

Mirrors without images

Mimesis and recognition in Lacan and Adorno

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Mène-moi vers la vie
Au-delà de la grille basse
Qui me sépare de moi même
Qui divise tout sauf mes cendres
Sauf la terreur que j'ai de moi.

Paul Éluard

In the history of the relations between philosophy and psychoanalysis, there have been two major developments: one in France and the other in Germany. It is widely accepted that these intellectual experiences have taken significantly distinct paths. In Germany, the confrontation between philosophy and psychoanalysis was staged by the Frankfurt School through its strategy of introducing Freudian discoveries into the history of ideas. In France, the philosophical inquiry concerning psychoanalysis permeated several moments of contemporary thought. Nevertheless, the main agency of the confrontation was the Lacanian reconstruction of Freudian metapsychology.

It is commonly accepted that there is no shared dialogical field between the Frankfurt School and Jacques Lacan. The Frankfurt School initially attempted to build up a kind of archaeology of social bonds and socialization processes based on readings of Freud's theory of drives; an archaeology capable of guiding a renovation of the ambitions of social praxis, as well as the modalities of its critique. Jacques Lacan's way, on the other hand, seems to have followed another cartography. It is true that we can find a kind of Lacanian archaeology of social bonds, mainly if we consider the theory of the 'five' discourses. However, despite this interest in producing a theory of discourse, Lacan developed a clinical practice grounded mainly on the recognition of the blockage produced by the unconscious against processes of self-reflection. In this sense, Lacanian psychoanalysis does not admit any notion of positive synthesis capable of weaving a reconciliation between the emancipatory ambitions of consciousness and the radical negativity of the

unconscious. This leads us to understand the end of analysis as a process of *subjective destitution*. Such a process places psychoanalysis in opposition to the possible enlargement of consciousness's field of self-comprehension and of any possible disalienation of the subject, blocking the dialogue between Lacan and the emancipatory aspirations of the Frankfurt School. But perhaps we are already entitled to criticize this way of addressing the problem.

Recuperating the subject... through the object

Certainly, the notion of cure in the Lacanian clinic is not compatible either with Erich Fromm's ideas about processes of individual development and culturalism or with the utopic horizon of social reconciliation proposed by Marcuse. At the same time, the Lacanian clinic distances itself from the attempts proposed by Habermas and Honneth to construct a theory of intersubjectivity that takes into account psychoanalytic models.¹ However, with Jacques Lacan and Theodor Adorno we witness two moments in the history of ideas that are very close to one another. It is not the intention here simply to show the interface between these authors, but rather to develop the consequences of an acknowledgement of the convergence between their apparently distinct programmes.

To begin with, we know that both Adorno and Lacan mapped out their intellectual enterprises by means of a project of a *return to Freud*. If this movement is clear in Lacan, we must also remember the major role played by Adorno's reading of Freud. This reading influenced Adorno's philosophical project in a decisive way, in particular, the structure of his conception of the self-criticism of reason. Adorno's materialist stance becomes simply incomprehensible if we neglect what psychoanalysis offered him concerning the genesis of the self, the relation between drive and the structuring of thought, the role of identifications in

the determination of self-identity and the strength of narcissism in the colonization of social life forms. The psychoanalytic core of Adorno's theory is so evident that some commentators – for example, Honneth – see in it the cause for a certain 'sociological deficit' present in the fact that it is therefore not possible for Adorno to produce a true reflection on the *social* modes of organization of society.²

However, when it comes to a possible confluence between Lacan and Adorno, it becomes most clearly visible when we recall that both – in opposition to the major trends of contemporary thought – sought to renew ways to sustain the principle of subjectivity. Instead of assuming the discourse of the subject's death, or a return to the immanence of being, both were willing to sustain the principle of subjectivity without the thought of identity.

For these authors the subject is not a substantial entity on which processes of self-determination are based; rather, it is the locus of non-identity and of splitting. This operation gains legibility if we recall that the common Hegelian roots of Lacan's and Adorno's thought allowed them to develop an articulation between the subject and negation. The result was that non-identity, understood as a non-retrievable negativity that is fundamental to the structuring of a subjectivity that does not vanish into the universal medium of language, could become the Adornian utopian horizon, in the same way that it represents what needs to be recognized by the subject at the end of Lacanian analysis.

This idea of the subject as locus of non-identity may become clearer if we recall how the two thinkers – once again, contrary to the major trends of contemporary thought – sustained the importance of experience as a confrontation between subject and object. Lacan and Adorno did not abandon the subject–object dialectic because there is an experience of decentering that is fundamental for the determination of subjectivity and which is only given by a certain regime of *identification* between subject and object.

Such a regime should not be understood as based on the mechanisms of projection of the I onto the world of objects, or of assimilation of the object through a recollection that is capable of internalizing splittings produced by consciousness. Rather, this is about taking the subject to recognize that it has 'an objective core'³ (*einen Kern von Objekt*) that is not reducible to processes of individuation and reflexive appropriation. That is why subjectivity should no longer be understood exclusively through its reduction to the intersubjective ground that structures the symbolic

field of social interaction, but in the restoration of the confrontations that characterize the dialectics of subject and object.

Adorno called the mode of recognition that is fundamentally connected with the figure of the subject regarded as locus of non-identity, *mimesis*. This essay aims to show that the Adornian problematic of mimesis is not a mere symptom of a repressed tendency to return to *Naturphilosophie*. Rather, mimesis is the fundamental concept for a reorientation of discussions about the modes of recognition available to subjects, as we can see from the following statement:

If speculation on the state of reconciliation were permitted neither the undistinguished unity of subject and object nor their antithetical hostility would be conceivable in it; rather the communication of what was distinguished (*Kommunikation des Unterschiedenen*). Not until then would the concept of communication, as an objective concept, come into its own, The present one is so infamous because the best there is, the potential of an agreement between people and things, is betrayed to an interchange (*Mitteilung*) between subjects according to the requirements of subjective reason.⁴

This statement is often seen as the symptom of a philosophy that persists in considering the relationship subject/world exclusively as a confrontation between subject and object – a confrontation proper to the philosophy of consciousness – while neglecting the intersubjective structure that would determine the relationship with the object. This explains the necessity of rescuing a vague concept of mimesis as the promise of an agreement between people and things, in spite of the *reflexive* processes of understanding already present in daily communication.

We must nevertheless insist that such a reading inverts the poles and sees as 'negligence' what is in fact the result of a critique. What we have here is a critique of the annulment of the ontological dignity of what appears, as *resistance and opacity of the object*, by the intersubjective scheme of signification. On the other hand, we have also a critique of the annulment of the ontological dignity of the irreducibility of what, in the subject, does not accede to the positive determinations of the shared word in uses of language in ordinary life. Thus, a 'communication of what was distinguished' must be sensitive to this *chiasme* by means of which the subject encounters in the object the same opacity that it finds in certain modes of relationship to itself. This search for an alternative concept of communication moulded out of the confrontation between subject and object brings Adorno and Lacan close to each other.

Clinic and recognition

In relation to Lacan, it is accepted that the theme of recognition is linked to an initial moment of his thought still marked by a certain French Hegelianism. But this attempt to reconstruct the rationality of analytic praxis by means of intersubjective processes of desire and recognition is taken to have been abandoned by Lacan when his intellectual experience reached maturity. In its place, we find an attempt to defend pure singularities that go beyond any universalist demand for recognition. This led to statements such as ‘There is no universal that doesn’t contain an existence that denies it.’⁵ So it seems that Lacan performed a typically post-structuralist turn, apparent in the themes of the irreducibility of pure difference and non-structured multiplicities to be found in philosophers such as Derrida and Deleuze.

This defence of pure singularities, despite the maintenance of the recognition processes in the clinic, seems to have set Lacanian psychoanalysis on course for a return to a pre-reflexive immanence of being. As Lacan abandoned the universalizing aspiration of recognition, this immanence of being was to be conjugated in the particular, admitting only a soundless, monological *jouissance* that does not hide its proximity to psychosis. It is as if Lacan succumbed to the temptation of ‘closing the individual over himself’, as Gilles Gaston-Granger notes.⁶

However, the moment psychoanalysis tries to move away from the reflexivity intrinsic to a subject marked by the desire of being recognized, the criteria for establishing the truth of what is given in the field of experience are lost – unless we return, in a somewhat subterranean manner, to a simplified notion of *subjective certainty* which has no need of the Other to be legitimated. It is therefore necessary to show that the cure in the Lacanian clinic is inseparable from a movement of *subjectivation* that necessarily leads to the *self-objectivation* of the subject in a structured field; that it is impossible to think a clinic devoid of recognition procedures. What is the recognition regime that is able to respond to the imperatives of self-objectivation that are specific to the decentred Lacanian subject and to the opacity of the drive, of the sexual and of the body?

Psychoanalysis has to cope with a double claim. First, it has to be a critique of knowledge through the comprehension of consciousness as synonym of alienation. In this, it is a discourse of discordance and splitting between knowledge and truth. However, by its opposition to the immediate self-identity of consciousness, psychoanalysis cannot transform itself

into a hypostasis of difference, of *non-savoir* and of a discourse of disintegration of the subject. Within the analytic frame, this disintegration would produce nothing but psychosis and foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father – that is, a fragmentation of identity characteristic of the paranoid deliriums of President Schreber. Hence the true challenge of Lacanian psychoanalysis is not to postulate the disintegration of the subject, but to find the strength of cure peculiar to those experiences of non-identity which break up both the circle of narcissistic certitudes of the I and the previously structured and controlled frame of intersubjective exchanges. Nevertheless, when we speak of an *experience* that is not a spiritual ascesis, we necessarily assume a formal horizon of recognition that is available to the subject. In the Lacanian case, this recognition is not totally carried out in the intersubjective field of language. On the contrary, it is dependent on the confrontation of the subject with the opacity of an object that causes its desire and that is not completely assimilable by the symbolic inscription of the signifier.

We may gain a better understanding of this point if we remember that in order to socialize itself in the intersubjective field of language the subject has to lose its symbiotic bonds with the objects of partial auto-erotic drives (or objects *a*). This is a major theme of psychoanalytic literature: initially, the baby lives in a state of symbiotic undifferentiation, which has to be broken up to allow socialization processes to operate. However, this breaking up implies losing that confrontation to which the subject is submitted prior to individuation by the image of the *corps propre* and by insertion in the socialization field of language. One of the characteristics of the Lacanian clinic consists in defending the necessity of the subject to confront itself again with these objects (which will continue to cause its desire), thus recovering what is ‘non-subjective in the subject’. Therefore, the self-objectivation of the subject, according to Lacan, is not connected to the expressive dimensions of socialized individuals. It is connected to the subject’s self-recognition in an object that bears neither its image nor the marks of its individuation. With this in mind, we approach the problem of the relation between mimesis and recognition in Lacan and Adorno.

Critique of intersubjectivity

What makes this strategy of self-objectivation necessary is the fact that Lacan has merged the mechanisms of *socialization* and the processes of *alienation*. This strict convergence is supported by a ‘totalizing critique of the reification of ordinary language’ common to

Lacan and Adorno. In both cases, ordinary language becomes the main space of reification and alienation. This leads both Lacan and Adorno to maintain that there is an irreducible tension between certain dimensions of subjectivity and the intersubjective linguistic field. This follows from the assertion of the impossibility of the subject's self-objectivation inside the alienated reality of modern societies.

Lacan even comes close to outlining a critique of instrumental rationality by showing that the empty speech of reified language produces a communication that is submitted 'to the enormous objectivation constituted by science, and it will allow the subject to forget his subjectivity'.⁷ This objectivation of instrumental discourse leads to 'the most profound alienation of the subject in our scientific civilization'.⁸ Within this instrumental dimension and context, Lacan speaks of language as a 'wall' that hinders the subject in establishing authentically intersubjective relationships. The consequences of this way of thinking become clear when Lacan abandons his sociohistorical statements to simply affirm:

The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject.⁹

That is to say, even the *intersubjective field of the signifying chain* can only make the subject speak by petrifying and dividing it, since: 'if it appears at one side as meaning, produced by the signifier, it appears at the other as *aphanisis*'.¹⁰ The subject appears *at the other side* as something non-objectifiable, as *aphanisis*, indicating a fundamental relation of inadequacy between subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

Adorno, in turn, will insist that the subject of our time faces a reality mutilated by the identitarian thought of the logic of equivalents intrinsic to the commodity form. This identitarian thought takes us necessarily in the direction of a reified language, where 'not only the qualities are dissolved in thought, but men are brought to actual conformity'.¹¹ This submission to the phantasmatic objectivity of fetishist abstraction establishes an inadequacy between the aspirations of singularity and the intersubjective field of language:

when public opinion has reached a state in which thought inevitably becomes a commodity, and language the means of promoting that commodity, then the attempt to trace the course of such devaluation

has to deny any allegiance to current linguistic and conceptual conventions, lest their world-historical consequences thwart it entirely.¹²

Nevertheless, it seems that the trajectories of Lacan and Adorno are not wholly convergent, since the Adornian diagnosis of the reification of language is the result of a historical assessment coupled with the developmental modes of capitalism, while the Lacanian diagnosis is a structural one. We must, however, insist on a certain *problematic historicism* peculiar to the Adornian critique of reification. Adorno is the first to maintain that the disqualification of the sensible, which appears as the major result of a reified language submitted to instrumental rationality, is a phenomenon that is indistinguishable from Western reason: 'Unity is the slogan from Parmenides to Russell. The destruction of gods and qualities alike is insisted upon'.¹³

The passages of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* devoted to this consideration are familiar. Axel Honneth has already pointed to a certain 'inversion' of the classic Marxist perspective in Adorno and Horkheimer, since 'in the totalizing view of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* commodity exchange is merely the historically developed form of instrumental rationality'.¹⁴ The roots of this rationality are to be found (and here Adorno could not be more Freudian) in the human process of self-preservation in face of the dangers of nature, and in the humanization of the drives. That is to say, the historical coordinates of the critique of political economy are submitted to a large-scale philosophy of history with a certain structural weight. With this in mind, we can try to think some problems concerning mimesis.

Mimesis, nature and estrangement

There is a certain 'hegemonic' interpretation of the problem of mimesis in Adorno, produced above all by Habermas, Wellmer and Honneth. Understood as the recuperation of a non-conceptual affinity that would escape the relation between subject and object determined by the cognitive-instrumental mode, the Adornian mimesis promises a reconciliation between subject and nature. This reconciliation is able to go beyond the subjugation of the diversity of sensible experience by the categorical structure of reason. However, thinking of reconciliations based on non-conceptual affinities appears to be ascribed to a perspective of 'return to the origins' by means of which 'one seeks to return below the rupture between culture and nature'.¹⁵

Such an interpretation presumes that the concept of nature in Adorno acts as a *sign of authenticity*. However, this cancels the possibility of a *dialecti-*



cal thought of nature, a thought in which nature is considered neither as a positive horizon of sense nor as a simple reified discursive construct. Yet this is in fact the direction of Adorno's thought. If mediation is a universal process, it is simply impossible that nature appears as locus of the origin. On the contrary, if 'the nature of which art seeks the image doesn't yet exist', it is not because Adorno is engaging in a negative theology, but because nature is defined precisely as *that which hinders* the integral indexation of existence by a concept. *Nature is a figure of the negative*. This is not strange to someone like Adorno, who articulates outer and inner nature and reads the problem of inner nature from the perspective of Freud's theory of drives.

Starting from this context, we can begin to understand Adorno's notion of mimesis. However, to grasp the specificity of this concept it is necessary to recall that mimesis aims to cope with four different problems: the truth content of analogical thinking which sustains magical practices and rituals; the tendency of the drives to regress to 'nature'; animal mimicry; and the contemporary aesthetic experience of confrontation with reified materials.

We know how modern reason refuses to assign cognitive content to mimesis, analogy and similarity, since 'magical' thinking would be precisely that thought still imprisoned in the chains of participation. But Adorno believes that the mimetic character of magical thinking has a truth-content, which, however, does not mean ignoring the rupture between nature and culture. It only means that magical thought is capable of positing certain identifying processes that are repressed by a

reason reduced to its instrumental condition. These processes concern above all the manner in which self-identity recognizes itself as a moment of difference. Lacan has shown this in a clear way in his comment on the 'iterative identification' of the Bororo Indian who says 'I am an ara':

Only the anti-dialectical mentality of a culture which, dominated by objectifying ends, tends to reduce all subjective activity to the ego's being can justify Van den Steinen's astonishment when confronted by a Bororo who said: 'I am an ara'. All the 'primitive mind' sociologists scurry about trying to fathom this profession of identity, which is no more surprising upon reflection than declaring, 'I'm a doctor' or 'I'm a citizen of the French Republic', and certainly presents fewer logical difficulties than claiming 'I'm a man', which at most can mean no more than 'I'm like the person who, in recognizing him to be a man, I constitute as someone who can recognize me as a man'. In the final analysis, these various formulations can be understood only in reference to the truth of 'I is an other' less dazzling to the poet's intuition than it is obvious from the psychoanalyst's viewpoint.¹⁶

This quotation shows that the self-identity's affirmation of the Bororo through identification with the other – an affirmation that, in this context, is necessarily a mimetic identification – reveals what is proper to modern individuation. If 'I am an ara' has the same value as 'I am a citizen of the French Republic' and 'I is an other', it is because in the three cases the reference to oneself only occurs through mediation with otherness. But if the 'anti-dialectic mentality' is surprised by the affinities between the subject and

an object of the world, this is because the identity of the modern I is based precisely on the denegation of the constitutive role of the mimetic identification with otherness. The I of 'modern man' is based on a simple negation of the constitutive role of opposition in determining identity.

These observations are entirely convergent with the major problems of Adornian thought. In the first place, we have to remember the way in which the problem of the truth-content of magical thought presents itself to Adorno. If rational thought needs to deny all cognitive force to mimesis, it is because what is sustained is 'the identity of the self that cannot disappear through identification with another, but takes possession of itself once and for all as an impenetrable mask'.¹⁷ The identity of the self would therefore be dependent on a fixed system of identities and categorical differences.



On the other hand, if the mimetic rationality of magical thinking could grasp the multiple affinities between what exists, it is because magical thinking is more open to recognizing the constitutive nature of identification. We can even say that magical thinking allows us to see how the fixed identity of objects is dissolved when thought takes into account the constitutive nature of opposing relations (and, in this context, opposition has the value of an identification that has not yet been posed).

However, if Adorno seeks in magical thinking the structure of identification that supports the determination of identities and the production of individuations, he is not able to abandon every positive concept of nature present therein. The assimilation of the I to the object through mimetism is not to be understood as a promise of return to the immanence of the archaic. This can explain why Adorno looked for a concept of nature, among others, in Freud's theory of drives. In this sense, let us follow a canonic affirmation of mimesis. Mimesis is the index of

the trend to lose oneself in the environment (*Umwelt*), instead of playing an active role in it, a tendency to let oneself go and sink back to nature. Freud called it the death drive (*Todestrieb*). (Caillois, *le mimetisme*).¹⁸

If Adorno sees in the death drive the coordinates of reconciliation with nature, there are several effects to be considered. The Freudian death drive exposes the libidinal economy by which the subject connects itself to nature understood as an inorganic space, the major figure of material opacity regarding reflection processes. In fact, Freud talks about a self-destruction of the person proper to the satisfaction of the death drive. However, *person* has to be understood here as the identity of the subject in the realm of a structured symbolic universe. This death related to the drive is therefore the phenomenological operator that designates the suspension of the symbolic regime of the production of identities. It marks the dissolution of the *organizing power* of the structures of socialization, which takes us to the rupture of the I as synthetic formation. This rupture is what Lacan calls 'second death' or 'symbolic death'. It was the Lacanian way of saving the strength of the negative as an opening to what is real in the subject beyond any Imaginary of the I.¹⁹ This becomes clearer if we consider Adorno's use of Roger Caillois's notion of *mimetisme*. This will help us to understand better this 'trend to lose oneself in the environment'.

We should bear in mind that with his concept of *legendary psychastenia*, Caillois tried to demonstrate that animal mimicry was not to be understood as a defence system, but as a 'tendency to transform itself in space' that implied disturbances of the 'feelings of personality, considering as the organism's feeling of distinction from its surroundings (*milieu*)'.²⁰ Speaking about this intrinsic mimetic tendency to get lost in the environment, Caillois affirms:

To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digest them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar.²¹

This dark space where we cannot put things (since it is not a categorizable space, the transcendental

condition for the constitution of a state of things) is a space that hinders us from being similar to *something determined*.

Thus, the mimetic imperative of self-recognition in death regarded as negation of the organising power of socialization structures (Freud) and in the exterior void of concepts (Caillois) indicates where the subject needs to recognize itself in order to affirm its non-identity. Such an articulation between Freud and Caillois, therefore, implies the identification with a negativity that comes from the object regarded as the motor of decentring. The problem of mimesis clarifies how the object marks the point in which the I no longer recognizes its image, a point in which the subject sees himself faced with a sensuousness that is 'materiality without image'. Mimesis is thus regarded as recognition of the subject in the opacity of what only offers itself as negation. And it is mimesis that indicates how to fulfil that promise of recognition which Adorno so surprisingly expressed, highlighted as follows:

Men are human only where they do not act, let alone posit (*setzen*) themselves as persons; the diffuseness of nature in which they are not persons resembles the lineamentation of an intelligible essence (*Wesen*), a Self that would be released from the 'I' (*jenes Selbst, das vom Ich erlöst wäre*). Contemporary art suggests something of this kind.²²

The recognition of subjects is dependent on their capacity to posit themselves, to identify themselves with that which no longer submits itself to the self-identical outlines of an I. If we think of mimesis as an identification operation with a nature regarded as a figure of the negative, we can understand how this recognition is articulated. At this point, we should introduce some considerations about the recourse to mimesis in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. This may explain how contemporary art may suggest something of this 'Self' that would be released from the 'I'.

Mimetic Schoenberg

An exhaustive analysis of the problem of mimesis in Adorno's aesthetics, mainly in his philosophy of music, would demand another piece. However, it is worthwhile stressing a major peculiarity of the Adornian recourse to mimesis in the aesthetic field. In Adornian aesthetics, mimesis is not directly connected to the imperative of reconciliation with the positive image of nature, as we might expect from a traditional reflection on mimesis in art. Adorno is extremely critical of projects that tried to restore something of this traditional reflection – for example, John Cage's programme of reconstructing musical rationality on

the basis of mimetic affinities with the non-structured facticity of the sonorous.

In fact, Adorno's demand passes through the necessity of art to posit its mimetic affinity with what is most dead and ruined in social reality. We must examine fully the consequences of statements such as: 'modern works relinquish themselves mimetically to reification, their principle of death'.²³ This is a strange statement, since the hegemonic trend tends to define modern art by a refusal of all mimetic affinity with reified society. On the other hand, the elevation to an aesthetic programme of the demand that the subject posit what concerns expression by means of a confrontation with reified materials seems a very strange idea of reconciliation: a reconciliation with what is dead. However, it is this demand that animates what Adorno called 'communication of what was distinguished', the grounds for the understanding between people and things. For,

If the subject is no longer able to speak directly, then at least it should – in accord with a modernism that has not pledged itself to absolute construction – speak through things (*Dinge*), through their alienated and mutilated form (*Gestalt*).²⁴

The subject can only speak through the alienated and mutilated form of things because the silence of the sensuous appears as resistance of the material against reification. This has nothing to do with some kind of return to the archaic or origin, as if there were an experience of pre-discursive spontaneity still not marked by fetishistic abstraction. This is merely about exploring the disruptive potential of experiences in which the subject sees itself in identification with objects that, beyond their condition of phantasmatic support of the commodity form, are only opaque materiality in which the I is no longer capable of projecting its image and its categorical structures. This could perhaps explain why

Those who regard the thingly (*Dinghafte*) as what is radically evil; who would like to dynamize everything which is, into pure contemporaneity, tend to be hostile towards the other, the alien (*Fremde*), whose name does not resound in alienation (*Entfremdung*) for nothing.²⁵

In Adorno's view, this was the lesson of Schoenberg. Often, when one speaks of Adorno's musical aesthetic, one asserts that it was the last radical defence of the rationality of the dodecaphonic technique. Adorno's Hegelianism speaks loud in his aesthetics, by his sustaining of a possible experience of the functional organicity of artworks grounded on the primacy of the

series and on the critique of the autonomy of particular moments and materials, a critique that appears through the problem of the fetishism of music.

However, one should not forget that, owing to an inversion always visible to dialectical thought, the rationality proper to dodecaphonic totality is criticized from the moment it transforms itself into *insensibility to the material*:

To be sure, the tritons, the major seventh and those intervals which extend beyond the octave have gained equal rights, but at a price of being placed upon the same level as the other.²⁶

This insensibility indicates the belief that operations of meaning are the strict result of positional plays determined by the series structure.

If Schoenberg maintained the motivic and thematic signature as a principle of expression that escapes the primacy of the series, Webern takes a step in the direction of the *fetishism of the row*, due to his belief that the construction is able to index all meaning occurrences in the artwork.

The self-determined law of the row truthfully becomes a fetish at the point when the conductor relies upon it a source of meaning. The fetishism of the rows (*Fetichismus der Reihe*) is striking in Webern's Piano Variations (op. 27) and the String Quartet (op. 28).²⁷

In these cases at least, Webern fetishizes the totality, since the material appears as that which can be dominated in a totality of relations. In fact, the material is transformed in the work's production system itself. The work no longer dissimulates, through its aesthetic appearance, its process of meaning production. Nevertheless, this full visibility is the figure of a principle of domination of the material which Adorno reads as a rationality distorted in the domination of nature.

It is interesting to note that Adorno criticizes Webern precisely because he attempts to think of an integral construction of the artwork in which everything is relation and all incidences of meaning are determined by means of positional plays. Because Adorno sees, in the principle of integral construction, 'something purely irrational hidden in the midst of rationalization',²⁸ he sometimes understands dodecaphony as a system of nature-domination in music, a 'rationality that comes close to superstition'.

Such discussion demonstrates how the true problem of Adorno's aesthetic lies not in the loss of the totality and functional organicity of artworks, as imagined by Lyotard,²⁹ but in the deposition of all possible resistance of the musical material. That is why Adorno can say that the radical gesture of Schoenberg is connected not to the refusal of tonality due to the primacy of

dodecaphonic series, but to the 'strength of forgetting', which in his last works allowed him to return to tonal material, this time transformed in a mutilated material with no strength to produce an experience of totality. He returns to fetishized material, but in order to reveal his estrangement. Due to this libidinal investment in what had become ruins 'he renounces his fidelity to the sole domination of the material – the very fidelity which he has once designed.... An artist, claims back for mankind freedom from art, a dialectical composer, he brings dialectic to a standstill.'³⁰ The biggest irony here lies in the fact that the tonal material is treated as a fragmentary exposition of a rest, as a manifestation of non-identity in the artwork.

To bring dialectics to a standstill is a gesture that comes at the moment in which the subject recognizes itself in a mutilated material that has become a kind of opaque rest, which represents the irreducibility of the non-artistic in art. Maybe the supreme ruse of dialectics lies herein, in the act of being able to silence in order to let the ruins speak. For Adorno, it would be a way to construe object relations that go beyond the fetishist fascination.

Specularity and opacity

Returning to Lacan, this discussion about mimesis seems very distant. In Lacan there is apparently no discussion whatsoever on the concept of 'nature'. However, if we follow the intuition of Adorno and try to derive a *negative* concept of nature (nature as something that resists the reflexivity of the concept), starting from the theory of drives, we find a path to tread within the Lacanian discourse.

Nonetheless, an initial approach to Lacan's thought would lead us to think that it is anti-mimetic par excellence. We should bear in mind that the realm of mimesis in Lacan seems to have a necessary connection with the dimension of dual and transitive relations, which in fact are symptoms of narcissist structures of apprehension of the object.

A major example here would be what Lacan calls 'the mirror stage'. Before reaching conceptual thinking, the baby orientates itself by means of mimetic operations. So, in order to guide its desire, the baby mimetizes an other in the position of an ideal type. Such introjection of the image of an other is the last stage within a process of rupture with the symbiotic undifferentiation with the mother and partial objects. By rupturing with these partial objects (breasts, excrement, eyes, voice), or objects *a*, which are located in the zone of interaction with its mother, the baby finally gets an image of its *corps propre* that is responsible for the organization of a corporal scheme.

However, this mimetic assumption of ideal roles does not represent a consolidation of a communicational relationship between subjects. Lacan tried to demonstrate that the figures of aggressivity and rivalry in the relationship with the other were structural symptoms of the impossibility of the I to assume the constitutive role of the other in the determination of its own identity. So, the result of the mimetic assumption of ideal roles would be narcissistic confusion between the I and the other, a confusion through which the I constitutes processes of self-reference starting from reference-to-the-other, at the same time that consciousness denies this dependence. This is the reason why Lacan points out that we must consider narcissism as an imaginary relationship fundamental to the inter-human relationship.



Yet if this is the problem, we could postulate that the centrality of mimetic identification with the other must liberate the subject from the identitary illusions of the I, leading it to assume the prior position of intersubjective relationships in the constitution of socialized subjects. Perhaps the expectations located in mimesis could be realized when we comprehend correctly what finally are intersubjective relationships.

Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that, if processes of socialization and of individuation operate initially through the introjection of the image of an other that gives form to the I, then the revelation of the dynamics of introjection and projection could only lead the subject to comprehend socialization as neces-

sary alienation of itself in the image of an other; that is, to comprehend that relationships, the dynamics of desire, as well as broader expectations of the subject of knowledge, are formed from the other.

With socialization mechanisms regarded as alienation processes, there are, broadly speaking, two ways of taking the subject beyond narcissistic confusion with the other. The first is to insist on a constitutive transcendence of the subject. This transcendence would imply the absence of every single mimetic affinity between the subject and that which appears in the empirical field. In Lacan, this strategy appears in the taking of desire as pure negativity, as a primordial 'lack-of-being' that poses non-adequacy between the subject and empirical objects. For the subject to recognize itself in the pure negativity of desire would be a way to heal it from the illusions of narcissism and alienation.

It is important to note, however, that Lacan will relativize this appeal to a transcendence of the subject. Gradually he will admit that the true potential of non-identity will not come from a certain negative transcendence of desire – even more as Lacan will understand that desire, far from being a primordial lack (that can be seen in the eyes of the Other), is caused by those partial objects that had got lost in the processes of socialization and formation of the *corps propre*. It is as if the formation of self-identity never ceases to produce a remainder that persists beyond socialized desire.

In principle, this second strategy can be taken as a kind of astute way of returning to the archaic and the amorphous regarded as a cure protocol – a return animated by the nostalgia of a prediscursive state of undifferentiation. After all, Lacan himself sometimes speaks of the 'lost object', referring to what remains as a 'remainder' of the socialization processes. However, what is really at stake here is the confirmation that the subjects may place themselves in something that is not integrally submitted to individuation. This operation is fundamental in order to allow us to see how 'to use the force of the subject to break through the deception of constitutive subjectivity'.³¹ This is not at all about an operation of return, but about the comprehension of the subject as a space of tension between socialization demands and a recognition of the irreducibility of the opacity of objects of drives that do not conform to the image of the I.

This implies a way to recuperate levels of mimetic affinity between the subject and an object that is not just a narcissistic one. As for Adorno, this affinity signifies disorientation of the identitarian structures

constitutive of the I, since the subject recognizes itself in that which, in the body, has the status of an object opaque to self-reflection identity. Here again the object is what marks the locus in which the subject sees itself facing a sensuousness that is 'materiality without image' and whose confrontation implies a perpetual decentring, by insisting on the recuperation of the sensuous as materiality without image that Lacan called, at times, the object *a* as 'flesh'.

Still, we should ask how Lacan believes that an experience of this nature could operate in the clinic and how it could allow a reconfiguration of relations of recognition among subjects. In this regard, it is important to note that Lacan derived his notion of analytic progress from the 'traversing of the phantasm'. In our context, we could simply state that such traversing is organically related to the question on the status of the category of object. While understanding the object only as a narcissistic projection, the subject will never be able to go beyond the phantasm. However, the phantasm offers the coordinates for the signification of empirical objects; it is the 'index of absolute signification'. Hence, what appears after the traversing of the phantasm is necessarily emptied of the signification that makes it singular, emptied of structural coordinates of value. In summary, it appears as something opaque to the determinations of identity.

An example of this traversing is the way in which Lacan recovers a certain 'phenomenology of the gaze' presented by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* – that is, the intersubjective deadlock which for Sartre appears mainly in loving relationships. For Lacan, it is the phenomenological description of a typical narcissistic confusion derived from a projective structure that tends to reduce the object to a support of the phantasm.

Let us recall the structure of this deadlock described by Sartre. The lover wants to be the gaze in which the freedom of the other agrees to get lost, a gaze under which the other accepts being transformed into an object. Thus, so long as I put myself in the position of the subject, I will never have before me another desiring gaze, a gaze that personifies the other. I will only have a reified gaze that is transformed into a narcissistic object in which I see only my own image. I can only have before me a gaze under the condition that I situate myself as object. In this way, the intersubjective recognition of a being that, in Sartre, is fundamentally transcendence would therefore be doomed to failure. The gaze (of consciousness) always reduces the other to the condition of an object.

Taking into account the long tradition of the philosophy of consciousness that makes use of optical

metaphors to cope with the self-reflective processes of consciousness, Lacan points out that the gaze is a special object because it is always elided within intersubjective relationships. 'The gaze is specified as unapprehensible' he says,³² in the sense of being non-objectifiable. This is a way to insist that something fundamental to the transcendent subject has no place in the intersubjective field. But instead of entering into the deadlock connected with the operations of a philosophy of consciousness, Lacan insists on the possibility that something that finds no place in the relationship between subjects can be posed by means of a confrontation between subject and object. To achieve this, the subject needs to have the experience that 'on the side of things, there is the gaze'.³³

To say that on the side of the things, there is the gaze may appear simply as a vague way of talking about the necessity of a critique capable of illuminating those relationships between subjects that are reified as relationships between things, especially if we take into account that the background to this debate is the intersubjective structure of loving relationships. Nevertheless, Lacan's aim is something rather different. For Lacan, the claim that there is a gaze that comes from things is to insist that the subject can recognize itself in the dimension of an object that is no longer based on the logic of the narcissistic phantasm. This position is possible for Lacan because the gaze appears, in his metapsychology, precisely as one of those objects *a* through which the subject was connected to relationships of symbiotic indifferenciation before the processes of socialization. Within this context, the gaze is not the source of expression of desire in its phantasmatic search for a narcissistic object. Rather, the gaze is the non-specular object that is beyond the expressive claims of the I and connected to a drive that is fundamentally the death drive. In this sense, it is not surprising that at the moment of Seminar XI dedicated to the discussion on the phenomenology of the gaze, Lacan refers to Roger Caillois in order to remind us that, as well as in Adorno's work, animal mimicry explains how a subject is able to recognize itself as a stain (*tache*), as an opaque spot; finally, how it is able to see its gaze where representation, with its fixed identities, oscillates.³⁴

In essence, it is as if Lacan is commenting on a proposition by Merleau-Ponty, another author present in Seminar XI:

Thus since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism in all vision. And thus, for the same reason, the vision he exercises also undergoes from

the things, such that, as many painters have said: I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity – which is the second and more profound sense of narcissism.³⁵

That is to say, the second and deepest sense of narcissism is a certain inversion that makes the object – formerly submitted to my narcissistic image – appear as the point in which my gaze returns to myself as something that is strange to me. When I feel looked at by things that were previously totally reduced to narcissistic protocols, I find myself facing something that doesn't allow me to hypostasize the concept of identity. This experience, which Freud called *Unheimlichkeit*, is constitutive of a certain redemption of mimesis as a major protocol of the analytical clinic. There are further experiences like these to be explored, but this was the way in which both Lacan and Adorno attempted to use the force of the subject to break through the deception of constitutive subjectivity.

Translated by Angelika Kohnke

Notes

1. For a different point of view, see Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, Verso, London, 1996.
2. 'In the place of the sociological question concerning the modes of social integration and social conflict there appeared the question concerning the reciprocal influence of individual psychic drives and economic reproduction – that is, the possible rapprochement of psychoanalysis and the analysis of economic system', Axel Honneth, *Critique of Power*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1991, p. 101.
3. Theodor Adorno, 'Subject and Object', in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, p. 143.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
5. Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits*, Seuil, Paris, 2001, p. 451.
6. Gilles Gaston-Granger, *Pensée formelle et sciences de l'homme*, Aubier, Paris, 1960, p. 192.
7. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2002, p. 282.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
9. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1977, p. 207.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
11. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London, 1997, p. 12.
12. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
14. Honneth, *Critique of Power*, p. 38.
15. Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1995, p. 513.
16. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, p. 24.
17. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 10.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
19. Richard Boothby understands this point as follows: 'For Lacan, the disintegration force of the death drive is aimed not at the integrity of the biological organism, as Freud had concluded, but rather at the imaginary coherence of the ego.' Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology after Lacan*, Routledge, New York, 2001, p. 151.
20. Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia', trans. John Shepley, *October* 31, Winter 1984; see www.generation-online.org/p/focaillois.htm.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, Continuum, New York, 1983, p. 277.
23. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p. 133.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
25. Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, p. 191.
26. Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, Continuum, London, 2003, p. 76.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
28. Adorno, 'The Aging of New Music', in *Essays on Music*, University of California Press, 2002, p. 189.
29. Jean-François Lyotard, *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, Christian Bourgeois, Paris, 1980, p. 114.
30. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, pp. 123–4, translation modified.
31. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. xx.
32. Lacan, *Seminar XI*, p. 83.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
34. 'Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind.' Lacan, *Seminar XI*, p. 99.
35. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1968, p. 139.

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