorno and Horkheimer's critique began to look as if its legitimacy stemmed from the despair which gave rise to the work, written in exile by two German Jews.⁴

Habermas, for instance, has suggested the following model through which to understand the dialectic of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Habermas distinguishes between what might be called a Kantian version of ideology critique which he prefers and the Nietzschean version which, Habermas contends, furnishes the model for Horkheimer and Adorno.⁵ For Kant, ideology critique functions essentially by challenging subjects to reflect more deeply on the reasons for their actions which is to say to recognize the necessity of making their beliefs and actions coherent with their intrinsic rational capacities. Kant's critique amounts to saying that

3 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970). 32. It is already a prominent idea in Kant that an individual's reasons for action can never be known absolutely. For instance at A551/B579.

4 For the context and history of the writing of the text, see Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingston (London: Polity, 2005). 272-82.

5 Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: zwölf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985). 131.

it is really of no use to have others think for me because, in the end, *I* have to think that *their* thinking is legitimate *for me*. So why not think for myself in the first place.⁶ This self-vindicating critique of ideology is based on the fundamental claim that “the I must be capable of accompanying all of my representations”. (B132-33)

The Nietzschean critique which Habermas finds in Horkheimer and Adorno amounts to a second inflection of this Kantian position: Kant’s notion of reason is no better than the earlier cognitive form through which human related to nature, namely myth.⁷ If reason, previously the chief weapon in the arsenal of ideology critique, can be criticized as itself ideological, we face the abyss of relativism and a complete lack of standards for theoretical and ethical life. Ideology, on this view, has become total simply because every thought must stand in suspicion of being an expression of the two poles: myth or self-interest.⁸ While myth represents the demise of the subject, self-preservation represents its hypostatization. The problem with the totalizing view is not just that it deprives us of a universal standard by which to judge what we should do or how we could know anything, it also means that there can be no rational ground for even calling an argument ideological. So ideology critique must implode.

Yet we can avoid saddling Adorno and Horkheimer with the claim that their critique of reason is totalizing and seek to understand what drove them to such a seemingly extreme view. Eighty years after its publication, the work continues to exercise a continued fascination. We can avoid this conclusion, I shall argue, precisely *by* attending to the Kantian dimension

6 “Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment.” Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” in *Practical philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). 8:35.

7 Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: zwölf Vorlesungen*. 141.

8 For a nuanced analysis of the concept of ideology, with reference to the Frankfurt School and specifically Habermas, see Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). chapter 1, especially 30.

of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that is, by seeing that Horkheimer and Adorno do not abandon the Kantian model of self-correction but rather emphasize that self-correction, at the structural level, must be understood as fundamentally dialectical.⁹

Kant supplies Horkheimer and Adorno with a model for thinking that myth construed as mimesis is not simply fused with enlightenment in the totalizing way Habermas think it is, but rather continues to provide a dialectical antipode to reason. It is only the *fusion* of the two which would constitute totalization. Here it is especially Kant's theory of schematization, the ability of mind to encounter sensibility, that is central. As Adorno and Horkheimer read it, Kant's schematism chapter makes vivid the problematic tendency of all philosophy, namely to equate nature with mind and thus to fall into idealism. Yet, read in the right way, the schematism chapter *also* shows us the dialectic which exists between the sensible and the conceptual, demonstrating that the two cannot simply be equated. (ND 6:140; 137) On the one hand, enlightenment as myth threatens to colonize even our ways of seeing *before* they are made into concepts, making concepts ideological from their inception and insuring that no later conceptual critique could alter their fundamental structure. The version would be in line with Habermas' view— call it the totalizing view. This version might be called *historical* because it traces reason's return to myth. Yet on the other hand, Kant's insistence that sensibility and conceptuality are fundamentally *heterogeneous*, means that this colonization can never become total— call this the dialectical view, one that insists on the irreducibility of the dialectic between mind and nature. I shall call this the *structural* reading because it focuses on the underlying conditions of which the historical is itself a condition.¹⁰

9 Adorno's provocative claim is that the dialectic between being and beings is best preserved in Kant, not Hegel. ND 6:144; 140.

10 It is only natural, from an Adornonian point of view, to ask for the historical and the structural themselves to be put into dialectic. And, while this is a quite reasonable demand, it cannot be carried out within the confines of this paper. A central goal here is to defend Adorno and Horkheimer against the charge of having equated historical developments with the structure of

In focusing on the dialectic between the sensible and the conceptual I shall be offering a structural analysis of the dialectic of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The analysis here is meant to show that reason is dialectical in nature, that it seeks to unify that which is heterogenous but that reason is, at the same time, capable of attending to its own transgressions. This is to take reason precisely in the spirit of Kant, for whom reason has the capacity to reign itself in or to criticize itself. (Axii) Indeed it is Adorno and Horkheimer's strategy to delve deeper into the conception of reason offered by Kant in order to refute those tendencies which would force us to impute idealism to him, which is to say to the idea that reason can legislate for itself without reference to nature.

The paper falls into three further sections. In the second section I will give what I hope to be a neutral account of the main movement of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, especially the worrying claim that our ways of perceiving themselves have become colonized by myth. Section III explores the role Kant's schematism plays in the Adorno and Horkheimer's conceptualization of the ideological domination of modern society through the culture industry. In section IV, I propose that schematism can be understood in terms of a dialectic between mimesis and concept subsumption which I connect to Kant's theory of reflective and determinative judgment. I conclude by arguing that Adorno and Horkheimer's model of mind can be understood as encompassing both mimetic and subsumption moments. This suggests that the pervasiveness of identity thinking in modern society is not necessary but rather a historical development which can, potentially, be reduced by paying attention to the forms of non-conceptual thinking in we habitually engage.

II. Myth and Enlightenment in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

The central double thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is famously: "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology." (DA 3:16; xviii)

reason, as Habermas does. For a similar defense against a critique of Adorno made by Albrecht Wellmer, see J. M. Bernstein, "Mimetic Rationality and Material Inference: Adorno and Brandom," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, no. 227 (2004), section II.

In reconstructing the argument, I shall have three goals. The first is to give a relatively neutral reconstruction with regard to the destruction of reason thesis. The second goal is show that dialectical of enlightenment is theory of cognition which revolves around the two of poles of mimesis/myth and concept subsumption/enlightenment. Finally, I want to emphasize the centrality of Kant's thinking in the argument.

Mimesis and Concept Subsumption

Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the central thesis turns on the relation of two analytically distinct but historically intertwined cognitive processes: mimesis and concept subsumption. I propose that once these two processes are disambiguated we can see that the historical process whereby they have become so viciously intertwined is the outcome of a concrete structural *possibility* rather than being a necessity. In myth, mimesis predominates while in enlightenment concept subsumption, the subsumption of particulars under universals, predominates. The exact meaning of mimesis in Adorno and Horkheimer is a matter of some debate, but we can capture the essential feature by noting that mimesis represents the world in a different way than concept subsumption does.¹¹ Think of the activity of drawing in which the eye focuses on the light and dark, the contour and so forth of that which it seeks to represent. What is sought in a sketch is the way nature appears rather than the 'object' it is.

Yet while these two processes can be held apart analytically, they are each necessarily part of the complete cognitive process. They are, as I will show in the final section, the two halves of what Kant means when he calls knowledge the "representation of representation". (A68/B93) That is, we must have *contact* with the world, *produce* an intuition, in order to be able to subsume that intuition under a rational concept. This means

11 Huysen has identified five discrete sense of mimesis in Adorno. See Andreas Huysen, "Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno," *New German Critique* 81 (2000). 66-67. For another set of senses, see also Martin Jay, "Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe," in *Cultural Semantics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), part I.

that mimesis is never overcome, but like the drive, simply alters form, as Jameson has put it.¹² Mimesis and concept subsumption can morph into each other because they share a logic which is that of making the different same, of creating an identity between nature and self while also maintaining that identity as a difference. The *history* of this cooperation, for Adorno and Horkheimer, is one in which mimesis serves concept subsumption and concept subsumption forgets its debt to mimesis with the consequence that concept subsumption falls back into mimesis. Let us look at this story in terms of the dialectic between myth and enlightenment.

Myth is Already Enlightenment

It is central to the argument that the dialectical being discussed by Adorno and Horkheimer is a dialectic of *cognition*; both myth and enlightenment are modes of encountering the world. They follow Nietzsche in understanding myth as the expression of the need to make nature intelligible¹³. Myth is already enlightenment because it is a mode of organizing the world. The sort of knowledge constituted by myth is in many ways hardly different from scientific knowledge. Myth fixes the world by naming the origins of the object in it. (DA 3:24;) Erich Auerbach, whose great work *Mimesis* was written at just the same time as was *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

12 "It is in any case probably more owing to psychoanalysis than to Hegel or Marx that we are today so willing to grant dialectical continuity to the same impulse and what represses it, and to see the mimetic impulse and the anti-mimetic taboo as a single phenomenon (with contrary effects); while the psychoanalytic construction can then authorize Adorno to develop the principle further (in the Anti-Semitism chapter) and to evoke a 'return of the repressed' of this same repressed mimetic impulse." Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism* (London: Verso, 1990). 105.

13 "The same drive which calls art into being to complete and perfect existence and thus to seduce us into being to complete and perfect existence and thus to seduce us into continuing to live, also gives rise to the world of the Olympians in which the Hellenic 'Will' held up a transfiguring mirror to itself." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). 24. „Die Geburt der Tragödie,“ in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München: DTV, 1980). Vol I: 36.

enment, notes how in the Homeric epic the relation between all events and relationships is fully spelled out, without lacuna or gap.¹⁴

Owen Hulott has, by my count, identified five levels of mimetic development in Adorno and Horkheimer's account which I shall use to scaffold my account here.¹⁵ At its most primitive, mimesis is equal to the tendency of nature to make itself identical with all else. We find this sense in both Caillois' and Freud's conception mimesis, both cited by Adorno and Horkheimer. (DA 3:260; 189) For Caillois, mimesis is the species level drive to assimilate with the natural environment.¹⁶ For Freud, the death drive is the drive to return to inanimate nature.¹⁷ Yet as Hulott points out, this condition is not yet a condition of individuation.¹⁸ Mimesis works against any individuation rather than toward it.

In order to achieve individuation, the organism must differentiate itself from nature. Hulott conceives of this in terms of the category of self-preservation, a central plank of Adorno's materialism directed against idealism. Individuation is driven by the experience of fear, write Adorno and Horkheimer, in which the subject overcomes their thralldom to nature by naming nature, thereby locating themselves at a distance from nature "The cry of terror called forth by the unfamiliar becomes its name." (DA 3:31; 12. cf. DA 3:205) Indeed, consciousness can survive against nature only by adapting its strategies. (DA 3:75; 44-45) What are these strate-

14 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). 6-7.

15 Owen Hulatt, "Reason, Mimesis, and Self-Preservation in Adorno," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 54, no. 1 (2016). For an alternate account, focusing on the epistemic features of mimesis using Hubert Dreyfus' six stage conception of learning, see Pierre-François Noppen, "Adorno on Mimetic Rationality: Three Puzzles," *Adorno Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017). 91-95. Dreyfus' account can be found in Hubert Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2009). chapter 2.

16 Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *October* 31 (1984). 32.

17 Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, and James Strachey, vol. SA III, Sigmund Freud Studienausgabe (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1969-74). 3:248

18 Hulatt, "Reason, Mimesis, and Self-Preservation in Adorno." 141.

gies? In order to overcome the return to the inanimate, the organism must adopt one of nature's two form: the developing and the no longer developing. The organism adopts the form of that which has *already* returned to the inanimate, namely of what is dead¹⁹. (DA 3:75-76; 44-45) This is mysterious, no doubt. The organism's taking on the form of the dead in order to survive can be seen better in its extended form of magic and ritual. The logic is the same: something living is killed, undergoes a change in condition from developing to rigid. Like the organism which substitutes the form of development for that of rigidity, magic works by substitution. The victim transfers its rigidity to the living individual or group.²⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer understand this movement as cheating the gods, as cheating nature. For here the human has gained power over the gods by substituting one condition, death, for another, life. (DA 3:68; 40)

As I have suggested already, for Adorno and Horkheimer the logic of mimesis is a form of *cognition*, a form of separating being and knowing. While in raw mimesis, knowledge of the world stands in service of the organism's reunification, the mimetic form of knowledge gained in magic helps the individual to remain separate from its overpowering force. The magician knows the world in order to dominate it. Thus are knowledge and power linked. All cognition functions by equating one thing with another, a concept with a thing. Yet substitution works in a variety of ways. While the raw form of mimesis achieves equation by *becoming* the other in an act of autopoiesis, the mimesis as self-preservation achieves its goal through *proximity* to the thing. (DA 3:27; 7) Proximity to the object gives the subject their power over the thing.²¹ Yet proximity

19 "Die Ratio, welche die Mimesis verdrängt, ist nicht bloß deren Gegenteil. Sie ist selber Mimesis: die ans Tote." (DA 3:75-76)

20 For a thoughtful treatment of this question with regard to the question of alterity in general as well as with continue reference to Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin, see Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: a Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Unfortunately an engagement with this work is beyond the scope of this essay.

21 The connection between copy and sensuousity is explored in detail by *Mimesis and Alterity: a Particular History of the Senses*. esp. §2-3.

means always *sensuous* proximity and that means that the animal aspect of the human, the part that makes them one with all of nature, will continue to constitute a danger.

Enlightenment Becomes Myth

Better, in a third stage, call it enlightenment, to subsume mimesis under abstract thought and so banish the sensuous. Equivalence, already at play in mimesis, is central to the subject's growing distance to nature. "Whatever might be different is made the same. That is the verdict which critically sets the boundaries to possible experience." (DA 3:28; 8) Nature is turned into a manifold which can be hierarchized, systematized and generally known. (DA 3:26; 7) But as the explicitly Kantian tone of their narrative suggests, nature can only be known systematically if it is known by a *knower* who unifies nature, paradigmatically Kant's "I think, which must be able to accompany all of my representations". (B 132-33; DA 3:26; 7)

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the idea of the ego standing opposite the world should not be conceived in terms of the merely epistemic project of equating subject and object but always also as the self's total arrogation of authority by which, even in early anthropomorphism, the ego institutes itself as the measure of all things. (DA 3:25; 5-6) The ego achieves this total equation and domination of nature through the means of the concept of law. Newton's third law, the every force brings with it an equal and opposite reaction, establishes and equates all of nature. (DA 3:28; 8) Though this equation, the ego must subsume itself under law as well. This subsumption, however, is more than merely the instantiation of a law. For the subject the cognition of nature, as we saw, is always also an expression of their power. This point reveals a further hidden feature of law, namely that in the instantiation of law as domination of nature, the mimetic process remains at work. The inner principle of science is itself mythic and therefore mimetic: that every occurrence be explained as the repetition of something that happened earlier. (DA 3:28; 8) Thus far from having achieved something like objective and impersonal knowledge, science is itself the means of a making same of subject and nature.

Yet enlightenment, the subsumption of nature under the categories of the understanding achieves its dominance only through what, in a fourth movement, we must call the repressive phase. For in order to equate all with all, what does not conform must be excised. (DA 3:29; 9) We can understand this thought as follows. The danger of sensuous particularity which threatened to destabilize self-preservation and which had to be controlled by means of the abstraction of law, must now, in the service of the new cognitive stage of recognition under concepts, be repressed in order for science to be credible. In a passage worth citing, Adorno and Horkheimer write:

The identity of everything with everything is bought at the cost that nothing can at the same time be identical to itself. Enlightenment dissolves away the injustice of the old inequality of unmediated mastery, but at the same time perpetuates it in universal mediation, by relating every existing thing to every other. (DA 3:28-29; 8)

Recall that the original thought of the separation of individual and nature required borrowing the rigid aspect of nature in order to form the subject. This required the ability to equate one thing's form with another's. This process of equation lies at the core of the subject's continual self-formation out of fluidity *into* form. Enlightenment has found a very powerful formula for maintaining the individual's rigidity or form. Yet the achievement of this form comes at the cost of denying what is *also* human, namely fluidity, change and death. These fluidity must be exorcized in order to maintain faith in the universal subject enlightenment teaches us to believe in.

Thus we have moved from the unstable cognitive operation of mimesis, equivalence through proximity, to the only seemingly more stable cognitive operation of concept deployment, equivalence through distance. Speculatively one might note that it is only the achievement of distance (and with it a sort of forgetting of sensuousness) that allows subsumption of the sinuous particular under the concept. For it is only when we lack contact with the particular that we can convince ourselves that it was never part of us.

The final stage is that of a regression in which the 'achievement' of abstraction is unable to maintain itself and reason falls back into the sort of tribalism we see in fascism. As the concern of this paper is to outline the dialectical interaction of the two poles of mimesis and concept subsumption (enlightenment), I shall not discuss the final stage here.²² We will rather stay with the fourth stage which Adorno and Horkheimer elaborate in their theory of the culture industry.

III. The Culture Industry: Schematization and Domination

Let me accentuate the threat of Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis by going into a little more detail about the two modes of ideology critique we have already seen in the introduction. Before looking at how Adorno and Horkheimer's view differs from this, let us look a little more closely at this sort of critique by turning to now classic critiques of the systematicity of racism and sexism in Critical Race Theory and feminism. These accounts typically rely on the generally Kantian idea that the use of an unexamined *concept* is at fault for subsequent wrong inferences. Thus in the example of central feminist and CRT critiques, the unexamined distinction between public and private leads to the claim that because racism and sexism is not permitted in the *public* sphere, it has effectively been eradicated.²³ Yet the fact that the contradiction has gone unnoticed and indeed is so extensively embedded in the social fabric so as to be called 'systemic' does not mean, as feminist and Critical Race theorists have recognized, that a critique of our concepts is *impossible*. Rather, such a critique requires the arduous task of showing people that their concepts are wrong, i.e. that that public/private distinction privileges men

22 The final two stages form the main subject of analysis of my paper "Does Adorno Have a Theory of Fascist Thinking?", *Constellations*, forthcoming.

23 See Catherine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1989); Neil Gotanda, "A Critique of Our Constitution is Color Blind," *Stanford Law Review* 44, no. 1 (1991). I take up this issue from a psychoanalytic perspective in [redacted for Review Purposes] See also Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Black Rights/White Wrongs: the Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

and white people. This can be shown by pointing out that the concept of public/private is employed inconsistently when it comes to people of color and women. Such critiques thus rely on *experience*, often relayed in narrative terms to heighten the effect, to show that the concepts which supposedly subsume the experience are inadequate. In doing so, these critics insist on subjective content to show that objective concepts or categories are inadequate. In effect, they deploy the primitive level of representation (mimesis) against the higher order level of representation (concept subsumption).

We are now in a position to see that what makes the particular argument of Horkheimer and Adorno's work so chilling is their view that the workings of ideological is not confined merely to the conceptual realm, where it could be self-revising, but colonizes experience as such. Adorno and Horkheimer make this point in Kantian terms by saying that enlightenment *schematizes* the world for us. The schema is what mediates between perception and conceptual activity, according to Kant. If the schema itself is infected by ideology it would become impossible for us even to perceiving or *see* nature, which is to say that we can no longer even *have* experience. That is to say that reason threatens to become totalizing in the sense that it becomes idealism: there is no outside to it, no nature that reason is responsible to. Reason can no longer be self-revising if there is nothing for to prompt this self-revision. In Kantian terms, there is only spontaneity, no longer receptivity. (A50/B74)

Let us examine the claim in some detail as understanding the process whereby enlightenment and culture industry schematize our modes of seeing the world is of the utmost importance for understanding what is *dialectical* of the dialectic of enlightenment. The dialectic is here essentially one between the sensuous particular and the universal or the concept. This account fits roughly into the fourth stage of reason's development. Adorno and Horkheimer articulate this dialectic by exploiting a tension within Kant's work which is, on the one hand, dedicated to an increase in rationality and, on the other hand, committed to the idea that such an increase in rationality would be (unlike in

Hegel) an unending project precisely because reason can never fully grasp nature.

From Kant's exertion to "think for yourself", Adorno and Horkheimer draw the conclusion that for Kant it is possible for the rational individual to systematize nature based exclusively on their own experience.²⁴ The individual constructs their understanding of the world based on the laws of transcendental logic, the categories of the understanding. This is achieved through the process whereby the subject subsumes particulars under universals. So far so good. The process of the subsumption of particulars under universals is a necessary aspect of rational thought. Intelligibility requires the ability to equate particulars at the level of higher order concept. The guiding principle of this process is the principle of non-contradiction for it allows concepts to be ordered and dialectically analyzed. (DA 3:100; 63)

The problem appears, Horkheimer and Adorno contend, when the particular is no longer really a particular, that is, when the processes of enlightenment has become so 'robust' that we in a sense *already* know what the particular is before even looking at it. In my drawing example, what is often difficult for novices is to *see* the three dimensional space before rather than just to *know* it as 'table', 'vase', 'flower'. Let me clarify this by looking a little more carefully at the schema. In an ordinary sense, a schema is what defines a field before it is subject to analysis. Thus we can say, broadly, that my practical intentions open up a certain way of seeing the world for me. When I am hungry, I see the world in terms of what is edible and what is not. But a schema can also be an unconscious set of preoccupations which frame the world for me. My unconscious desire to avoid humiliation leads me to seek out social situations in which I can humiliate others. As such, the schema is not a problematic notion. It is a heuristic for making decisions.²⁵

24 "Sapere aude" Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?." 8:35. DA 3:100; 63.

25 I would like to thank members of the Wayne State philosophy department for pressing me on this issue. This argument can be brought into contact with research in cognitive psychology and also in unconscious bias. See, Daniel

Adorno and Horkheimer's more concerning point is that just as my unconscious desire to avoid humiliation can fix me in a certain pattern of behavior, so too can social forces fix us in social schemata. The idea of self-preservation is a case in point. For Adorno and Horkheimer, individuals demonstrate that they are mature in modern society by seeing their own advantage in every social situation. (DA 3:102; 65) The schema of self-interest governs the way we encounter the world in its particularity. Now the schema has gone from being a heuristic to *imposing* a certain view on all individuals in society. By reducing all objects to their exchange value, capitalism, think Adorno and Horkheimer, has move us from a constellation of more or less local schemata to one unified schema which imposes a rigid view of the world on us.²⁶ Any moment that does not fit, they write, is ruthlessly resolved in favor of the reigning orthodoxy of exchange and equivalence. (DA 3:103; 65) That is to say, what is a historical category of understanding the world becomes naturalized or ontologized and thus becomes invisible.

While we might accept that in the realm of commerce, all is already made fungible, or conceptual, we might resist the idea that capitalism has taken over *all* of society. Adorno and Horkheimer's account of how the culture industry functions is meant to show us how close we are to precisely that condition. The analysis of the culture industry deals with *culture*, that is, that part of social life which resists the advances of science and capitalism, claiming for itself a certain autonomy based on the primacy of the perceptual. This autonomy is insisted upon from Kant's idea of the beautiful as *disinterested* interests to the fin de siècle's *art pour art* and beyond.²⁷ The

Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrer, Strauss and Ginoux, 2011). However, I believe that these critique are not sufficient as they neglect the systematic dimension expressed in psychoanalytic terms by the concept of repression. See, again, the final section of "Does Adorno Have a Theory of Fascist Thinking?"

26 For the idea that capitalism constitutes a schema, see Christian Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

27 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN.: Hackett, 1987). 5:205.

idea is that art, by its very nature, resists the subsumption of the particular under the universal prevalent in all other realms of society from morality to science. As Kant has put it, in the beautiful (and, by extension, in art) the sensuous stands in a relation of free play with the concept rather than being subsumed under it.²⁸ Thus in the case of art, the sensuous is *not* dominated, classified, but remains free, other, to the categories of mind and society. The survival of the sensuous in art holds out the possibility that even in cases where the sensuous or the particular *is* subsumed under the concept, the sensuous remains as a memory to which the concept must be referred back.

From the perspective of the system of knowledge, the particular is a nuisance because it obstructs the system of equivalences. Thus the system of equivalences seeks to extend its reach, fixing ever larger areas of human life in science, law, economics, morality etc. While in those fields the thinking in terms of equivalence, what Adorno calls identity thinking, is able to proceed by order concepts under other concepts, the colonization or schematization of culture, and particularly of the aesthetic, presents a special case. For, as we have seen, culture is not *already* a conceptual sphere but rather a sphere in which the particular plays a prominent role. By conquering the realm of culture, the particular *as such* is conquered and reason, facing no resistance, becomes totalizing.

To conquer the particular is task of the culture industry. The culture industry seeks not to replace one sort of concept with another (say virtue with self-interest) but seeks to replace one *mode* of intelligibility with another. Culture industry replaces the particular with the schematized particular, a free sensitivity to the world around us with a fixed schema which makes of sensitivity to the particular all but uniform. Thus Adorno and Horkheimer envision the culture industry's various products, film, television, radio, spectacles of other sorts, as replacing any individual experiences of the particular with 'sharable' experiences according to a pre-figured schema. The Hollywood romantic comedy, then as now, is new only in its variations on an invariant schema which tells us when

28 *Critique of Judgment*. 5:217-18.

to laugh and when to cry, when to identify with the male protagonist, when with the female. (DA 3:149; 101) In a paper written after *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno argues that television is able to penetrate our unconscious, structuring it in such a way that it will become seamlessly subsumable under the manifest content offered by culturally conformist narrative.²⁹ For support Adorno cites the work of Gershon Legman who had argued that the violence of comic books really functions as a sort of substitute for sexual arousal among boys (the principle consumers of that medium).³⁰ The point is that the culture industry inserts itself into the viewers mind at the level of the pre-conceptual harmonizing it in advance with the concepts already on offer.

Once the particular has been conquered, no resistance remains to the total systematization of the world through instrumental reason. Once no particular remains, there is nothing to which a critique of reason could refer in order to reveal another concept to be inadequate. In terms of the debate mentioned earlier, if it has become impossible to *experience* the difference between one's treatment in the public and the private spheres, there will no longer be a way to even *notice* that the distinction privileges white people and men over people of color and women. The eradication of the particular by the culture industry would constitute the final defeat of human particularity and experience.

IV. Mimesis and Subsumption: the Dialectic of the Dialectic of Enlightenment

In the previous two sections I have set up a conflict between the cognitive process of mimesis and of concept subsumption. I have argued that according to the narrative of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the mimetic gradually become subsumed under the conceptual, the culture industry representing the penultimate stage in that process. There the non-prop-

29 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prolog zum Fernsehen*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, vol. GS 10.2, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970). 513. (At present, there appears to be no English translation of this text.)

30 *Prolog zum Fernsehen*, GS 10.2. 513. Gershon Legman, *Love and Death; A Study in Censorship* (New York: Breaking Point, 1949). 45.

ositional content of mimetic cognition is given a fixed meaning by being subsumed under a concept. This subsumption is necessary but can become insidiously, as we have just seen, when it prefigures the particular in such a way as to fix it even before the individual subject can attempt to grasp it for themselves. In this section I revisit this process from the perspective of the Kantian model underlying Horkheimer and Adorno's model. The Kantian model, I shall argue, offers us a way of seeing that the relation between the mimetic and the conceptual must be fundamentally dialectical, that is, that mimetic resistance against concept subsumption is forever a possibility even if, for historical reasons, it seems to have all but disappeared. This will put us in a position to see in the next section that we should not conflate the present *historical* tendency of reason to totalize with the very *structure* of reason.

Critique of the Kantian Schematism

For Kant, all cognition originates from two basic sources of the soul: receptivity to sensation and spontaneity of concepts. (A50/B74) This sets up an irreducible dialectic in which the mind perpetually seeks to make sense of what it receives from nature by subordinating it under concepts. Rather than understanding this process as a simple and direct confrontation between mind and nature, Kant conceives of the nature-knowledge relation as involving two levels. Human minds possess only a discursive intellect, that is, they experience the world only through representations. (A68/B93) Kant conceives of human mind as providing a first order mediation of nature in the form of sensibility (discussed in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*) and a second order mediation of sensibility through its subsumption under concepts (discussed in the *Transcendental Analytic*). This makes of knowledge 'representation of representation'. (A68/B93)

The basic division between receptivity and spontaneity as well as the consequent division between the lower faculty of sensibility and the higher faculty of the understanding means that for Kant the fundamental task of mind becomes that of unifying that which cannot readily be unified. The problem is, as Kant plainly states in the *Analytic of Principles*

(known as the 'schematism chapter'), that sensibility and concepts are "heterogenous" (*ungleichartig*). (A137/B176) This is the same point that Kant is making when he says that we have only a *discursive* intellect, one which cannot have direct access to nature.

For Adorno, this point constitutes a central hinge in the Kantian argument. (ND 6:140; 136) Kant is to be admired, says Adorno in a later lecture, for having so plainly taken up this topic which is antithetical to his whole argument.³¹ The courage to do so is for Adorno part of Kant's depth, the willingness to pursue a thought no matter where it leads.³² Nevertheless Horkheimer and Adorno conclude, as Adorno does later as well, that Kant ultimately sides with the conceptual side against sensibility. (ND 6:142; 139-40) The idea of a schematism is, for Kant, at the philosophical level, what it becomes in social life in the culture industry: the guarantee of the homogeneity of concept and sensibility which is somehow already prefigured by mind.³³ That is, for Kant mind is able, through some unconscious process, to unify sensibility and concept under a third thing, time. The reason Adorno and Horkheimer cannot be satisfied with the solution Kant offers is that, in an ordinary (though not in a technical Kantian) sense, time is *also* a concept.³⁴

The Dialectic of the Sensible and the Conceptual

We can begin to outline the dialectic at work between the particular and the universal so central to Adorno and Horkheimer's thinking, by looking at the different modes of cognition each offers. The chasm between sensibility and concept to which Kant draws our attention, suggests that

31 Theodor W. Adorno, *Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1959) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995). 201. *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (1959) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). 133.

32 *Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1959). 203. *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (1959). 134.

33 Kant speaks of a "hidden power in the depths of the soul" as the source of this unification. (A141/B180-81)

34 On this question see Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction*. chapter 2. Noppen, "Adorno on Mimetic Rationality: Three Puzzles." 86-87.

turning again to Kant's theory of judgment could provide some insight. For Adorno, Kant's thinking is the best embodiment we have (apart from Adorno's own, of course, and some passages in Hegel) that, as Adorno puts it in the opening sentence of part II of *Negative Dialectic*, "there is no being without entities" ("Kein Sein ohne Seiendes"). (ND 6:139; 135) Turning to Kant's theory of judgment will also allow us to make sense of the two cognitive modes we have examined so far: mimesis and the subsumption of the particular by the universal. Despite the paradoxical relation between the sensible and the conceptual, Kant again provide a model helping us with a way of understanding the relation between mimesis and concept subsumption through the idea of affinity.

But before turning to the notion of affinity, let us note that the Kantian paradigm of our inquiry, both ours and Adorno and Horkheimer's, means that we are always already within the realm of cognition, that is, in the realm of the attempt to produce an equivalence between mind and world for the benefit of the subject's self-differentiating orientation therein. This, again, is a consequence of Kant's thesis that our knowledge is only ever *discursive*, that is, mediated in some way.³⁵ Nor is there, for Adorno and Horkheimer, any question that all natural content must be *cognitive*. This means that for Adorno and Horkheimer as well as for the later Adorno, no particular that can be accessed as such, that is, without the mediation of mind. The idea that our access to nature is *mediated* places the emphasis on the different *modes* of cognition which I am trying to pull apart here. That is, given the mediated character of knowledge, the particular will only be able to manifest itself by revealing the limitations of the particular *cognitive* mode which seeks to capture it. And what is revealed in the limitation of a certain cognitive mode is the other cognitive mode that has *supplanted* it. This means that any critique of the process of

35 "Wahr ist sie [die kantische Philosophie], indem sie die Illusion des unmittelbaren Wissens vom Absoluten zerstört" ND 6:144) "This is where the truth and the untruth of Kantian philosophy divide. It is true in destroying the illusion of an immediate knowledge of the Absolute; it is untrue in describing this Absolute by a model that would correspond to an immediate consciousness, even if that consciousness were the *intellectus archetypus*." 140.

concept subsumption will have to emerge immanently from seeing how concept subsumption has supplanted the mimetic. Given the history of cognition we have so far sketched, this means looking for traces of any mimetic cognitive activity is still present, albeit in a repressed form, in cognition as the subsumption of the particular under the universal.

Affinity, Determinative Judgment and Reflective Judgment

Adorno sees in Kant's concept of affinity the basic relatedness of the two cognitive modes which I am claiming have been theorized by Adorno as mimesis and concept subsection. Again Kant sets up the problem: in the Transcendental Deduction, Kant leads us from the manifold of sensibility to the necessary unit of that manifold in mind. For something to *be* a manifold, it must be manifold *for* mind. That is, there must be rule to establish the necessary relations between sensate representation and the categories. This unity between mind and nature Kant calls *affinity*.³⁶ (A122) Affinity is the empirical connectedness rule which permits association to occur. Affinity, Kant also says, requires a transcendental law to ensure its legitimacy. Yet what is central here, however, is that affinity is testament for a basic cognitive process *before* it receives the official imprimatur of the conceptual by being subsumed into the system of transcendental philosophy.³⁷

In the section entitled "Of the Regulative Use of Ideas", Kant develops a set of necessary processes according to which this affinity between mind and nature is to be made conceptual, that is, made mediate so that it can constitute knowledge. The process of reflection operates according to the following three moments: sameness, variety and affinity which Kant

36 For an account of what is at stake in the relation between the imagination and the affinity it produces, see Rolf-Peter Horstmann, *Kant's Power of Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). 13ff. See also Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction: An Analytical-Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). 241f, 264-71.

37 On the importance of affinity in Adorno, see Josef Früchtel, *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Würzburg: Hönigshausen und Neumann, 1986). 209-21 and Simon Jarvis, *Adorno, a Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998). 179-81.

glosses as the principals of homogeneity, specification and continuity respectively. (A658/B686) The central idea is that in order for there to be variety, variety must occur in the context of sameness. For only if variety includes sameness can the different terms really count *as* a variety. Kant further argues that the specification of homogeneity which constitutes variety can only occur based on a continuity of affinity between the same and the different. That is, any specification is a specification on a continuum of possible specifications. (A658/B686)

Let me specify these two movements, the homogeneity-variety movement and the variety as continuity movement, in the context of the two sorts of cognitive modes we have been discussing. The key here is to understand these logical operations as operating on a sensible totality which is necessarily produced by the unity of consciousness but also which *produces* the unity of consciousness. So we are here speaking of how mind makes sense of nature and nature allows mind to make sense of it. It is central to the view I am trying to flesh out in Adorno that empirical consciousness and transcendental consciousness are co-constituting. While I cannot go into this in any detail, the central idea is that transcendental philosophy must be an abstraction *from* experience, taking experience (empirical consciousness) as its basis. But the rules that are gained by this abstraction (the transcendental unity of apperception and the categories) then *constitute* empirical consciousness in return.³⁸ The question is, then, how, given the homogeneity or the unity of the manifold, the manifold is to be known.

One option is for the unity to be divided up according to a connection in which the variety is *already known* (as it is in the process of concept subsumption in the faculty of the understanding). Here specification subsumes the indistinct element of nature as a member of a class. This pro-

38 Adorno distinguishes between three levels of identity, the identity of empirical consciousness, of logic and of epistemology in an important footnote at ND 6:145-46; 142. Kant's failure to distinguish between the logical and the psychological "is due to the fact that, in idealism, identity designates the point of indifference of the psychological and logical moments." ND 6:145; 142.

cess of subsumption is what Kant calls determinative judgment.³⁹ This is side of the cognitive process which is theorized by Kant in the account of transcendental logic in which the generally accepted form of the logic of judgment as requiring a synthesis before analysis can take place, furnishes the idea of the subject's own operation qua transcendental unity of apperception.⁴⁰

The second option is to follow the particular something in nature as it, before our eyes as it were, transforms itself into something else. The something is continuous with its environment *both* distinguishing itself from the environment *and* slipping back into identity with its environment. Here we can recognize the basic structure of mimesis. In this case we do not suppose we know the something's class in advance but attend to the way the something is continuous with yet different from other somethings. Here we are not finding the universal for the particular but rather attend to the sort of universal the particular finds or produces for itself. That is, here judgment must specify at which point on the continuum between something and something else, the something can be adequately specified. Kant calls this the of judgment reflective judgment.⁴¹ The universal observed in this mode of cognition is not a logical universal, says Kant, but an empirical universal, a mere analogy of the logical.⁴² Kant further says that the rule according to which reflective judgment constitutes the universal from of the particular is produced by judgment itself rather than by logic (for if it were produced by logic, it would be *determinative* judgment).⁴³ Thus the process of *finding* the particular for the

39 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. 5:179, see also "Jäsche Logik," in *Akademie Ausgabe*, ed. Prussian Academy of Sciences now German Academy of Sciences (Berlin de Gruyter 1900-). 9:131-32.

40 This is the central concern of the metaphysical deduction. A69/B94.

41 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. 5:179.

42 "Jäsche Logik." 9:131-32.

43 *Critique of Judgment*. 5:180 Bernstein has explicitly linked mimesis to reflective judgment as well. Subsumption under concepts only becomes possible once mimetic responses are *made* into intuitions. Bernstein writes: "I want to say that reiterative abstraction and ascent requires the transformation of mimetic response, however eventually theorized, into intuition. But in-

universe by attending to nature is associated with the activity *empirical* consciousness which *does not* already possess the rule or the schema to understand. Here too, we have the novice sketch artist's efforts to imitate nature by grasping the shapes before them, which is done by holding off 'knowing' the sorts of 'objects' one finds oneself amidst.

So I would like to suggest that in Kant's theory of reflection we have a model for the interaction between mimesis and concept. We have seen that concept subsumption is the process of subsuming the particular under a universal according to the rules of transcendental logic. Mimesis, however, is the process whereby the something's own movement is traced as it occurs in experience. For the rule the observer employs in specifying nature is *not* the rules of logic which belong exclusively to mind but rather the empirical rule which, in appearing to us, the something gives to itself. Here mindedness and nature implicitly coincide to produce mimetic cognition. Adorno and Horkheimer call this process which emphasizes the tactile that of *Anschmiegen*, snuggling up to or nestling in. (DA 3:205; 148)

The key point here is that the more primitive form of reflective judgment developmentally (both ontogenetically and phylogenetically) precedes the process of concept subsumption. For it is the basic mimetic process of life which furnishes the material for any sort of determinative judgment. Yet it is not a question of 'returning' to a more primitive form of cognition which is in some ways 'better' than the subsumption of particulars under concepts. (We might rather say that the Kantian moment represents for Adorno and Horkheimer (or at least for Adorno) a sort of highpoint in the intellectual development of humanity, a moment when mimesis and concept subsumption were just about to tip into asymmetry

tuition is only the systematic relegation of mimetic identification beneath conceptual identification." J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). 190. The relation between the subsumption and the mimetic has also often been put in terms of the difference between metaphor and metonymy. With reference to Adorno, see Jameson, *Late Marxism*. 104. Andrew Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013). 63, 70.

but where significant scientific advancements had made life 'better' in some ways.) At any rate, what we can now see is that the copula does not *necessarily* imply concept subsumption, but can express another sort of identification, one which proceeds laterally, tracing a continuity which the organism interrupts to fix itself out of its own accord. In Kant as well as in Adorno and Horkheimer, mimesis thus precedes concept subsumption as the working of a more basic or primitive level of mindedness.

V. Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have been offering a structural reading of the dialectic of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The purpose of such a reading is to emphasize the structural moments of Adorno and Horkheimer's conception of reason against the *history* of reason's descent into barbarism. Habermas' analysis confuses the two, arguing that the historical character of reason constitutes for Adorno and Horkheimer the structure of reason, that is mind, per se. Within the confines of this paper, we can only trace the structural possibilities of mind, not their concrete vicissitude like the eruption of fascism.

The purpose of this structural framework is to show that in principle, that is, in a utopian sense, the mimetic could be paid attention to, could be considered in understanding abstract conceptual language and could thus lead us away from the seemingly ever increasing pressures of rationalization in modernity. Psychoanalysis as well as art provide privileged spheres wherein to try to locate the lost particular which, through successive iterations has become unrecognizable to itself.

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The Dialectics of Coloniality/Modernity: Rewriting a Classic

*Eduardo Mendieta*¹

Abstract: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is without question one of classics of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. In this essay the author sets out to evaluate its merits, demerits, and how well it has aged. Thus, the author postulates how it could be written after the critiques of the book's Eurocentrism, inattention to class and in general the material conditions of the reproduction of life, as well as its lack of concern of discussion of race and racism, other than Anti-Semitism. The text lays out several possible "fragments" that could be the basis for an "updated" version of the *Dialectic*.

I

Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is indisputably a classic of Frankfurt School critical theory². Although it was what they called "philosophical fragments," it was also written without question at the darkest hours of the Twentieth Century, while both were in exile in the US, and more specifically, in sunny Los Angeles. It is true that some of the ideas developed in the *Dialectic* were developed in Frankfurt. Further, the book evolved from a privately printed *Festschrift* for

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- 2 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). This edition is important as it closes with an Afterword by Willem van Reijen and Jan Bransen that analyzes the variants of the manuscript.

their friend and colleague Friedrich Pollock to a book that was printed in 1947 with substantive additions. As Jews, they had been exiled from their homes and found refuge in the US. While the “philosophical fragments” show cased with exuberance and finesses the art of immanent critique, namely the power of reason to correct and heal its own pathologies, it is also frustratingly ahistorical, anti-materialist, ungraciously anti-American, and surprisingly, undialectical. The intellectual historian Anson Rabinbach tipping his hat to Hegel, wrote an essay on the *Dialectic*, which he titled “The Cunning of Unreason: Mimesis and the Construction of Anti-Semitism in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.”³ I find this expression most apropos, for as we read it, the book traces not so much the emergence of reason from myth, but the endurance of unreason despite so-called progress. By now there are many essays and books on how to make sense of this classic, which is a thorn on the rationalist flesh of Critical Theory, namely, the aspiration that the self-critique of reason leads to new forms of enlightenment, that history is not a ceaseless *Verfallsgeschichte*; contrary wise, that reason is always plucked from the flowers that material history gives birth to. Yet, the *Dialectic* attempts to give us a history of reason and the reason of history, as the “cunning of unreason,” entangled in that Hegelian bacchanal. Further, Adorno and Horkheimer, argued not simply that “reason reverts to myth,” but also that “progress reverts to regression.” These are very bleak assessments of the dialectic of enlightenment, as they suggest the reverse, namely that there is a dialectic of unreason, one that begets more unreason, repression, and violence. From there, where do we go with an immanent critique of reason that is grounded on an analysis of social relations and the imaginaries that they instigate? What happens to “reason” when all it begets is more “unreason.” Perhaps the paperback edition of the *Dialectic* should have had on its cover a reproduction of Goya’s

3 Now in Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectual between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), 166-198. This essay also documents the archeology of the *Dialectic* based on work in the Horkheimer archives and the correspondence between him and Adorno.

famous painting: *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*. A title that is as ambiguous as is the *Dialectic*. One could translate Goya's title as "The Dream—as in aspiration- of Reason Produces Monsters" or "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters." Thus, we may ask: What is the *Dialectic*, the dream or sleep of reason?

As I kept writing and revising this paper, I could not help but feel really uncomfortable, even angry. First, these are major intellectuals who had been given refuge in a democracy, a democracy that endured the pains of a civil war, and two World Wars to defend democracy. True, not enough Jews were granted asylum, but so it is today with Mexicans, and Central Americans in general. There are ceaseless calls to shut down the border. Still, the US has tried to be a "decent" nation among nations. What most irks me about this beautiful book of philosophy, is its utter disrespect and disregard for the struggles for justice in the very land that had granted them asylum. In 1944-7, when the book took shape, the US was segregated, all across the country there were signs proclaiming: "Only Whites" and "For Colored." For thinkers who took so viscerally and intellectually the issue of anti-Semitism, it is very sad that they never made a connection between anti-Semitism and anti-black racism. Where a sign says "No blacks," there may as well be one that reads: "No Jews." Horkheimer and Adorno never considered the relationship between Anti-Semitism and legally sanctioned racism, even after they had been stripped of their German citizenship. Surely, they saw those signs.

Nonetheless, it is very likely that many of us were awoken from our dogmatic slumbers by the *Dialectic*. When I first read it as an innocent undergraduate I was overwhelmed by the prose, the allegories, the metaphors, the turn of phrases and the sense of relentless critique, but also the creeping suspicion that this book was full of despair. Above all, I admired the historical breath of the book, from the Greeks to the Mid-Twentieth century, even as it claimed that after so-much progress our reality is "radiant with calamity." I have read the book many times and I have the German and the two English editions. Over the years, I have come to realize that this book that impacted me, and perhaps many

of you, so deeply has not aged well. It is parochial, Eurocentric, inattentive to question of race, other than those of Anti-Semitism, and it does not have serious considerations of gender, as well of class and the dynamics of modes of productions and the social relations they spawn. A book written by putatively historical materialists that does not mention class conflict is surely a chimera. One could say the book has become an anachronism and out of tune with our not so enlighten, but still to be enlightened times. Yet, the book has important lessons, some of which must be learned and retained. Thus, I began not so much to ask “how to give yet another interpretation of the book?” but “were we to re-write it today, how would it be re-written?” I was thinking along these lines because a line that I found fascinating, and which I can’t remember who wrote it: “the Greeks should be re-translated for every generation.” Having read several different translations of Homer and Dante, I think this is a fair expectation. And, as I already mentioned, we have two different translations of the *Dialectic*. As I thought about these questions, I had in the back of my mind Jorge Luis Borges’s wonderful story “Paul Menard, Author of the *Quixote*.”⁴ In this short story Borges tells us about novelist Paul Menard, whose work the narrator tells us he has been cataloguing. Among the works Menard left is his draft of his re-writing of *El Quixote*, but what our narrator discovered was that Menard was so besotted with Cervantez’s Spanish that he ended up re-writing every sentence in the way Cervantez had written it. In that Borgesian spirit, I set out to re-write the *Dialectic*. Here, however, I can only give you a précis of the table of contents, and in the spirit of the original, these are promissory fragments.

II

The first fragment of my rewriting would begin with an exegesis of the epic of *Gilgamesh*.⁵ This is one of the most ancient epics, although it was

4 Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” in Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 88-95.

5 *Gilgamesh, a New Translation of the Ancient Epic*, translated by Sophus Helle (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022). See also Joan Acocella, “How

only until the late 19th century that it was discovered, assembled and deciphered. It was written in cuneiform and the Akkadian language on baked tablets. The story tells of Enkidu, a wild man, who dwelled in the forest and could communicate with the animals, and who had been brought forth by the Gods to punish and constraint Gilgamesh, who was tyrant king of the people of Uruk. Yet, Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends and like brothers. Enkidu, further, lays with a woman, who we are led to believe is a prostitute, thus losing his power to speak with the animals. What were these ancient Phoenicians thinking? Sex is bad and pollutes you. Is this the origin of the Original Sin that expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden?

In any event, Gilgamesh and Enkidu set out to kill a Goddess of the Forest, which they accomplish. Enkidu gets ill and dies. Gilgamesh is distraught and inconsolable. He sets out in a quest to find immortality, which he almost achieves, but loses because he falls asleep. This is an amazing epic. It has many themes that continue to hold together epics. There is the tyrannical king that has to be domesticated. There is the unexpected friendship that transforms both friends. There is the theme of the struggle between nature and civilization. Enkidu represent nature. Gilgamesh civilization. He is the king that built the fortifications of Uruk and many of its monuments. Enkidu represents the dream of harmony with nature, but also the hazards of coming into contact with the city and culture. We can read the *Gilgamesh* as a very early lamentation of ecological devastation. The story has also an eerie critique of sexual violence. Gilgamesh's quest for immortality is reminiscent of Achilles' own quest for immortality. What is significant in this epic is the weaving of these philosophemes: nature vs. culture, sexual violence, ecological devastation, which in the *Gilgamesh* are correlated, and the running theme of the quest for immortality. He almost acquires it, but then loses it by the fact that he is a mortal that must rest. Gilgamesh is reconciled with his mortality, and then returns to Uruk to be a kinder king. Mortality is the

condition of possibility of morality, and thus is a blessing as Hans Jonas put it.

III

The second fragment would turn to Homer's *Odyssey*.⁶ It is too often forgotten that the first books of the *Odyssey* tell the story of his son's quest to find his father, which are generally known as the Telemachy in reference to Telemachus, Odysseus's son. Arguably the book has three main sections. The story of Telemachus, Odysseus's odyssey and his long return home, and the third and final, which is about his Penelope, and her cunning, and of course Odysseus's slaying not only of the suitors who had plagued her and his kingdom, but also of Penelope's maidens. In this fragment I would focus on the themes of conjugal love—the *Odyssey* is also one of the greatest love stories ever told—, misrecognition, as opposed to disavowed identification. Horkheimer and Adorno offer a great interpretation of Odysseus's stratagem to escape Polyphemus, the Cyclops, son of Poseidon. Indeed, the book's last section is full of moments of misrecognition, where Odysseus either wants or does not want, yet, to be recognized. But who do recognize him, immediately? His faithful dog, Argos, and his now very old nanny, who recognizes him because of the scar in his leg that she healed when he was a boy. Even after Odysseus has slaughtered the suitors, Penelope is still not sure he is who he says he is. He can prove who he is because he knows how the conjugal bed was made. Another theme that is often forgotten is that while Odysseus is gallivanting around the Aegean seducing and being seduced, Penelope is holding safe the house and the kingdom with her cunning. Can we say that Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus are the proto-bourgeois family? Surely not, but nonetheless, one theme that is central is that of romantic love for one's partner. The Italian writer Alessandro Baricco

6 There are many translations into English of this classic. I read three of them. See Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Emily Wilson (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018)

re-wrote the *Iliad* removing all references to the Gods⁷. He compressed it into the human story it is. We can wonder how the *Odyssey* would read if we removed all the mythology and malignant Gods and Goddesses?

IV

The *Dialectic* is putatively an archeology of bourgeois, that is, modern subjectivity, which Horkheimer and Adorno unearth in the *Odyssey*. This alleged aim is questionable, but for the moment let us hold the question. There is a wonderful passage in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus talks to himself, as he is stealthy getting into enemy territory to do harm. There is duplication of the self: Odysseus talks to himself in the mode of the better, more agile, more guileful self. Within Odysseus dwells another self, another Odysseus. What is in my perspective unacceptable, in retrospect, is that the *Dialectic* goes from Homer to Sade like a race car, when there were centuries of thinking and work on the self that needed to be accounted for. Thus, in my third chapter I would stop and linger over the works of Augustine and Boethius. Augustine gave us many of the most important works of Western philosophy, especially his blunt and surprisingly candid *Confessions*.⁸ Boethius, on the other hand, gave us another powerful confession, his *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which he wrote as he awaited execution.⁹ Both authors gave us the basic ideas about the possible answers to the questions of theodicy, namely if God is omnipotent and all benign, why do evils assail humans? Why does a good God allow evils to plague his creatures?

What is noteworthy in the *Dialectic* is the absence of consideration of the question: how did the conscience get invented? Now, Homer's Odysseus talks to himself, urging himself to be courageous and stealth. What Augustine and Boethius gave us was a self that talks to itself before a

7 Alessandro Baricco, *An Iliad*, translated by Ann Goldstein (New York, New York: Knopf, 2006)

8 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009)

9 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by P. G. Walsh (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000)

supreme being, God. This is how conscience was invented, namely by the introjection of God, another self, into our inner dialogue. I would call this theophagy, the eating of God, into our inner dialogue. Now, we are many, inside ourselves: the now you, the before you, the you to come, and this absolute voice, God, watching, judging, cajoling, perhaps rewarding you. Conscience is a majestic sundering of the self, from within, that projects us into some future: our better selves. How can we do any archeology of the modern subject without a history of the invention of conscience, and thus without a history of the role of early and medieval Christianity?

V

Who reads the Marquis de Sade anymore? And why, if they do? I will confess that I have read too much of de Sade, and I am not wiser. I read Simone de Beauvoir's short book, or rather long essay, on Sade.¹⁰ The takeaway, was, don't censor or burn pornographic books. I agree with Beauvoir. What do we get from doing philosophy with Sade in the bedroom? Be a sadist, be a masochist? Be neither. Instead, be dialogical and communicative. The bedroom, for the better, has become a space of communicative freedom, and Sade did not anticipate that, nor could he envision it. One thing critical theory can be proud of is the idea that the bedroom is the most intimate communicative space. Still, it is peculiar that Horkheimer and Adorno picked Sade as an epitome of the bourgeois mathematization and mechanization of sex, desire, and love. In my re-write of the *Dialectic*, I would not have gone from the ancients to a pornographic writer, notwithstanding his philosophical virtues in the bedroom. Instead in my fifth fragment I would focus on Pico della Miradolla, as a stand in for the Renaissance humanistic revolution. Why did Horkheimer and Adorno not consider the Renaissance as an element in the dialectic of Enlightenment? Pico, as I will henceforth call

10 Simone de Beauvoir, "Must we Burn Sade?" in Simone de Beauvoir, *Political Writings*, edited by Margaret A. Simons and Marybeth Timmerman (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 37-102.

him, wrote one of the most fascinating texts of the Italian Renaissance, namely *The oratio on the dignity of humanity*.¹¹ Like few texts from the Renaissance, Pico's *oratio*, articulated a unique theory of the essence of the human. Pico took the biblical story of *imago dei*, namely that humans are created after or in the image and essence of god and gave it a distinct twist. The superior hermeneutical twist was this: humans are divine, or created in God's image and essence, because they create, like God, and their most supreme creation is themselves; this is humanity as a creature of creation, who creates itself in the act of creation. It is noteworthy that the Renaissance does not appear in the *Dialectic*. My re-writing would certainly pay attention to one of the periods in human history that potentiated an artistic and scientific revolution. Today, we are children of the Renaissance humanists and artists, and we have ceased reading Sade.

VI

The *Dialectic* can and should be read as a cartography of reason, not unlike those offered by Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. It can also be read as a diagnosis of reason, one that says that reason is always sick. This may lead us to ask whether one can talk about the "pathologies" of reason, if reason is always ipso facto sick. If so, then, we must ask, what is the dialectical power of reason to enlighten itself, i.e. heal itself from its bourgeois tendency to turn into mere "instrumental reason"? How is immanent critique possible überhaupt if reason is always ailing from alienation and reification? In any event, the *Dialectic* does not deal with or mention one of the most important events in the history of Europe and the world, namely 1492, i.e. the so-called discovery of the world. There are pivots in history, and of course WWII and Auschwitz are some of the most momentous in our recent past. But 1492 was and remains one of the most decisive pivots in global history; in fact, it is since then that we can speak of global history. Still, 1492 is engulfed in mythology. The year is sometimes described as the "discovery" of the new world; as the

11 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, translated by A. Robert Caponigri (Washington, DC: Gateway Editions, 1996)

beginning of an ignominious conquest; as a divine call to save souls; as a genocide (which it was), as the greatest biotic exchange the world had ever seen. 1492 was also the year that the cartography of reason began to be re-drawn. Here the work of Enrique Dussel would be indispensable.¹²

Now, 1492 also created the condition of possibility for one of the most important debates in the history of reason, and what Habermas calls rational freedom, and also one of the greatest moments in the history of the self-healing of reason by means of immanent critique. I am of course referring to the famous debate at Valladolid in 1550-1551 between Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Fray Bartolomé de las Casas.¹³

The debate between Sepúlveda and de las Casas was a clash of two very different titans. Sepúlveda was an Aristotelian and Thomist who espoused the view that Amerindians were slaves by nature, and furthermore, that because of their barbarian practices, could be waged just war against. De las Casas, who has been known in the literature as the “defender” of the Indians, argued that Christianity could not be imposed by violence and should appeal to the reason of the Indians. I am giving the most elemental description of the debate, which was not simply about whether Amerindians were natural born slaves, and whether just war could be waged against them to save them from their barbarian state. The debate at Valladolid was also diagnostic of what would culminate in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, nearly a century later. In this précis of my re-write of the *Dialectic*, I only have space to highlight two monumental aspects of a debate that should be part of any attempt to diagnose the pathologies of reason, as well as its possible self-healing and self-transformative powers. The first is, and which can't be underplayed,

12 See in particular Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity*, translated by Michael D. Barber (New York, New York, Continuum, 1995). This book, incidentally, came out of a series of lectures Dussel gave in Frankfurt on the occasion of the Quincentennial of the ‘discovery’ of the Americas.

13 The best study on this debate is Lewis Hanke, *All mankind is One: A study of the disputation between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 on the intellectual and religious capacity of the American Indians* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974)

is that in this debate what was at stake was what Pierre Manent called the theological-political problem of Europe, namely: what are the sources of authority for any claim to dominium, from God or from a power conferred by a Pope to a Sovereign. Thus, the debate was covertly about the source of political and military power of a sovereign "empire." This famous debate became the stage for one of the most important schools of international law, namely the "School of Salamanca." In fact, and arguably, the idea of "international law," was spawned by this famous debate. It is indeed disconcerting, even baffling, that two Jews would not register on their philosophical reflections on the pathologies of reason that the Nuremberg trials were taking place over a year, from November of 1945 to October of 1946, possibly as they were finishing their "philosophical fragments." But the Nuremberg trials would not have been possible without the work done by the Salamanca school in response to the question of the legality of invasion and conquest of the Americas. The principles enunciated at Nuremberg about "crimes against humanity" and "crimes of war," were first delineated by the Salamanca school in the aftermath of the Valladolid debate.

The second reason why this debate was monumental, and decisive in the pedagogy of reason itself, is because de las Casas asked about the criteria of deciding when someone, a people, are to be considered, without reason, and thus in need of tutelage at best, or torture, if need required. It is indeed fascinating to read de las Casas's treatise *De Unico Vocationis Modo*, [The Only Way] in which he argues, on theological grounds, on behalf of the reason of the Amerindians.¹⁴ Let me be simplistic and make two points: first that de las Casas uses theological arguments to defend the "reasons" of the other. Second, that de las Casas uses the powers of reason to argue on behalf of the reasons that the "other," the "Amerindian," which is a cosmopolitan use of reason against the violence of the Spaniards in their conquest. There is a famous aphorism that says that

14 Bartolomé de las Casas, *The Only Ways*, edited by Helen Rand Parish, and translated by Francis Patrick Sullivan (New York, New York: Paulist Press, 1992)

the heart has reasons that the mind does not understand, or something to that effect. What de las Casas argued was that reason does not know the reasons of the other, which are also rational and reasonable reasons. And thus, the geography of reason was re-drawn.

VII

There are two additional fragments that make up my re-write of the *Dialectic*. The penultimate is titled “Herrenvolk Ethics and the Invention of the White Race.”¹⁵ This fragment would be/is dedicated to the philosophical and then biological invention of the notion of races, and above all that there is one that will supersede and dominate all the other, more inferior races, which in any event were fated to be extinguished by the logic of evolution. This is what Kant argued in several of his texts. In this fragment I would focus on Kant’s anthropology and Hume’s essays, arguably two of the philosophers who gave philosophical credibility to racist ideas.¹⁶ Is it even necessary to note that when we get the idea of a “master race” with its inevitably ethics of the lord race, then we are preparing concentration camps, camps of mass extermination. Extermination concentration camps are sites of dehumanization, and sadistic violence. Only humans create such institutions to eliminate other humans. Of course, this is a sordid chapter in the history of the pathologies of reason, although these camps ran very rationally, efficiently, with their impeccable book accounting.

The last fragment of my Borgesian book is titled “The Anthropocene Anthropological Machine.” It deals with our present environmental challenges and the semantics of the term “Anthropocene.”¹⁷ It is diffi-

15 This title refers to the important work of Charles W. Mills. See Mills, “White Right: The Idea of a Herrenvolk Ethics. In C. W. Mills, *Blackness Visible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 139-166.

16 On this point there is no better point of reference than the numerous essays by Robert Bernasconi. See *Critical Philosophy of Race* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023)

17 See my essay “Anthropodicies of Coloniality: Urbanocene, Plantationocene and Critical Theory” *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (January 2023), 103-130.

cult to ignore the fact that our planet is under severe stress. Temperature has risen to unprecedented levels given rise to desertification, floodings, and ever more intense storms and tornados. The oceans are also under stress: from overfishing, from salinification, and raising temperatures. Of course, humans are not the only living creatures affected by these synergistic and unprecedented environmental changes; animals, trees, fish, are all being affected. This is why the term Anthropocene is also mentioned in the same breath as the phrase: "The Sixth Extinction." This phrase refers to other major events of mass life extinction in the history of the earth. Now, however, instead of being some cataclysmic event, such as an asteroid colliding with the earth, it is humans that caused such ongoing extinction. Anthropocene means the age of the Anthropos, but as a geological force and cataclysmic event. However, one of the big questions asked and debated among the proponents of the term, "Anthropocene," is: when did it begin? Some argue that the Anthropocene began with the Holocene, after the Ice Age retreated and humans began to take over the earth, with its own type of extinctions. Others argue that it began with the Industrial Revolution in the 18th Century. Yet, others argue that it began with the end of WWII and the rise of consumer culture and the automobile as a major commodity. Yet, other attentive to the fact that we are debating geology and the stratigraphic record, argue that there are two major stratigraphic records: the colonization of the New World and the exploding of atomic bombs in the 40s and 50s of the 20th centuries. It would be important to note that Horkheimer and Adorno were still working on the *Dialectic* when the U.S. dropped two atomic bombs over Japan. This is all part of the geological record.

This last fragment, however, would focus on two questions. The first has to do with whether the Anthropocene should be understood as a form of Anthropodicy.¹⁸ Given the intense anthropogenic devastation to all life on the planet, it is to be argued whether humans are a malady on the earth. The parallel with theodicy is suggestive. Why if there is a god

18 See the last chapter of my book *The Philosophical Animal: On Zoopoetics and Interspecies Cosmopolitanism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2024)

that is all beneficent and omnipotent would god allow evils and injustice come to innocent people? Anthropodicy asks: is Anthropos a force of good or evil and injustice? If we think of the Anthropocene as a judgement on Anthropos, then we must ask those questions that theodicy tried to address, but now with respect to humans. The second question has to do with who is the Anthropos in the Anthropocene? Notwithstanding all the debate about the Anthropocene, anthropocenists –those who think and theorize about the Anthropocene- agree that the anthropogenic effects on our environment are mostly due to the so-called developed nations of the world. Not every human has had, or has, the same impact on the environment, as does, let us say, a family in the U.S. There are countries that add more to offset the adverse effects of green grasses than others; think here of Central American Countries, Colombia, Brazil, etc. Do the Amazonian Yanomami add to the effects of the Anthropocene, or live in such a way as to decrease its effects? Who is the Anthropos in the Anthropocene? This question can't be evaded. Perhaps over the long span of the Holocene, Anthropos in general did contribute to what today we call the Anthropocene. Today, however, the contributions to climate change are very uneven, and one may claim very unjust, as some of the effects of severe climate change are affecting more adversely those communities and nations that had the least to do with it. These are important question that have to do with global justice, especially when we address climate refuges.

Dear reader I am exhausting your attention, politeness, and fairness. I must come to an end in my overview of this re-write of a "classic." I would like to do so by quoting one of my favorite authors: Italo Calvino. In a wonderful essay, titled "Why read the Classics?" Calvino sets out to define what is a classic and why we must read them and then re-read them.¹⁹ I like definition six, which says "A classic is a book that never finished saying what it has to say." But I also like definition eleven: "*Your*

19 Italo Calvino, "Why Read the Classics?" in Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature*, translated by Patrick Creagh (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 125-134.

classic author is the one you cannot feel indifferent to, who helps you to define yourself in relation to him [sic], even dispute with him [sic].” Indeed, for many of us the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a classic that has never finished saying what it meant to say. It is also a classic because it became *YOUR* classic, a book that you can’t be indifferent to because it shaped your *Geist*.

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Fostering the dialogue between sociology and critical theory: some remarks on the normative character of social relations from Georg Simmel's sociological theory

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Abstract: This paper aims at reconstructing some aspects of Georg Simmel's relational sociology in order to highlight the possible convergence between (relational) sociology and Critical Theory. Georg Simmel focuses on the idea that society consists of the interactions (*Wechselwirkung*) among individuals, and these interactions generate forms of socialization (*Formen der Vergesellschaftung*) which are investigated by the sociologist. In this regard, the very subject of the social ontology is the social relation. Within the frame of this interaction, individual conducts are expected to be managed under an ethical and intrinsic vocation: each individual plays the social role and society is the moral arena in which any individual feel the constraining forces as ethical claims (as also Durkheim sustained). Good and evil in society govern individual conducts, as well as Critical Theory points out the possible "social pathologies" and "social disfunctions" given by new and old forms of domination and control (or simply unauthentic paths of individual life). Through a reconstruction of the main topics in relational sociological literature, Simmel's texts and the recent debate within Critical Theory, this paper wants to put accent on the inner normative character of social relations, arising from interaction, giving by forms of social life, and carrying possible pathologies when they cannot accomplish to its purposes which is guaranteeing a "good life" for individuals involved.

1. Georg Simmel: a Relational sociologist

Georg Simmel is probably the first and the most meaningful sociologist to contribute to the foundation of sociology as an independent

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science among humanities, namely addressing it as a science of “interaction”, “relation” or “reciprocal action” [*Wechselwirkung*]. Olli Pyyhtinen has recently highlighted how Simmel’s theory could be considered as a “science of relations”²: Simmel surely uses relation (*Beziehung*) and interactive determinations as a heuristic category in order to explain the social order and the social processes, and then he assumes reciprocity in order to tackle epistemological, ontological, and cultural questions. *Wechselwirkung* became formerly a very “metaphysical” principle, as he explicitly affirmed in his *Anfang einer unvollendeten Selbstdarstellung* (1898): an exhaustive and wide meaning useful to engage new forms of sociality and cultural subjects into modernity, but also the key-concept into epistemology, historical, socio-psychological, and moral sciences³.

In this worthy document, Simmel presented himself as a scholar who gained scientific results engaging the concept of “reciprocal action” (*Wechselwirkung*) and testing its validity into the field of epistemology, philosophy of culture, and sociology. Particularly in his sociological studies, he maintained that the separation between forms and contents into “reciprocal actions” allowed him to build sociology as an autonomous science among humanities. Due to this clarifying premise, he thus conceived sociology as the science of the “forms of association” (*Formen der Vergesellschaftung*), which represent the stratification and sedimentation of the formerly explained principle of *Wechselwirkung*.

In his masterpiece *Soziologie* (1908) Georg Simmel did not only put (and erect) sociology as autonomous science among humanities, but he primarily recognized that the social as such consists of relations and interactions, namely – guided by a common Neokantian scheme – he viewed that it could be concerned under an epistemological perspective as a subject divided into a *form* and a *content*. As he states in the first chapter of *Soziologie*:

2 See Olli Pyyhtinen, *The Simmelian Legacy. A Science of Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

3 Georg Simmel, *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel. Briefe, Erinnerungen, Bibliographie. Zu Seinem 1. Geburtstag Am 1. März 1958* (Berlin: Duncker&Humblot, 1958), 9.

That is, a society exists where several individuals enter into interaction [*Wechselwirkung*]. This interaction always originates from specific impulses within or for the sake of specific purposes. Erotic, religious, or purely social impulses, purposes of defense from attack, the play of commerce, the need for assistance from instruction, and countless other purposes bring it about that human beings enter into fellowship - correlating their affairs with one another in activity for one another, with one another, against one another, activity that both affects them and feels the effects of them. These interactions indicate precisely that the individuals bearing these motivating drives and

In the seventh chapter on *The Poor Person*, Simmel thus clarifies what reciprocity means within the frame of his sociological theory:

One can look at society in general as a reciprocity of moral, legal, and conventional relationships, and as a reality justified under many other categories; that this implies a duty for others is only, so to speak, a logical or technical consequence, and if the unthinkable were to happen, that satisfying every claim in a way other than in the form of fulfilling the obligation were to be sufficient, society would not require the category of duty⁴.

In this regard, there could be a conceptual wreck reading some Simmel's writings, namely the philosophical ones: I particularly refer to *Philosophy of Money* (1900) in which Simmel seems to regard relation as pure "exchange" function, in order to explain modern social and cultural practices. "Exchange" may have indeed a normative effect on social actors, even if considered under a "financial" manner according to original Simmel's foundation of sociology into his masterpiece *Philosophy of Money*⁵.

In the preface of *Philosophy of money* Simmel directly faces Marx, and suggests the attempt to construct "a new storey beneath historical materialism": this is a very interesting hint, also looking to a different kind of reading Simmel's work in regard to Marx and more broadly to Critical

4 Ibid., 409.

5 See Christian Emden, "Die Normativität des Kapitals. Zur politischen Aktualität von Georg Simmels Philosophie des Geldes". *Zeitschrift für Kulturphilosophie*, 9 (2015): 179-206.

Theory⁶. Simmel sustains that the explanatory value of the incorporation of economic life into the causes of intellectual culture is preserved, while these economic forms themselves are recognized as the result of more profound valuations and currents of psychological or even metaphysical preconditions. And hence he states: “For the practice of cognition this must develop in infinite reciprocity”⁷.

2. Normative reciprocity: convergence of Simmel’s ideas and recent Critical Theory debate

It is not trivial to put forward what we must mean with the formula *normative reciprocity*. Within the social sciences, on the one hand, many agree on reciprocity as analytical category (it is largely accepted within relational sociologists); on the other hand, many others dismiss any issue dealing with normative account, simply because they regard it as a non-sociological matter. This divarication clearly emerges from the pages of Stephen Turner’s book *Explaining the normative* (2010). According to Turner, “normativists” are those who claim that social is basically reduced to “normative facts” which are considered the basic analytical stage. They involve such concepts as “transcendence”, “correctness” or “validity”, which are *conditions of possibility* of social life: normativists tackle thus social facts, assuming (or postulating) special transcendental qualities or ‘validity’ within social interactions. Turner denies the possibility to consider normativist theories as causal explanation to describe social facts. Normative basically has to do with something *should be*, in spite of what any empirical and descriptive science must do, that is telling and reporting *what the realm is*.

We commonly divide scientists under two main categories, as Abbott suggests to explain social order maintaining the centrality of “transition”

6 See Davide Ruggieri, “«Constructing a New Storey Beneath Historical Materialism»: Georg Simmel and the Foundations of a «Relational» Critical Theory”. *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory*, 3(2) (2019): 61-90.

7 Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of money* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004): 54.

and “contingency” concepts⁸: we have ‘normativists’, on the one side, and ‘empiricists’, on the other side. Social sciences must look indeed at both of these two levels of social facts (normative and empirical). We experience nowadays social sciences beyond Max Weber’s warning on the “objectivity” and “neutrality” of the historical-social sciences which does not only concern the possibility or not of expressing value-judgments, but it is based on the fundamental idea that it can never be the task of an empirical science (such as sociology and any social science) “[...] to provide binding norms and ideals from which directives for immediate practical activity can be derived”⁹. Distinguishing between *empirical statements* of facts or *value-judgments* it is the objective criterion for social science¹⁰.

In other words, an empirical science cannot prescribe anything to individuals, it does not exert any power in saying whatever he *should* do, but it aims at understanding the ways in which individuals *can* and *wish* in certain circumstances. This appeal to not concern social sciences as value-judgement free has to be read beside some peculiar hints given by Weber in *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1917), where he conceived as the first goal of social sciences to enlighten individual actions, that is to make aware them of the tight relationship between means and goals – means required for the attainment of some goals – as well as clarify the connection between the attainment of those goals and its (expected or unexpected) consequences¹¹.

8 Andrew Abbott, “The Future of the Social Sciences: Between Empiricism and Normativity”. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 71 (3) (2006):202.

9 Max Weber, *The Methodology of social sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2017): 52.

10 The question finds in the recent debate further development: sociology is required to be not only a science in regard with its *descriptive* aim, but nowadays (by virtue of the more and more use of algorithmic or big data analysis) also in regard with its *predictive* character. Maccarini has recently highlighted this issue, trying to disentangle the knots on the concern of sociology and on its tasks (Maccarini 2023).

11 Max Weber, *The vocation lectures: Science as a vocation. Politics as a vocation* (Indianapolis-Cambridge: The Hackett publishing company, 2004): 11.

A rigorous assessment on what reciprocity might represent under a sociological meaning is surely furnished by relational sociology (or it should be better to talk on *relational sociologies*). Among the several perspectives on this issue, Pierpaolo Donati alleges that “[...] society does not host relations, it is not a space-time where relations happen, *it is relations*”¹². This relational-emergentist theory is coherent to the morphogenetic approach, namely Margarete Archer’s. Both these authors claim in *The Relational Subject* (2015) book that reciprocity “[...] creates (activates and reactivates, generates and regenerates) a social relationship as such, for the super-functional value that it has”¹³ and moreover: “Reciprocity and free giving are two ways of acting united by the fact that they share a certain anti-individualism, a certain anti-utilitarianism, and a certain orientation to horizontality (that is, to a non-hierarchical reticular action)”¹⁴. This perspective was recently criticized by Christian Papilloud in his volume *Sociology through Relations* (2018), because he sees some contradictory propositions in regard to Donati’s foundational claim (from an epistemological and ontological view) that “society consists of relations”: maybe it is the case to deepen this issue. To say that relation is the first subject of sociology doesn’t necessarily disregard reciprocity if we maintain that encountering others and triggering interactions is the first cry of any social issue. Reciprocity means that (social) actors reply to interactive processes in adequate manner in regard to what is expected from others: reciprocity does not mean symmetry. I suggest to interpret this issue under the meaning given in Saint Augustine’s talks on equality between man and God. *Non ad aequalitatem, sed pro modo nostro* (Discourses IX,3): not the abstract principle of a horizontal equality, but a similitude principle regulates social transaction in order to achieve reciprocity. Individuals or social actors are not the same, in the meaning of a “reflec-

12 Pierpaolo Donati, *Relational Sociology. A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences*. (London: Routledge, 2011): XV.

13 Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret Archer, *The Relational Subject*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 249.

14 *Ibid.*, 250.

tion" (A=B in regard to an abstract equality principle) [*ad aequalitatem*]; rather individuals are similar and they must interact in respect to their own differences and a similarity principle [*ad similitudinem*]¹⁵.

Reciprocity is the *form* of social relation: in other words, without reciprocity there could only be individual conducts, or at least social actions, but not certainly relations. In *Rembrandtstudie* (1914) Simmel alleged that "[...] the form is timeless because it consists only in the movement and relation of the view contents; and it has no strength, because it cannot exert any effect inasmuch form; only within life, keeping on flowing underground, and its causal process, also this stage is prolonged in further effects"¹⁶.

The social ontology of reciprocity should maintain that the very subject into sociological inquiries is the relation as an emergent effect of interaction among individuals¹⁷. Interaction is the dynamic side of social life which is to conceive as a flow; it produces thus forms which are the static side of social life and they shape a specific identity. In *Das Problem der Soziologie* (in both of 1894 and 1908 released editions) Simmel gave a name to the interactive/dynamic social mechanism and its crystallization [*Formalisierung*]: respectively *Wechselwirkung* and *Vergesellschaftung*. Max Weber also focused on the *Vergesellschaftung* issue distinguishing it from *Vergemeinschaftung* principle¹⁸: Weber alleged in the pages of *Econ-*

15 Fukuyama has taken into account the reciprocity issue under a norm-oriented approach, and it represents a basic element mainly in regard with the social capital concept. He put in fact that "social capital is an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals. The norms that constitutes social capital can range from a norm of reciprocity between friends, all the way to complex and elaborately articulated doctrines like Christianity or Confucianism" (Francis Fukuyama, 2000. *Social Capital and Civil Society* (April 2000). IMF Working Paper No. 00/74: 3).

16 Georg Simmel, *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1909–1918*, Band II, GSG 13 (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 2000): 39.

17 See Davide Ruggieri, "Emergenza, riduzione, relazione: il paradigma della sociologia relazionale e il dualismo tra struttura e cultura". *Studi di sociologia*, 54(3) (2016): 279-293.

18 See Klaus Lichtblau, *Das »Pathos der Distanz«*. Präliminarien zur Nietzsche-Rezeption bei Georg Simmel, in Heinz-Jürgen Dahme, Otthein Rammstedt (eds.),

omy and society that the rational organization of modern social life is to be conceived as *Vergesellschaftung*, that is the typical mode under a *Zweckbeziehung* or *Wertbeziehung*.

Georg Simmel played a decisive role among the theorists of the first generation in the Frankfurt School: Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer (who was the *spiritus rector* of the studies and researches in Critical Theory as well as the founder of the Frankfurt School) were in debt with Simmel's ideas and style. His disruptive and unsystematic thought was very impressive and we could surely find (overtly or not) trace of his ideas in such authors. As once Alfred Schmidt noted, the "art of micrological observation" in Simmel and the "materialistic" analysis of everyday life¹⁹ were surely decisive in Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer and more generally in such authors who shared at time these suggestions given by the analysis of the "mental life" in the modern metropolis: Simmel's *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (1903) is emblematic and it represents a socio-philosophical attempt to understand the modern issues of individuals within the complex life of metropolitan spaces and times²⁰. There are biographical evidences emerging from the correspondence between Max Horkheimer and Hans Simmel, which testifies the great intellectual debt of Horkheimer toward the sociological and philosophical thought of Georg Simmel²¹.

Georg Simmel und die Moderne (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000)

- 19 See Alfred Schmidt, "Die geistige Physiognomie Max Horkheimers". In M.Horkheimer, *Notizen 1950 bis 1969 und Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1974).
- 20 In this regard Simmel is also decisive for the understanding of the acceleration (and "accelerated social lives") of contemporary society according to Hartmut Rosa and his "resonance" paradigm (Rosa 2019): Rosa explicitly refers to Simmel in his work *The Uncontrollability of the World* (Hartmut Rosa, *The uncontrollability of the world*. Wiley: New York Rosa, 2020: 24 and ff.), particularly looking at the interactional feature of our modern (social) lives, given by our more and more "exchangeable" social nature in metropolitan life.
- 21 See Davide Ruggieri, "The Unpublished Correspondence between Hans Simmel and Max Horkheimer (1936–1943). Some Remarks on Critical Theory, Georg Simmel's Sociology, and the Tasks of the Institute for Social Research". *Simmel Studies*, 24(1) (2020): 127-158.

3. Normative reciprocity and the critique of forms of social life

In *Philosophy of Money* Simmel concerns exchange as a very form of (social) life. He states: “It should be recognized that most relationships between people can be interpreted as forms of exchange. Exchange is the purest and most developed kind of interaction, which shapes human life when it seeks to acquire substance and content”²². Simmel efforts a theory of exchange within the frame of an *economization* of social and cultural life: he contributes to the Neokantian debate of the late XIX century, advancing a theory of cultural and social exchange; the more differentiated and complex modern society gets, the more it requires individuals to “monetize” their existence. It means that the increasing intertwined and differentiated character of modern society, that is the intersection of more and more social circles, testifies the necessity to get exchangeable (at the highest level) social and cultural identities. More precisely Simmel states that exchange is an emergent phenomenon producing effects on engaged members or entities: “Economic values are produced by the same reciprocity and relativity that determine the economic character of values. Exchange is not the mere addition of two processes of giving and receiving, but a new third phenomenon, in which each of the two processes is simultaneously cause and effect”²³. This conviction allows him also a relativistic solution of the metaphysical question on truth – a cultural-philosophical solution²⁴: it is the effect of a reciprocal interaction of different perspectives or imagines of the world.

This reciprocity, in which the inner elements of cognition authenticate the meaning of truth for each other, appears to be upheld by another form of relativity, that between the theoretical and the practical interests of our life. We are convinced that all representations of what exists are functions of a specif-

22 Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of money*, 79.

23 Ibid., 88.

24 See Matthieu Amat, *Le relationnisme philosophique de Georg Simmel. Une idée de la culture* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2018).

ic physical and psychological organization which do not mirror the outside world in any mechanical way²⁵.

Simmel was persuaded that such central concepts as “truth”, “values”, and “objectivity” in his philosophy (and sociology) of culture had to be interpreted within the frame of a “relativistic” (and heuristic) view²⁶:

Truth means the relationship between representations, which may be realized as an infinite construction, since, even if our knowledge is based upon truths that are no longer relative, we can never know whether we have reached the really final stage, or whether we are again on the road to a more general and profound conception; or it may consist in a reciprocal relation within these systems of representations and its demonstration is also reciprocal²⁷.

What is at stake in Simmel’s work is the idea of the legitimation of a necessary practice due to the augmented differentiation of modern society, which requires individuals to get their identities *subject of exchange processes*. According to Fitzi and Thouard’s interpretation of Simmel’s category of reciprocity, legitimation aspect and normative reasons are involved into typical mechanisms of modernity, and Simmel’s solution gets towards “the law of individual” insight: “Tous les aspects normatifs de la problématique moderne y sont en effet consignés à la sphère pratique. En la matière, l’option de Simmel est l’éthique individuelle”²⁸.

Exchange represents the first subject (also in logic-temporal terms) for the relational scheme given by Marcel Mauss. As Papilloud affirms: “Mauss insists on the sense of obligation between the actors of the gift,

25 Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of money*, 14.

26 Simmel’s view is relational in the sense that he conceives relation (*Wechselwirkung*) as a very broad category (metaphysical, sociological, ethical...) to understand and to explain the world. He was accused of being “relativist” from many scholars and colleagues, and actually his position stands undecidable (see Davide Ruggieri, “Georg Simmel and the “relational Turn”. Contributions to the foundation of the Lebenssoziologie since Simmel”. *Simmel Studies*, 21(1) (2017): 43-71).

27 Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of money*, 113.

28 Gregor Fitzi and Denis Thouard. “Réciprocités sociales. Lectures de Simmel”. *Sociologie et sociétés*, 44 (2) (2012): 7.

which exists primarily because of their exchanges. Once taken up in the circulation of gifts, the actors have practical obligations to fulfil, of which they cannot be discharged - at least not without exposing themselves to strong social sanctions"²⁹. Reciprocity represents the very "stuff" of society: it has a very ancestral and anthropological meaning, according to the deep insight given by Mauss in his studies on gift. It neither deals with individuals, nor with institutions: it represents the interstitial *niveau* among individuals, among social processes. It builds social from inside: it arises, it sediments, it thus objectifies the necessary human exchange and the need to recognize and being recognized as subjects into an interactional frame. Mead, Schutz, and many others have been tackling this issue, exploring the manifold aspects of human being-in-relation. Social sciences have definitively recognized the role of relation as the very issue of sociological investigations and inquires³⁰. This would only confirm that maybe sociology and social sciences have a natural affinity with what has to do with "social life" as a relational issue³¹. In this regard, Michel Freitag offers stimulating theoretical hints, affirming that a relational concern of sociology conceives society as an ontological entity, which will be immanently reproduced by social relations and social practices³². But society is not only an ontological entity, it is also a normative one³³, because any of

29 Christian Papilloud. *Sociology through Relation: Theoretical Assessments from the French Tradition* (New York: Palgrave, 2018):66.

30 In this regard see Christian Powell and François Dépelteau, (eds.). *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology. Ontological and Theoretical Issues* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Christian Powell and François Dépelteau (eds.) *Applying Relational Sociology. Relations, Networks, and Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jan Fuhse and Sophie Mützel (eds.), *Relationale Soziologie : zur kulturellen Wende der Netzwerkforschung* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010); Robert Seyfert, *Beziehungsweisen. Elemente einer relationalen Soziologie*. (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2019).

31 See Judith Butler. "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?: Adorno Prize Lecture". *Radical Philosophy*, 176 (2012): 9-18.

32 Michel Freitag, *Dialectique et société*. (Vol. 2. Montréal: Editions Saint-Martin, 1986: 14).

33 Hałas has recently put accent on the crossing aspects of ethical and social features of social relation (see Elzbieta Hałas. "Discovering the Relational

its expressions in relations and practices are non-neutral ones, and, this aspect is very peculiar in Mauss' theory³⁴. Society is thus the "symbolic mediation" in social life³⁵, coherently to the Durkheimian tradition.

Relations could be meant under different perspectives and theoretical positions: they could stay for processes, structures, networks, fields, and they could involve human as well as not-human beings³⁶. Latour sustains that social must be considered as "[...] the name of a movement, a displacement, a transformation, a translation, an enrollment. It is an association between *entities* which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together"³⁷. Latour's perspective is also stressed by Scott Lash towards a *Lebenssoziologie*, which represents a "great theory" on social as vital processes³⁸. Social life is a sure topical interest into our discourse on normative reciprocity, but it is uneasy to enlarge and extend the effects (and the causal power) of reciprocity also on non-human being³⁹, but the

Relevance of Reciprocity". In *The Relational Gaze on a Changing Society*, ed. Elisabetta Carrà and Paolo Terenzi. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019: 89–105; Elżbieta Hałas. "Relational Care: Rethinking Altruism". In *Relational Reason, Morals and Sociality*, ed. Elżbieta Hałas and Aleksander Manterys. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021: 69–93).

34 Michel Freitag, *Dialectique et société*, 177.

35 Michel Freitag, *Dialectique et société*. Vol. 1. Montréal: Editions Saint-Martin, 1986: 11 and ff.

36 On this topics see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to the Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jane Bennet, *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things* (Durham-London: Duke. University Press, 2010); Ismael Al Amoudi and Jamie Morgan (eds.), *Realist Responses to Post-Human Society: Ex Machina* (London: Routledge, 2018); Robert Seyfert, *Beziehungsweisen. Elemente einer relationalen Soziologie*.

37 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to the Actor-Network Theory*, 64-65.

38 See Scott Lash "Lebenssoziologie: Georg Simmel in the Information Age". *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22(3) (2005): 1-23; Heike Delitz, Firthjof Nungesser, and Robert Seyfert, *Soziologien des Lebens. Überschreitung – Differenzierung – Kritik* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2018).

39 A crucial distinction between humans and non-humans still remains on the reflexive coefficient, that is the idea that non-humans basically do not understand what they act, elaborate, compute and so on. As recently Faggin al-

challenge of social sciences exactly deals with this new scenario in which objects, computing machines, “moral machines”, and all digital technologies are getting deeper and deeper part of the social realm.

Reciprocity stands for the ontological sphere of any social realm. Simmel synthesized this issue giving a metaphorical account of the interactive processes which make the social: in his masterpiece *Soziologie* he asks “how is society possible?”, that is how society and societal forms arise and have proper consistency beyond individual existences. The making of society is given through three main conditions, which Simmel literally calls *a priori* (getting inspired by the Kantian theoretical ones). As Thomas Kemple highlights: “these apriorities suggest thresholds of reciprocal interaction through which the elements of life as a whole are connected to or separated from one another, embracing both natural objects and human subjects”⁴⁰.

Simmel maintains that the first social apriori is “the image of the other”; it is the very naïve social position of each individual in a social interaction (reciprocal) assigning to each one a specific “image”:

We are all fragments, not only of humanity in general but also of ourselves. We are amalgamations not only of the human type in general, not only of types of good and evil and the like, but we are also amalgamations of our own individuality and uniqueness – no longer distinguishable in principle – which envelops our visible reality as if drawn with ideal lines. However, the view of the other broadens these fragments into what we never actually are purely and wholly⁴¹.

In Simmel individuals remain “subjects” even if they interact with others, and thus getting “objects” of the interactional order. It depends on the second social *a priori*, that is there is something (*Ausserdem*) determin-

leges, machines are able to process a great number of informations and data, but they are basically not *conscious* (or aware) of what they manage: they are symbolic machines, while we (human) are semantic machines: see Federico Faggin, *Irreducible: Consciousness, Life, Computers, and Human Nature* (Essentia books 2024).

40 Thomas Kemple, *Simmel* (New York: Polity Press, 2018).

41 Georg Simmel, *Sociology*, 44

ing social character of individuals, which cannot be indeed “interacted” into social realm.

Finally, we find the third social *a priori*, that is the *Beruf* (profession/vocation) category: according to Simmel, society is a combination of dissimilar elements, for even where democratic or socialist forces plan or partially realize an “equality”, it can only be equality in the sense of being equal in value; there can be no question of homogeneity. The *a priori* principles in Simmel’s first chapter of *Soziologie* (1908) stand on the assumption that each individual can find its own place in society: these two dimensions of ideal and real position collide in an appropriate position for the individual in society. Horst Helle affirms, particularly on the third social *a priori* (*Beruf*) that “this is the condition upon which the social life of the individual is based, and which one might term the universality of individuality”⁴².

Pluralism is the key (and the premise) of the functional interaction among social subjects: this don’t necessarily mean that “relationism” must be seen as synonym of relativism, as many relational sociologists allege (from the Bourdeausian ones to the Neo-pragmatists and Transactionalists). It is the case to appeal to Weber’s formula “polytheism of values”, to state that pluralism in modernity is a fate, but it doesn’t necessarily mean relativism⁴³. “Demons” and “gods” still are fighting dressing new aspects: in this regard, some recent trends in sociological theories (I particularly look at Latour’s ANT and the manifold effects on several disciplines among social sciences) legitimizes a new kind of Manichaeism, in which differences becomes more and more vanished. Human and non-human, subject and quasi-objects, individuals and collective identities, any opposition is going to fall down by virtue of a kind of (in)difference principle: the more you claim for erasing any “ontological difference” (to use Heidegger’s well-known motto) in order to legitimate universal rights (stressing an uncontrolled and symmetrical allocation of right subjects), the more you have a relativistic account of what could be considered a subject.

42 Horst Helle, Introduction to the Translation of G.Simmel, *Sociology*, 7.

43 Max Weber, *The Methodology of social sciences*,17.

Pluralism means that there are several different subjects interacting and creating social space: reciprocity doesn't stand for symmetry, since there are different positions within social space (also according to what Bourdieu sustains about "fields" and social space) due to different characteristics of individualities and social actors. Different allocations of identity don't mean inequality *only if* reciprocity works as a normative principle, that is recognizing otherness in force of its constitutive differences. In this regard Bruno Latour – who is regarded as a relational inspiration for some sociologists – offers good insights in his *We have never been modern* (1993) where he sustains that "[...] the principle of symmetry aims not only at establishing equality – which is only the way to set the scale at zero – but at registering differences – that is, in the final analysis, asymmetries – and at understanding the practical means that allow some collectives to dominate others"⁴⁴.

In 1992 *The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices* essay Habermas already stressed the idea of inter-subjectivity as a "glimmer of symmetrical relations marked by free, reciprocal recognition. [...] Connected with this is the modern meaning of humanism, long expressed in the idea of a self-conscious life, of authentic self-realization, and of autonomy – a humanism that is not bent on self-assertion"⁴⁵. In *The Inclusion of the Other* (1998) Habermas hence focused on this idea, alleging: "This moral community constitutes itself solely by way of the negative idea of abolishing discrimination and harm and of extending relations of mutual recognition of mutual recognition to include marginalized men and women"⁴⁶. His formula of "a universalism that is highly sensitive to differences" became paradigmatic. Christian Papilloud recently relaunched the challenge given by Habermas' words, and he puts together reciprocity issue with the question on the relational sociology: he namely considers rec-

44 Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 107-108.

45 Jürgen Habermas, *Post-metaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 145.

46 Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), XXVI.

iprocity “[...] as a special relationship that legitimates institutions and personal actors, and whose concrete manifestation is strongly conditioned by the expansion strategies of institutions on the one hand, and to a lesser degree by the personal actors on the other”⁴⁷.

Very close to the analytical and theoretical frame of Papilloud studies, this paper argues for a deep investigation on what reciprocity may still express for social sciences, and what it may represent within the debate on multiculturalism. Since the dialogue among different cultures seems to sail in critical conditions: the failure of globalization in political and cultural term risks very strongly to bring us back to a nationalize our identities, as recently Crouch highlighted⁴⁸: he stresses the idea that globalization produced negative effects on the political and cultural stage, with the emergence of new inequalities and forms of nostalgic regressions, instead of representing increasing international cooperation and increasing interdependence.

Many years before, Erving Goffman investigated on the interactive social order, giving accent on the normative functions within social *situations*. In his masterpiece *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) he viewed that interactions among individuals are mediated by role and identifying features which deal with both moral expectations and social duties. He literally alleges:

Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in a correspondingly appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought to have this claim honoured by others and ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them

47 Christian Papilloud, *Sociology through Relation: Theoretical Assessments from the French Tradition*, 2.

48 Colin Crouch, *The Globalization Backlash* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect⁴⁹.

In *The Interaction Order* Goffman clarifies that “orderly interaction” has to be viewed neither as a social contract, nor as a social consensus⁵⁰, also because for the term “order” he means “a domain of activity”. He prefers to regard order as a “interactional zoo” (or garden) where you can list - for sociological interests and purposes - (1) *persons/ambulatory units* (“as vehicular entities, that is, with human ambulatory”), (2) *contacts* (“any occasion when an individual comes into an other’s response presence, whether through physical copresence, telephonic connection or letter exchange”); (3) *conversational encounters* (“[...] in which persons come together into a small physical circle as ratified participants in a consciously shared, clearly interdependent undertaking, the period of participation itself bracketed with rituals of some kind, or easily susceptible to their invocation”); (4) *the platform performances* (“a talk, a contest, a formal meeting, a play, a movie, a musical offering, a display of dexterity or trickery, a round of oratory, a ceremony, a combination thereof”); (5) the *celebrative social occasions* (“the foregathering of individuals admitted on a controlled basis, the whole occurring under the auspices of, and in honor of, some jointly appreciated circumstance” (Goffman, 1983: 6-7). Goffman founds a “normative reciprocity” assessment on the interaction order when he finally alleges that:

[...] the social relationship we call “mere acquaintanceship” incorporates knowership and little else, constituting thereby a limiting case – a social relationship whose consequences are restricted to social situations – or here the obligation to provide evidence of this relationship *is* the relationship. And this evidence is the stuff of interaction” (Goffman 1983, p. 13).

In other words, he viewed that the fact of being involved in social interactions puts simply actors in an obligation scheme which is not derived from a moral order; it exactly regards a sociological *niveau*.

49 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in everyday Life* (New York: Anchor books, 1959), 13.

50 Erving Goffman, “The Interaction Order: American Sociological Association, 1982 Presidential Address”. *American Sociological Review*, 48(1) (1998): 5.

In the same years, the category of reciprocity was efficaciously argued by Alvin Gouldner in his well-known article on *The Norm of reciprocity* (1960). Beyond explicitly referring to (and inspiring by) Howard Becker with his book *Man in Reciprocity* and the formula of *Homo reciprocus*, Gouldner also mentioned L.T.Hobhouse who once held that “reciprocity is the vital principle of society”. In regard to complementarity which “[...] connotes that one’s rights are another’s obligations, and viceversa, Gouldner alleges that reciprocity “[...] connotes that each party has rights and duties [...]”. And moreover (and more significantly), reciprocity has its significance for role systems in that it tends to structure each role so as to include both rights and duties⁵¹. Within the frame of Ego-Alter interaction, Alter may reciprocate ego’s action to a greater or lesser degree. These are two features of “reciprocity as a pattern of mutually contingent exchange”⁵². Besides the pattern of exchange, there is a norm of reciprocity that “evokes obligations toward others on the basis of their past behavior”⁵³. Gouldner distinguishes moreover also between egoistic or altruistic ways to act under a reciprocal action. Finally, reciprocity may be positive or negative⁵⁴. In recent years Robert Putnam challenged Gouldner’s topic towards a theory of “social capital” and he defines the concept as follows: “social capital— that is, social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity”⁵⁵.

Peter Blau released *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (1964), putting accent of exchange mechanisms within the frame of the social processes. According to Blau, social exchange basically differs from economic exchange for three important reasons. First, the items of exchange are not commodities, but gifts. No money is involved, nor credit, nor contract.

51 Alvin Gouldner, “The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement”. *American Sociological Review*, 25 (2) (1960):169.

52 Ibid., 161.

53 Ibid., 170.

54 Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basics books, 1970), 172.

55 Robert Putnam, “Social capital: Measurement and consequences”. *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, 2 (2001): 41.

Giving a gift is a “selfish act of generosity” in that it creates in the recipient the need to reciprocate with something that is desired by the giver. Blau alleges that (at least) both parties to the exchange “[...] are prone to supply more of their own services to provide incentives for the other to increase his supply” (Blau 1964, p. 89). Gift does not necessarily represent an expression of altruism; rather, in most cases it is a way to exercise power over another. Second, the terms of exchange are unspecified (Blau 1964, p. 91). One side offers something the other values, without knowing how or when the partner will return the favor. Third, the exchange is not instrumentally calculated. Without a quid pro quo and in the absence of explicit bargaining, one cannot know if the gift is optimal in a given transaction.

In *Social Systems* (1984) Niklas Luhmann delegitimized the function of reciprocity within the argument of *double contingency* mechanism: in this regard, he states that any form of symmetrical assessment in a systemic theory is destined to fail. Any symmetric model crashes facing the question of complexity and the necessarily selective reduction of complexity that is steered self-referentially within the system:

Above all, we must detach ourselves from the traditional manner of treatment that tried to solve the problem of double contingency (even when it did not call it that) with concepts like “reciprocity,” “reflection,” “reciprocity of perspectives,” or even reciprocity of performances. The unity being sought was seen as a kind of “stapling together” what was different. Similarly, sociality was conceived as relationships between individuals, and one was led to believe that individuals could not drop out of the picture without relationships also disappearing⁵⁶.

Nevertheless, Luhmann rehabilitates reciprocity moreover when he advocates that *interpenetration* is the key mechanism within systemic frames. Due to the increasing differentiation and internal evolution of systems (that is hierarchy principle and claiming identity through dif-

56 Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Redwood city: Stanford University Press 1996), 107

ferences), evolution itself can take place thanks to *interpenetration*, and more precisely Luhmann alleges:

[...] only with the evolution of higher forms of system formation are that evolution's presuppositions brought into the form that is then appropriate. They come about only by use. Therefore, evolution is possible only by *interpenetration*, that is, only by *reciprocity*. From the systems-theoretical viewpoint, evolution is a circular process that constitutes itself in reality (and not in nothingness!)⁵⁷.

Conclusions

Under a methodological aspect, we can advance a good-life-centered approach nurturing a culturally and ethically sensitive *social relations*. This would mean to cross relational sociology (or relational theory) with some crucial aspects of Critical Theory dealing with the concepts of "good life", "reciprocity", "social justice", "reflexivity". In a nutshell, we put that relational theory and critical theory basically converge on some very core issue in sociological debate. Social theory must inquire on forms of social life which are the relational aspect of "being-in-relations", that is the reciprocal effect of the everyday relational life among individuals, and between individuals and institutions. Social relations could nurture and nourish "social goods" or "social evils": social facts have always a normative content, so that social sphere must always be considered to have an intrinsic ethical issue.

In this regard, Rahel Jaeggi offered interesting hints: in *Kritik der Lebensformen* (2004) she literally admits that "[...] the thesis that forms of life have a normative content seems banal, if not even tautological"⁵⁸, but she means indeed that we should start analyzing the existing individual and collective forms of being-together, up to the individual style of life: consequently, her theory aims at deeply exploring the *normative* characteristics of forms of social life. Jaeggi basically puts that forms in social life are meant under five meanings:

⁵⁷ Ibid., 216.

⁵⁸ Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life* (New York: Belknap 2018), 122.

- 1) "Norms specify a *standard* that someone or something can meet or fail to meet"; it deals with the style of life (and this idea should conduct us very far, at least at the analytical part of *Philosophie des Geldes* by Simmel, who is unfortunately not mentioned by Jaeggi);
- 2) *normative* is commonly put in opposition with *descriptive* (and this basically deals with an epistemological issue since social sciences must observe a pure descriptive approach);
- 3) "According to a commonplace definition, norm-conforming behavior is rule-guided or *rule-governed* as opposed to merely *regular*";
- 4) "Norms direct our behavior, and where we comply with them, they require us to do something. It is characteristic of norms in this respect that they are *manmade* formations, hence that they are (in principle) shaped and shapeable";
- 5) The "space of norms" is thus a "space of reasons" (the question of justification and reasoning why adopting certain conducts).

In the chapter *Forms of life as normative belonging* Jaeggi thus advocates that the forms of life have a normative connotation because they are based on the demand for normative expectations⁵⁹.

Among the other authors of the fourth generation within the Critical Theory, Hartmut Rosa is surely one of the most representative for the purposes of our discourse. He coined the sociological and philosophical category of *Resonance* [*Resonanz*] to address that it is a "good" way of encountering the world, that is, people, things, matter, history, nature and life as such⁶⁰. According to Rosa, the quality of human (social) life cannot be simply measured through algorithmic options or resources, but it would be necessary an investigation on related-to-world conditions [*Weltverhältnisse*] and on the relationships to world [*Weltbeziehungen*]. Good life corresponds to Rosa to good relations, because the question is never a matter of scope or instrumental calculation of goods; namely good relations are "a particular way of relating to the world – to places

59 Ibid., 20.

60 Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance. A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 54.

and people, to ideas and bodies, to time and to nature, to self and others". Resonance is thus for Rosa a way of rehabilitating our social co-existence in order to preserve and to enhance it by four crucial elements: 1. "*Being affected*. Resonating with another person, or even with a landscape, a melody, or an idea, means being «inwardly» reached, touched, or moved by them (**af←fection**); 2. "*Emotive self-efficacy*. At the same time, we can speak of true resonance only when this call is followed by our own active response (**e→motion**); 3. "*Adaptive transformation*. Whenever we resonate with another human being, a book, a song, a landscape, an idea, a piece of wood, we are transformed by the encounter, although of course in very different ways (**transformative quality**); 4. "*Uncontrollability of resonance* [...] which means, first, that there is no method) no seven- or nine-step guide that can guarantee that we will be able to resonate with people or things" (**non-controllability** or **not-availableness** [*Unverfügbarkeit*])⁶¹.

Critical Theory (and namely some aspects investigated by such authors like Jaeggi and Rosa) and relational sociology should regard relations as forms of "normative reciprocity" including the investigation on the social conditions which characterize interactions among individuals who basically conduct their lives aiming at their own "good life", and more precisely a critical investigation (and evaluation) on the conditions impeding and inhibiting to grasp their own "good life". This means that liberty, autonomy, self-realization, happiness as social issues, must be assumed as *relational* issues, in the form of the *normative reciprocity*. Good relations could be regarded as a *black box*: they have a necessary and unpredictable character; they cannot be *a priori* defined, nor described from observers as a mere fixed subject. Sociology should investigate on relations as a primary and necessary being-associated or being-together. Good relations generate well-being and thus any politic of welfare. It's good, in conclusion, to recall Adorno's idea of happiness, mentioned in *Minima Moralia*⁶²: to be in a *good relation* means to "be encompassed" by

61 Hartmut Rosa, *The uncontrollability of the world* (Wiley: New York 2020), 31-35.

62 "To happiness the same applies as to truth: one does not have it, but is in it.

it. Any form of social relation claims for its intrinsic *good* realization in order to satisfy its components and individuals.

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Indeed, happiness is nothing other than being encompassed, an after-image of the original shelter within the mother. But for this reason, no-one who is happy can know that he is so. To see happiness, he would have to pass out of it: to be as if already born. He who says he is happy lies, and in invoking happiness, sins against it. He alone keeps faith who says: I was happy. The only relation of consciousness to happiness is gratitude: in which lies its incomparable dignity", Theodor Adorno, *Minima moralia. Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London and New York: Verso 2006), 104.

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What are Semantic Crises?

On Problems of Meaning in Problem Solving

Jan-Philipp Kruse¹

*Words offer the means to meaning
And for those who listen, the annunciation of truth
And the truth is: There is something terribly wrong with this
country, isn't that?*²

Abstract: The notion of *Semantic Crises* is providing a perspective on crises that already occur when it comes to how a society is understanding itself, how it is understanding its problems, and its interpretative resources. In other words, I am concerned with crises of handling crises, which begin with an appropriate description of what is critical, before acting accordingly.

Semantic Crises can be found when terms necessary to appropriately capture a societal problem are not at hand, pointing to underlying difficulties with judging and organizing experience in general. The hypothesis is that they are reflecting a condition in which a society's concepts and interpretive resources have come under pressure in the course of dealing with societal problems, for "incomplete" or one-sided processing of problems will gradually impair a society's ability to communicate meaningfully.

This paper is featuring theory of experience in Critical Theory, how Semantic Crises are conceptually encompassing judgment, experience, and the structure of societal problems, worrisome tendencies in nowadays liberal public sphere to be analyzed through the lens of Semantic Crises, and inelastic problems such as "climate change" raising the bar for democratic deliberation.

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 - 2 James McTeigue, (dir.), *V for Vendetta* [movie], USA/UK/Germany 2005, ca 19:47.

Overview

The present calls for a renewed and more complex diagnosis of societal crises. For one, several lines of crisis are occurring at the same time or in short succession (“Multiple Crisis”, “Poly-Crisis”), entailing to crisis management as a default mode, and not the exception. For another, numerous of those crises also use to be structured in a remarkable way that is to be further investigated and should feed into an updated analysis of social crisis phenomena. In this regard, “Climate Change” or “Global Warming” provides a striking example for problem-solving attempts that already tumble at the level of communication and conceptualization. These types can be characterized as *Semantic Crises* when terms necessary to capture a problem are not at hand, and point to underlying difficulties with judging and organizing experience in general. The 2021 movie “Don’t look up”³ is providing a condensed and catchy cultural reflection on that, picturing where such developments might lead one day: Science has discovered an alarming existential threat. And it is actually featured in democratic public spheres’ channels such as the news, talk shows, social media, and so on – yet in a not appropriate and overall insufficient way, ultimately resulting in the extinction of human life on earth.

While this is an aesthetic extrapolation, it is in fact that problems with successful problem-solving, like with climate change, are accompanied by a variety of worrisome tendencies in nowadays democratic public sphere: be it the renaissance of conspiracy theory, erosion of essential concepts like truth, or political discourse both bubbled and polarized (which appears as two sides of a coin).⁴ Such Phenomena, albeit pointing

3 Adam McKay (dir.), *Don't look up* [movie], USA 2021.

4 Conceptually, and also with regard to mixed empirics, it seems reasonable to explain both tendencies (in short, homophilia and provoked anger) as efforts to max out the time span citizens are spending on social media platforms. The time span argument is for instance maintained by the German National Ethics Council in its 2023 paper on AI challenges (cf. *Mensch und Maschine* –

to different directions, also appear linked to one another in terms of how experience is organized – which is often in a way that is not understandable to the whole of society, and often also does not seem appropriate in a more fundamental sense, beyond political queries. Vice versa, normatively sensitive and scientifically backed-up viewpoints expose conspicuous difficulties to find acclaim in wider debates.

Against this background, I am sketching a perspective on crises that already occur when it comes to how a society is understanding itself, how it is understanding its problems, and its interpretative resources.⁵ In other words, I am concerned with crises of handling crises, which begin with an appropriate description of what is critical, before acting accordingly. Alluding to late Habermas,⁶ these forms of crisis can be called Semantic Crises.

They can be schematically defined as

- (a) References to
- (b) precarious forms of expression whose understanding can no longer be taken for granted,
- (c) which, on the other hand, appear to have no alternative articulation,
- (d) because no other (new) forms for the articulation of what is meant are at hand,
- (e) while the subject matter is nevertheless considered relevant.

In the context of a “Crisis Society”,⁷ characterized by a multitude of on-

Herausforderungen durch Künstliche Intelligenz, German National Ethics Council (2023).

5 Some parts of the following overlap with my monograph on Semantic Crises (Jan-Philipp Kruse, *Semantische Krisen. Urteilen und Erfahrung in der Gesellschaft ungelöster Probleme* [Semantic Crises. Judgment and Experience in the Society of Unsolved Problems] (Weilerswist 2022).

6 I am referring to Habermas’ later writings on religion and beyond. A fair part of this period is condensed in Jürgen Habermas, *Also a History of Philosophy*, Volume 1, transl. by C. Cronin (Cambridge/Hoboken 2023). For a systematic interpretation, see Kruse, Jan-Philipp, “Reason, Religion and the Crisis of Social Semantics. Habermas’ Philosophy of Religion as a Guardrail for Derailing Modernity”, in: *Azimuth*, VIII (2020), nr. 16, pp. 103-120.

7 Isette Schuhmacher, *Krisengesellschaft* [Crisis Society], PhD project, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

going crises, this perspective is shedding more light on two unavoidable questions. For one, why are there actually so many crises? Why are they not resolved? And for another, how come that debating these crises seems oftentimes to be derailed in itself, on the communicative level (e.g., why would people think that Washington politicians seek for the blood of children, that Nancy Pelosi, and not Trump, would have incentivized the January 6 United States Capitol attack, etc.)?⁸ To make “post-truth” rhetoric like this actually work, there has to be an underlying problem with sorting, weighing and interpreting, what philosophy is usually referring to as *power* or *faculty of judgment*. The concept of Semantic Crises is encompassing and connecting both sides, which is societal problem-solving and communication based on judgment.

It appears vital to me to recognize this as a bidirectional connection. Semantic Crises impede social self-understanding, which will affect framing and discussing problems. Its diagnostics can be utilized to describe problem structures and peculiar difficulties in dealing with them (just as in “Don’t look up” it is not a technical challenge that ultimately causes humanity to fail, but rather deficits in democratic opinion-formation, social coordination, and so on).

Then again, when it comes to explaining for which reasons and developments Semantic Crises would come into being, it is more of the other way round. Semantic Crises are capturing a condition in which a society’s concepts and interpretive resources have come under pressure in the course of dealing with social problems, or even crises, for “incomplete” or one-sided processing of problems continually impairs a society’s ability to deal with problems at all. In a nutshell, the hypothesis is this: Problem-solving in a democratic society would have to accord to overarching goals at least from time to time. Forcing it to follow one-sided interests (like a truncated conception of economic profit) instead, demands for communicative distortion, depicting particular interests as if they would serve general interests. However, too much distortion over a too long

8 The former is alluding to one of the major QAnon conspiracy theories, the latter to a Trump narrative that is part of the 2024 election campaign.

period of time will also distort the ways of judgment. My thought on this, which is inspired by a more pragmatist reading of Kant's third Critique, is: If there are too little examples how to judge appropriately that can be learned from, citizens' judgment, as a consequence, becomes a more and more disembodied,⁹ and also more error-prone exercise.

Furthermore, the cognitive component in this appears to be linked to a broader and more affective dimension. In this regard, disembodied judgment is also a form of alienation (rather than the kind of habituation that Aristotle or Hegel have in mind). In a way, albeit developed in another context, Adorno's observation on goodwill suffering scars, then turning to "blindness" or "fanaticism", still applies here, for Adorno was also thinking of a sort of "violence", as he would call it, to interrupt or distort exploring open-mindedly the world we live in:

"Such scars lead to deformations. They can produce 'characters,' hard and capable; they can produce stupidity, in the form of deficiency symptoms, blindness, or impotence, if they merely stagnate, or in the form of malice, spite, and fanaticism, if they turn cancerous within. Goodwill is turned to ill will by the violence it suffers."¹⁰

Semantic Crisis phenomena are threatening successful democratic deliberation on urgent matters, while also descending from social problem processing. Put another way: Loss of experience must at the same time have something to do with the derailment of how experience is organized in a society. And this experience organization is closely connected to the organization of problem-solving. The reason is that in liberal societies, policies are not simply imposed. Rather, they are discussed with the help of meaningful concepts of interpretation. This is a major source of the strong connection between understanding and action in contemporary democratic societies. In short, Semantic Crisis is a diagnostic term, linking judgment, experience, and problem structure.

9 Cf. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York/Toronto 1944).

10 Max Horkheimer/Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, transl. by E. Jephcott (Stanford 2002), 214.

Foundations of a Theory of Experience in Critical Theory: Benjamin and Habermas

In spelling out what Semantic Crises are, where they are coming from, and what makes them a crisis, I am operating on a field that has been brought to attention by Habermas' later works on the philosophy of religion. Indeed, these works expose a "seismographic"¹¹ antenna for the abysses of a "modernization threatening to spin out of control"¹² already on the level of communication and societal self-understanding. On the other hand, Habermas' perspective also strives to address, prolong and repair systematic motifs. That is why Benjamin is referred to, being the reference point for an import of theological thought and the topic of impoverishment of experience within Critical Theory – yet in a peculiar fashion, which follows from Habermas' approach as laid out in the *Theory of Communicative Action*.

As Habermas puts it himself:

"My motive for addressing the issue of faith and knowledge is to mobilize modern reason against the defeatism lurking within it. Postmetaphysical thinking cannot cope on its own with the defeatism concerning reason which we encounter today both in the postmodern radicalization of the 'Dialectic of the Enlightenment' and in the naturalism founded on a naive faith in science. It is different with a practical reason that despairs of the motivating power of its good reasons without the backing of the history of philosophy, because a modernization threatening to spin out of control tends to counteract rather than to complement the precepts of its morality of justice."¹³

With *counteract* and *complement*, Habermas invokes a Hegelian thought already adopted in the context of discourse ethics:

11 Cf. „Großes Palaver“, article in: *Der Spiegel* 39/1977, pp. 237-239.

12 Jürgen Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing", in: Id., *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, transl. by C. Cronin (Cambridge/Malden 2010), pp. 15-25, 24.

13 Op. cit., 18.

“For unless discourse ethics is undergirded by the thrust of motives and by socially accepted institutions, the moral insights it offers remain ineffective in practice. Insights, Hegel rightly demands, should be transformable into the concrete duties of everyday life. This much is true: Any universalistic morality is dependent upon a form of life that meets it halfway [entgegenkommt].”¹⁴

Morality is dependent on a foundation or complement in forms of life (Hegel’s *ethical life*). Against the background of Habermas’ social ontology, those forms of life are part of the *lifeworld*, which is threatened by “systemic constraints of material reproduction” to be “mediatize[d]”.¹⁵

This precarious balance between “systems” and “lifeworld” is now observed to spin out of control in a way that even questions the continuity of the *project of modernity*:

“The division of labor between the integrative mechanisms of the market, bureaucracy, and social solidarity is out of kilter and has shifted in favor of economic imperatives that reward forms of social interaction oriented to individual success.”¹⁶

As a consequence, what is considered to be the social substrate for morality, solidarity, or even meaningful communication and meaningfulness as such, is suspected to erode. Habermas also speaks of a “disruption of normative consciousness”.¹⁷ At stake are “sufficiently differentiated expressions of and sensitivity to squandered lives, social pathologies, failed existences [...] deformed and distorted social relations”¹⁸ and “suffering

14 Jürgen Habermas, “Morality and Ethical Life: Does Hegel’s Critique of Kant Apply to Discourse Ethics?”, in *Northwestern University Law Review*, LXXXIII, 1-2, 1989, pp. 38-53, 49f.

15 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, translated by T. McCarthy (Boston 1987), 185.

16 Jürgen Habermas, “The Boundary Between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant’s Philosophy of Religion”, in: Id., *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge 2008), pp. 209-247, 238f [italicization jpk].

17 Op. cit., 239.

18 Jürgen Habermas, “Pre-Political Conditions of the Constitutional State?”, in:

in general”¹⁹. With regard to solidarity, Habermas argues accordingly that an

“uncontrolled modernization of society as a whole could certainly corrode democratic bonds and undermine the form of solidarity on which the democratic state depends even though it cannot enforce it. Then the very constellation that Böckenförde has in mind would transpire, namely, the transformation of the citizens of prosperous and peaceful liberal societies into isolated, self-interested monads who use their individual liberties exclusively against one another like weapons.”²⁰

A “sober postmetaphysical philosophy”, as he puts it, “cannot compensate for this lack”.²¹ In other words, reason cannot bootstrap itself. It is in need for some sort of complement. For Habermas, two consequences arise from this. That is, for one, “to conserve all cultural sources that nurture citizens’ solidarity and their normative awareness”.²² And for another, *translation* is introduced as a way to gain or reignite elements of normative consciousness and awareness sheltered in religion. For instance, translating “the theological doctrine of creation in God’s image into the idea of the equal and unconditional dignity of all human beings constitutes one such conserving translation.”²³ For characterizing this kind of translation, Benjamin is alluded to on several occasions, and also called explicitly: “Walter Benjamin was among the thinkers who at times succeeded in making such translations.”²⁴

Habermas’ perspective is resting on the shoulders of the founding distinction between economic and administrative systems on the one, and what is referred to as lifeworld on the other hand. From a more holistic

Id., *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge 2008), pp. 101-113, 110.

19 Habermas, “Boundary,” 239.

20 Habermas, “Conditions,” 107.

21 Habermas, “Boundary,” 239.

22 Habermas, “Conditions,” 111.

23 Op. cit., 110.

24 Ibid.

approach, however, the diagnosis shifts.²⁵ It is not so much about religious tradition preserving precious contents that would otherwise not be expressible or are mundanely already lost in the process of one-sided capitalist modernization. Instead, I am suggesting to treat emancipatory semantics less as a reservoir, and more as something that is evoked, stabilized, or destabilized by patterns of experience rooted in everyday life. Societal communication under conditions of a capitalist economy is characterized by regular misuse of culturally 'thick' or 'laden' semantics for cloaking particular as general interests. In this regard, semantics are stressed, and can wear out. Vice versa, though, it would also seem plausible to me that a more candid, honest and goal-oriented social metabolism will not lose semantic potentials, or even bring about his own. From this angle, then, also the view on Benjamin shifts towards his rich considerations of how experience and form of life are associated.²⁶

Paralysis and Derailment

Semantic Crisis, as an analytic notion, is meant to be more comprehensive than concepts like political polarization, discursive 'fragmentation' or symbolic turbulences alongside social modernization. Firstly, Semantic Crises encompass both phenomena of escalating disputes and of inarticulation. Both groups are likely to not address pressing problems appropriately.

Secondly, as far as polarization is concerned, Semantic Crisis is aiming at a more fundamental level: not at standpoints being relatively far apart, but at an erosion of the underlying framework locating such standpoints in the first place. Such a second order polarization²⁷ is eroding the coordinate system that would allow to frame different standpoints as different perspectives on the same matter. In other words, irrespective the amount

25 For a more detailed interpretation, see Kruse, "Reason, Religion and the Crisis of Social Semantics."

26 In Kruse, *Semantische Krisen*, I am concerned with "Zum Begriff der Geschichte," „Der Erzähler“ and „Linke Melancholie.“

27 Cf. Bernhard Pörksen, *Die grosse Gereiztheit. Wege aus der kollektiven Erregung* (Munich 2018), 194.

of pluralization or social differentiation processes a society has undergone, the systematic question is to what extent citizens' perspectives can productively engage and relate in the processing of societal problems.

This leads, thirdly, to highlighting the functional side of 'crisis' in Semantic Crisis. Shared, meaningful semantics enable and enrich the discourse on society's problems. Therefore, the criterion for crisis is a relative, not an absolute one. It is in no way a question of thinking ahead,

how a society *should* come to an understanding. Instead, I am arguing with a pragmatist intuition that social vocabularies and problem structures must align to a certain degree, in order to have the 'right' words to conceptualize problems and challenges adequately. Otherwise, Semantic Crises can arise. Another paradigmatic case is not so much that a term is literally missing, but more that concepts are somehow available (e.g., in the dictionary), yet cannot be utilized reliably. They lose their vitality, so to speak, and would ultimately appear as something like neither fully dead nor properly living 'zombies'. In fact, there are notions like love or solidarity, that on the one hand seem indispensable, while on the other like a dusted item on a long-forgotten shelf.

Fourthly, the functional dimension in the concept of crisis also indicates that Semantic Crises cannot be merely about crises of certain signifiers. Why should a form of expression that has become difficult not simply be replaced or superseded by other expressions that could fulfill same or similar functions? Consequently, speaking of Semantic Crises means to aim at the very sources of semantics: that something is missing, for not being available as a reliable expression for social self-understanding: "practical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake ... an awareness of what is missing."²⁸ Semantic Crises understood in this way differ from what I would call semantic turbulences. Turbulences in a society's symbolic reproduction, that arise in the course of social modernization (for example redefinition or liquefaction of social roles), awaken the need for cultural self-understanding, which in turn can unfold on the grounds of

28 Habermas, "Awareness," 19.

a symbolic medium. Only when this medium of reflection itself is somehow impaired and consequently not able to develop new concepts of interpretation or update those that are perceived as outdated, there is the danger of Semantic Crisis.

Problems, Judgment, Experience

By specifying that analyzing Semantic Crises should not stop at certain signifiers, it is also implied that it is aimed more generally at the possibility of and conditions in the organization of experience. Now, why do we need or what is organization of experience for on a societal level? The answer is that it coordinates the joint solving of shared problems. Problems have to be recognized, defined and conceptualized: What actually is the problem? Where does it originate and where does it go? Which strategies appear promising, and which do not?

The 'forum' for such a task is the democratic public sphere, while digitally transformed public spheres can no longer be described in terms of a forum: It is less about a specific place, and more about a communicative process.²⁹ This communicative process neither features a single paradigmatic location (like the Agora), nor time-wise synchronized experience (like TV news) necessarily. Those 'classic' forms have become parts of a looser ensemble of forms of experience, stretching from mass to social media and digitally mediated everyday life. In this context, experience organization cannot be conceived as some sort of top-down distribution (though there are of course top-down-elements). It is more that individuals will encounter such and such perspectives on socially relevant matters, depending on their profile of media usage and form of life. Relating to those encountered perspectives means to judge them. In this regard, judging something is about assessing the underlying perspective's ac-

29 Cf. Jan-Philipp Kruse, "Von der Öffentlichkeit zur Urteils Umwelt? Zur Aktualität einer Theorie der Öffentlichkeit und ihrer Probleme" [From Public Sphere towards Judgment Environment? On the Actuality of Public Sphere Theory and its Problems], in: *Entgrenzte Öffentlichkeit. Debattenkulturen im politischen und medialen Wandel*, ed. S. Jung/V. Kempf (Bielefeld 2023), pp. 173-193.

cessibility: "If you look from this angle, that is A and that is B, and from that follows..."

Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*,³⁰ is describing this in the German edition with the term "ansinnen", meaning that judgments are offered to others, who are called by an offered judgment to try to make sense of it. That may succeed, and then it would "click",³¹ as Wittgenstein phrased it. For Kant, it is essential that judgments click at least now and then. Reason is in need of suitable objects to assure itself. Already for early Kant, it is beauty indicating that reason and reality match ("daß der Mensch in die Welt passe").³² Against this background, the counter-question must be what happens if reason were to encounter too few suitable opportunities to judge successfully. In this regard, I am grasping successful judgment as something that develops, dependent on suitable opportunities to judge.

What becomes clear in the context of Semantic Crises analysis, is a conceptual conjunction between judgment and its respective consequences for collective action: Concepts introduced into judgments can prove to be more or less valid - as measured by the success of the problem processing they inform. In other words, what I am suggesting is to read Kant's third Critique with a sideview to pragmatist intuitions, while also maintaining its close connection between understanding, meaning and communicability, a key insight already encapsulated in the complex notion "ansinnen".

The fundamental relationship between understanding (judgment) and action (problem-solving) is highly relevant for explaining recent public sphere tendencies. On the one hand, 'spheres' such as politics or economy constantly provide offers of judgment. On the other hand, such offers will regularly not be reconstructable by citizens' judgment. The

30 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, transl. by J. Creed Meredith (Oxford/New York 2007).

31 Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* (Oxford 1967).

32 Immanuel Kant, "Logik," in: *Akademie-Edition*, Vol. 16 (Berlin/Göttingen 1900ff), 127.

underlying reason is that one-dimensional problem-solving is regularly not able to achieve goals in a planned manner.

Drifting Problem-Solving in the Name of Optimization

There is, of course, an overarching goal like profit maximization. Profit maximization is most often understood and exercised as some sort of linear optimization. Q4 in 2024 shall be more profitable than Q4 in 2023, and so on. The punch line is: Precisely because linear optimization strategies are so widespread, it is often not clear whether they are appropriate in the end, fitting with the objects that are to be optimized. Even more, it can be systematically shown that linear optimization has to fail when it comes to certain types of problems.³³ That is a grave finding.³⁴ It points out that linear optimization is a potentially *disdirectional* (not goal-oriented) approach to problems.

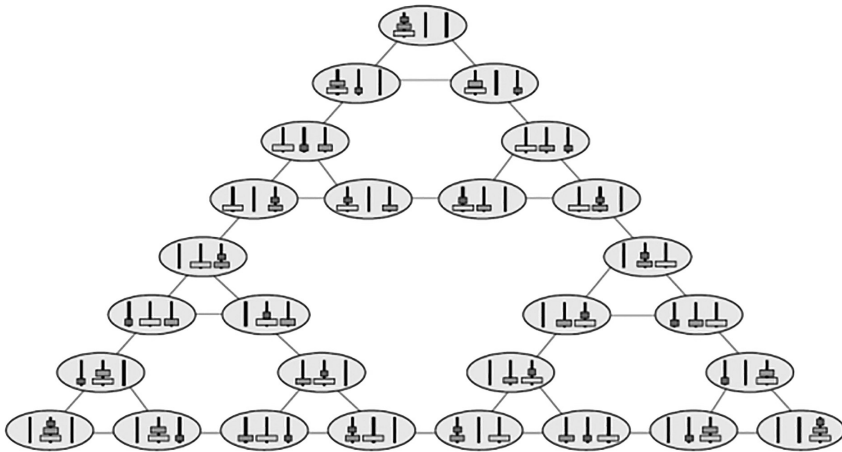


Figure 1: Schematic depiction of the “Tower of Hanoi” Problem. Taken from Tilmann Betsch/Joachim Funke/Henning Plessner, *Denken – Urteilen, Entscheiden, Problemlösen* (Berlin/Heidelberg 2011), 195 (#15.2).

33 Cf. Kruse, *Semantische Krisen*.

34 Of course, there are influential theories that point in a similar direction, such as critiques of instrumental reason. I am aiming for a reactualized take that also allows for a more detailed look on the processes involved.

With a reference to psychological problem-solving theory, it becomes apparent that linear optimization strategies cannot pursue their goal systematically given a problem structured like the so-called “Tower of Hanoi” (above), but will *drift* instead. Try for yourself: Following the premise that each to be selected configuration should get closer to the goal (which is a formalization of a linear optimization strategy), that goal will never be reached systematically. There is dynamics or movement, as problem states are played through, yet often none that is directed towards what is considered to be the undertaking’s goal.

As with every modeling, this abstraction comes of course with a price. For instance, societal problems are most often not clearly defined. Rather, it is contested what the problem actually is. Still, such modeling allows for gaining insights in the processing of problems (which are not as evident when focusing on results).³⁵ And it entails two severe consequences for judgment: Problem-solving that is not clearly successful, has a motif to depict itself as if it would be, utilizing concepts and ideas that are known to unfold a certain cultural momentum or traction. On the other hand, this, in a way, is wearing off those concepts, and also judgment itself in the long run.

In rather drastic cases, it could be said that we are dealing with unrealistic, perhaps even ideological assumptions, which then deserve to become the object of criticism. At this point, I am concerned with the long-term effects of such constellations. Concepts that prove themselves too rarely lose their hold in the social order of knowledge. A term that is constantly in use, though does not work out, is wearing out, gradually loses its meaning, because, as Habermas states, meaning cannot be *produced*, yet wear off through misuse:

“There is no administrative production of meaning. Commercial production and administrative planning of symbols exhausts

35 Focusing on results is common: Has the problem been resolved? Did it work out? Is there a contradiction? And so on. However, for analyzing the interrelation of judgment/experience and problem-solving, it seems beneficial, and to a certain extent necessary, to pay attention to stages and patterns in the process of coping with problems, instead ‘just’ looking at results.

the normative force of counterfactual validity claims. The procurement of legitimation is self-defeating as soon as the mode of procurement is seen through. Cultural traditions have their own, vulnerable, conditions of reproduction."³⁶

One could also say that terms are being updated or iterated by deploying them, which can mean enriching, but also weakening them. When terms are weakened that are still needed, Semantic Crises are likely to come about.

Learning and Unlearning in the Liberal Public Sphere

The public sphere plays a threefold role in the setting of Semantic Crisis analysis. Firstly, it refers to the idea of social self-understanding that is also prominent in Kant's third Critique. On the one hand, the theory of Semantic Crises, as laid out here, draws on the rich tradition of a public 'forum' in which thoughts and interpretations have to prove themselves, which is to show they can be understood by other citizens. This line of tradition establishes a close conceptual link between public sphere and the faculty of judgment. Communicability of judgments, which in turn has something to do with their coherence, the inner organization of judgments, is ultimately revealed in public. If I cannot explain myself, it is at least a potential indication that the perspective applied may be incomplete or skewed.

On the other hand, theorizing Semantic Crisis includes a pragmatic aspect that is often neglected by theories of judgment. From its angle, how a judgment is reached – and if it can be reached at all –, also depends on the objects of judgment. Problem-solving (as a paramount object in social self-understanding) will facilitate or impede the formation of a "clicking" judgment.

What exactly does that mean? It is precisely those attempts at problem-solving that are not effective in themselves, which have a motif to instrumentally draw on the cultural pool of rhetoric and symbols to cre-

36 Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, transl. by Th. McCarthy (Cambridge/Oxford 1988), 70.

ate legitimation in a democratic public sphere. By this, problem-solving is becoming symbolically charged with elements that do not source from itself, and can regularly not be pursued systematically (see 2.). So called *Green Washing* is one example among many. Ecological goals are officially embraced, without doing justice to them.

The result is a kind of iterative pressure – on the related symbolic structures (which, in the long run, cannot be aligned with what really happens) as well as on the faculty of judgment involved (which cannot learn how to judge appropriately in a realm dominated by instrumental communication). In that sense, we are dealing with a sort of second order phenomena (which emerges from many similar cases). The idea is that instrumental communication, when occurring too often, will have a negative effect on the competence of judgment by successively unsettling it.

The second role of a liberal society's public sphere relevant here is to play a key role in coordinating problem-solving. That is, viewpoints and opinions are not forced, but are advertised in it. In this respect, a liberal public sphere is not only the terrain, yet also condition and motif for presenting goals and projects (e.g., an economic product or a political reform proposal) in the best possible, most attractive way. Facing that mechanism, it can be said that liberal public sphere – as a form of communication in a society dealing with problems disdirectionally (i.e. not in a goal-oriented way) – is also a condition of Semantic Crises.

The third conceptual role of public sphere in Semantic Crisis analysis leads back to the idea of a learning history in judgment. The hypothesis of a learning history allows for taking a more differentiated look at findings that are sometimes a bit hastily attributed to new (digitalized) forms of the public sphere, and also to link them with one another.

Of course, shifts in media structure matter. Yet, these cannot fully explain why new forms of manipulation or conspiracy theory proliferation should be that successful. How can it be that for many people, unsubstantiated rumors appear, in contrast to "liberal" or "mainstream" media, to be the more reliable sources? Where does the ubiquitous anger

come from?³⁷ My take is that these phenomena have a history of disappointed hopes and failed judgments.

Kant had speculated about a cultural evolution that would deepen understanding more and more.³⁸ What remains of this is at least a remarkable optimism that still characterizes many theories of judgement. Their optimism sometimes makes it seem as if they are exactly the right key for a communicative sphere perceived as having less common ground. In light of this, it is not at all surprising that some of these more recent theories of judgement come across with an almost Habermasian gesture³⁹ and present themselves as conceptual tools for framing communicative channels in a fragmented global society. These theories often forget, or in any case underestimate, the fact that their optimism is originating from the Kantian root and remains tied to it in at least some way.

In any case, it is plausible that faculty of judgment involves a social dimension, a *history of learning*. Also, it is not trivial that societies are actually able to understand themselves – they have to learn it. Yet, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is only interested in one direction of this dimension: progress, which would be stabilized by learning. Given the recent socio-political context, it should as well be asked how learning can be compromised, blocked, or turn to unlearning. Insofar as judgments of others are often enough not even recognized as perspectives on the same objects, nowadays communicative shortcomings and derailments also have something to do with no longer understanding each other:

“To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individual-

37 As described by many academics and intellectuals, among them also Pörksen, *Gereiztheit*.

38 Cf. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 127: “Eventually, when civilization has reached its height it makes this work of communication almost the main business of refined inclination, and the entire value of sensations is placed in the degree to which they permit of universal communication.”

39 To give just one example, cf. Albenaz Azmanova, *The Scandal of Reason. A Critical Theory of Political Judgment* (New York 2012).

ly distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods".⁴⁰

As already touched upon, being able to learn has something to do with the objects of judgment encountered. It can be said that just by coupling one-dimensional goals (like profit maximization) with marketing these goals as being actual solutions for society on the grounds of a liberal public sphere, difficulties for citizens' judgment arise, since it cannot successfully reconstruct such symbolically charged perspectives (except for realizing that there is a misfit between the real-world agenda and its colorful depiction).

Speaking of a learning history of judgment thus offers conceptual tools for further developing what has been referred to as second order phenomena above. In the course of judgment, something happens to it. There will be constellations that have an impact on its further development, but are not about learning in a rich understanding, like reactions to experiences that do not necessarily allow to deal with them in a 'better' way. This maneuver, which is based on Kant, yet broadening the scope, achieves two things. Firstly, it allows for analyzing public sphere phenomena such as conspiracy theories in a more differentiated way. Yes, digital communication helps conspiracy theories to gain greater reach, but why should so many citizens fall for them? The answer given here is, in short, that they must have unlearned by experience how to make appropriate judgments.

Secondly, this is how an interconnection between the ensemble of recent public sphere phenomena becomes more tangible (be it conspiracy theory, be it withdrawal from 'official' politics, be it widespread affects of anger, be it hyperpolarization, be it difficulties with navigating media sources), as a connection of reconstructive failures that *à la longue* also pertain to the productive aspect of judging.

40 John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems. An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Chicago 1946), 154.

On the Elasticity of Societal Problems

Modeling problem-solving with recourse to psychological problem-solving theory reveals that linear processing (like with one-sided profit maximization) typically shows a specific pattern. Given a more complex type of problem, linear processing will expose *drifting* in relation to its goal (instead of approaching the goal systematically). The term drifting is meant to capture those turns or moves attempting to solve a problem that do not get systematically closer to a desired solution or supposed goal. Modeling problem-solving in this way comes with several benefits. It allows for a closer inspection of problem-solving stages and their relation to corresponding judgments, and to better understand coping with problems as a process, rather than merely looking at results.⁴¹ Also, it is suggesting a fresh take on topics associated with instrumental reasoning, and by this pointing to yet another form of learning blockage as originally described by Rahel Jaeggi:

“[A] successful form of life is something that can be understood as the result of a successful dynamic of transformation. Conversely, forms of life are bad, irrational, or inappropriate insofar as they are marked by systemic blockages or disruptions with regard to the perception and solution of problems and correspondingly are the result of failed or deficient transformation processes.”⁴²

Looking at Semantic Crisis' etiology, blocked learning appears to be less about stagnation, and also less about the (final) “result”. Problems do not stand still, but are dealt with in a way that impairs the resources of social self-understanding (and thus also the processing of problems) in the long term. Such types can be called *Dynamic Learning Blockage*.

41 Which is even, to some degree, a tendency in Jaeggi, related to the reception of Hegel.

42 Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, transl. by C. Cronin (Cambridge/London 2018), 216.

At this point, the danger of getting into some sort of vicious circle is obvious. Drifting problem-solving would then lead to the wear and tear of semantics, which ultimately derails judgment. Experience is impoverished, which in turn affects the ability to judge a problem appropriately. It is precisely on this track that contemporary phenomena of the public sphere can be spelled out further. Nonetheless, neither can a specific threshold be derived from this type of theoretical approach, nor is problem processing the only momentous iteration of semantics in society (art would be another). Theorizing problem-solving and societal self-understanding is much more about getting hold of a mechanism that might contribute to regression, if not countered or mitigated.

Yet, there is one aspect that is about even more, adding more gravity to Semantic Crisis analysis. Until now, we have focused on the relation between problem-solving patterns and the role of semantics in judgment, one influencing the other. Under conditions of Anthropocene, it has to be added *that some problems need to be solved appropriately within a limited time span*. This will become clearer by distinguishing two types of problems. By *elastic problems*, I would like to refer to problems whose processing does not irreversibly alter or impair their solvability. In principle, such problems are able to snap back into a solvable form, no matter how deformed they may be – things can turn out ‘well’ in the end. For instance, if the US should slide into a more authoritarian regime, returning to democracy would at least not be utterly impossible at some point in the future. As sad and catastrophic as it still would be to lose democracy, there might be another democratic revolution.

Conversely, problems that irreversibly change if they are dealt with (or not dealt with) are to be called *inelastic*. Climate change is a striking example for this second type. Solving the problem of climate change (as an existential threat)⁴³ must be successful at some point – or it will be too late. Neither can engaging with it be postponed indefinitely, nor can anything be learned ex post from failures on an existential level. While almost tautological, there is a neglected truth that probably needs to be

43 Cf. Nick Bostrom/Milan Ćirković (ed.), *Global Catastrophic Risks* (Oxford 2008).

spelled out: Planet Earth is the very and only basis of life for homo sapiens. Without it, any civilization would come to an ultimate end, for “Earth is [as isolated] today in space” as “Easter Island was [...] in the Pacific Ocean”.⁴⁴

Having said that, I am also to say that in its core, Semantic Crisis’ analytical framework is actually quite light-footed, aiming at proportionalities and relations. At the center of interest is the relationship between problem-solving and social self-understanding. Nevertheless, it is true that the loss of meaning in the course of Semantic Crises will also affect the species’ capability to deal with existential challenges.

Resumé

Semantic Crises is an analytical term to get a hold on semantics that are worn out, while still of relevance for societal self-understanding and consequently to coordinate problem-solving. Otherwise, there would be no crisis in semantics becoming outdated, like with many old-fashioned expressions.

Specific concepts that appear to be affected by Semantic Crisis point to the underlying ability to organize experience, usually referred to as faculty of judgment. Otherwise, again, there would be no reason to miss specific terms – as Habermas does⁴⁵ –, or to consider worn-out terms to be a challenge at all, for outdated terms might then just be replaced or rejuvenated. In this sense, Semantic Crises become visible when terms are “missing”, while they are dating back to the organization of experience. A variety of contemporary phenomena – be it the renaissance of conspiracy theory, affective overload in, or resigned withdrawal from political debates – is thus encompassed. They are linked with one another being about communicative troubles, misconceptions or mismatches that root in the organization of experience. For experience is structured by specific terms, these are symptomatic for Semantic Crises, which can from the

44 Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York 2005), 119.

45 Cf. Habermas, “Awareness.”

outset be defined (as I did in the beginning) as situations where a term appears to be both unreliable and yet also unavoidable.

The conceptual approach is threefold. For one, there is Benjamin and Habermas, the former starting, the latter building up on thoughts about the vitality und survivability of emancipatory semantics under adverse historical conditions. In a certain sense, Habermas has returned to a core question of Critical Theory in his writings on the philosophy of religion, namely the crucial question of its own conditions: What are the conditions of critique? What minimum requirements must societies meet for critique to function (in principle), to have an effect, to find recipients? This is a special version of the more general question about the possibility of social self-understanding pursued here.

For another, I have suggested to interpret key parts of Immanuel Kant's third Critique in the light of a broadened view that accounts not only for progress through collective learning processes, but also for regress when opportunities to learn are insufficient. Kant had even speculated about an evolution towards ever enriching social understanding, but was also aware that this understanding has to be learned and unfolded by appropriate examples and opportunities. Reason must be assured that it actually fits the empirical world we live in. What I am also taking from Kant is the close conceptual link between judgment, understanding and communication.

As a third major theoretical resource, I am referring to a broadly conceived Deweyan perspective on societal problem-solving, which is detailed by a model of problem-solving derived from psychological problem-solving theory and re-interpreted for socio-philosophical means. On the one hand, this allows for substantiating how Semantic Crises come about, and how they might be resolved or avoided. Semantics are not detached from, but rather a reflection of forms of life. Whether they make sense, is a question of their role in the processing of societal affairs (vulgo problems), of proving themselves as valid descriptions. Again, this equation has two sides, and if problem-solving is systematically impaired for its instrumental character ("linear optimization"), accompanying con-

cepts are weakened in the process. On the other hand, working with such a model – which of course also has its downsides – allows for detailing problem-solving processes as processes. It is not only the results (if a form of life succeeded or failed in solving a crucial problem), but also the way leading there, which is accounted for.

More generally speaking, this reflects that it is not only the turning points in history that have an influence on how a society is understanding itself and how capable it is to engage with problems. Much more, everyday life is characterized by never-ending instrumental communication, misusing hopes and fears systematically, so that in the end the fabric of communication itself is likely to tear. The perspective advocated here is that on the grounds of a democratic society's liberal public sphere, societal self-understanding is reciprocally intertwined with problem-solving. Only a society that solves its problems sustainably will be able to sustain meaningful communication in the long run.

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The lively voice of Critical Theory

Berlin Journal of Critical Theory (BJCT) is a peer-reviewed journal which is published in both electronic and print formats by Xenomoi Verlag in Berlin. The goal is to focus on the critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School and to extend their theories to our age. Unfortunately, it seems that most of the concerns and theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are neglected in its second and third generations.

We believe that the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are still capable of explaining many social, cultural, and political problems of our time. However, in some cases, we need to revise those theories. For example, the culture industry in our time can also work with a different mechanism from that described by Adorno and Horkheimer. In our age, the majorities can access the media and even respond to the messages which they receive – this is something which was not possible in Adorno and Horkheimer's time. But this doesn't mean that the culture industry's domination is over. Thus, we may need to revise the theory of the culture industry to explain the new forms of cultural domination in our age.

Therefore, we are planning to link the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt school to the problems of our age. This means that we are looking for original and high-quality articles in the field of critical theory. To reach our goals, we gathered some of the leading scholars of critical theory in our editorial board to select the best articles for this journal.

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