

## **Why Is Adorno So Repulsive?**

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Something very striking happens during Jay Bernstein's presentation in Seminar 5 of the 2010 Stone Summer Theory Institute. Several participants react to Bernstein's invocation of Theodor Adorno much as Harry Potter might respond to a dementor – that revolting, wraithlike creature who sucks all the happiness and vitality out of its victims.

Or at least that's how I read the following protests, each addressed to Bernstein:

Elise Goldstein: "Well, I can't feel alive in the face of rationality as you do."

Joana Cunha Leal: "The pleasure you describe in relation to art, Jay, seems very far from Adorno's negativity."

And even:

Sven Spieker: "Adorno didn't know much about the experience of falling in love."

Is this what Adorno has become – the Grinch Who Stole Pleasure?

A creepy old guy with bad breath who leans over just when you're shaking with laughter to remind you that "fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe" and, just in case you haven't wiped the smile off your face yet, that "In

wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality.”<sup>1</sup> Why would anyone want to be stuck in Adorno's gloomy closet, trying to remain world-historically hopeful about that tiny little ray of light making its way in from under the door, when they could be hitching a polymorphously perverse ride on one of Deleuze and Guattari's thousand plateaus, from which infinite lines of flight radiate out toward the horizon?<sup>2</sup>

But Adorno sticks in my craw. He will not go down easily. He's that fragment of bone on which I keep choking.

Joana Cunha Leal adds the familiar longing to *know how to oppose*: “If only we could know what resistance looks like.” And it occurs to me that Adorno was at his weakest when he was most implacably opposed. Opposed to what we now call popular culture. To Disney cartoons. To the syncopation of jazz, which Adorno dismissed as pseudo-individuality. His close friend Walter Benjamin, who by upbringing had similar scruples, nevertheless allowed himself, when stoned in Marseilles, “to mark the beat with my foot.”<sup>3</sup> Adorno steadfastly refused to groove. He fixated instead on the “superior” smile of the jazz cat that gets rapped on the knuckles for “involuntarily” funk up a bit of Beethoven.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA, 2002): 112.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Hashish in Marseilles,’ in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed Michael Jennings et al (Cambridge, MA, 1999): 678.

<sup>4</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 101.

Let's face it: Adorno's insistence that art produced for the market, made as a commodity from the very beginning, is *inherently* incapable of doing uncanny, unexpected and rather beautiful things, was never very convincing. Crudely stretched across the entire cultural field, the wholesale dismissal of mass culture has rightly been ridiculed and dismissed by every generation of critics since those female students flashed their breasts at stuffy old Adorno in the spring of 1969 and sent him stomping out of the lecture hall for the very last time.<sup>5</sup>

But having driven a stake through the Grinch's tiny heart the new generation of populists unwittingly imported and reproduced his central mistake. They scurried off to find canny acts of subversion in every last nook and cranny of "everyday life." And in the very act of resisting all those totalizing Adornian constructs – "the culture industry," "the administered society" and so on – the new cadre of kitchen-sink redeemers gave these constructs a coherence and an authority *precisely as something to be opposed* that even Adorno at his most paranoid could not have imagined.

At least they found out what resistance looks like.

In Seminar 4, Diarmuid Costello notes: "If a term is so thoroughly determined by what it is opposing, then it won't succeed in what it's trying to do." Simply taking an ideological

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<sup>5</sup> Lisa Yun Lee, 'Interrogating Philosophy: The Bared Breasts Incident,' in *Dialectics of the Body: Corporeality in the Philosophy of T W Adorno* (New York, NY, 2005): pp. 49-76.

polarity and turning it upside down only reinforces the polarity with which you began.<sup>6</sup>

Hal Foster invokes Yve-Alain Bois on the four dimensions of Bataille's *informe* – each of them, in this way, reconfirming the omnipresent *threat* of the Bad Term that is to be resisted: “horizontality against the primacy of the visual (and the verticality of its field); base materiality against the tyranny of form [...]; pulse against the exclusion of materiality as permeated by desire; entropy against structure and totality.” Elsewhere the list of reified oppositions marches on two by two: politics against police (Rancière), molecular against molar (Deleuze and Guattari), intuitive against conceptual knowing (Bergson). In every case, the narcissistically “critical” valorization of the first term brings the second back in the mode of the undead. A zombie concept, leached of the complexities of life but reliably indestructible. The Bad Guy in the melodrama of Critical Theory. No wonder it's hard to feel alive in the face of *this* kind of rationality.

For Adorno the promise of art was the possibility of a world where sensuous corporeality in all its particularity would not be alien to critical judgment, but would also not be reducible to it. As Jay Bernstein says in Seminar 5: “Art promises a different form of practical reason and so a different form of life.” Benjamin thought this could happen even at the picture palaces: “The progressive attitude [made possible by the cinema] is characterized by an immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure – pleasure in seeing and

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed illustration of this dynamic at work, see my critical reading of Hardt and Negri's category of the multitude vis-à-vis crowd theory in William Mazzarella, ‘The Myth of the Multitude,’ *Critical Inquiry* 36, no 4 (2010): pp. 697-727.

experiencing – with an attitude of expert appraisal.”<sup>7</sup> But the Grinch thought Herr Benjamin – in other respects “a dazzling trap set by heaven”<sup>8</sup> – was being less than properly dialectical in pitting the liberatory potential of popular media against the reactionary charismatic authority of ‘autonomous’ art.<sup>9</sup>

“Dialectics at a standstill,”<sup>10</sup> then – but not in a good way.

Something vaguely reminiscent happens when, in Seminars 7 and 8, the talk turns to affect. Eve Meltzer has already, during the preliminaries of Seminar 1, suggested to Jay Bernstein that much of what he derives from Adornian aesthetics might usefully be reframed in this light: “sensuous particulars, love, appearances – all that could be thought in terms of affect.” And at the outset of Seminar 8, Jim Elkins proposes that affect “is the principal contender for a reconceptualization of the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic at a ‘deeper structural level.’”

But just as several participants greet Jay Bernstein’s Adornian exposition with variously expressed anxieties about the loss of life and love, so for others all this affect-talk seems to threaten a dangerous eclipse of the critical subject. Omair Hussain complains that

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version), in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA, 2002): 116.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase is from a September 1929 letter from Adorno to Siegfried Kracauer, as cited in Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge, MA, 1994): 86.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Letter 47: Wiesengrund-Adorno to Benjamin, London, 18.3.1936’ in *Theodor Adorno & Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge, MA, 1999): pp. 127-134.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge, MA, 1999): 865.

talking affect in contemporary art too often means affirming plurality “without working through potential conflicting positions and stances.” Jay Bernstein worries that the focus on affect means capitulating indiscriminately to expressive appeals to the point where “judgment seems like an insult.” The old polarity-thinking again: subject versus object, judgment versus life.

In its dominant formulation, affect theory emerges out of a vitalist line of thinking: Spinoza, Bergson, Deleuze, Massumi, Hardt and Negri.<sup>11</sup> To that extent it remains trapped in the romance of pure immanence and radical emergence. It is, as Eve Meltzer claims in Seminar 7, “beyond the limits of our current discourse” – even as it installs itself as our current discourse. In the familiar polar way, it is implacably opposed to all the tiresome tools of Critical Theory as Master Discourse: mediation, representation and, most of all, dialectics.<sup>12</sup>

It’s no surprise, then, that two problems that emerge as linked in these Seminars – affect as that which *invests* us sensuously in our ideological commitments and affect as that which constantly escapes all ideological inscriptions – cannot be theorized together. They remain in what Slavoj Žižek has called a parallax view: a “constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space – although they are closely connected,

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<sup>11</sup> Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, ed, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> William Mazzarella, ‘Affect: What is it Good For?’ in *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization*, ed. Saurabh Dube (New Delhi, 2009): pp. 291-309.

even identical in a way [...] they are *two sides* of the same phenomenon which, precisely as two sides, can never meet.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps we could do to Adorno what Adorno, in *Negative Dialectics*, wanted to do to Hegel: that is to say, make him drink his own dialectical medicine to the last vile drop. Adorno’s beef with Hegel was that the master dialectician was not dialectical enough. He argued that Hegel preached the importance of yielding to the sensuously emergent properties of objects as a crucial moment of the dialectic while in fact practicing the kind of “identity-thinking” where “the thought he discusses always extracts from its objects only that which is a thought already. Despite the program of self-yielding, the Hegelian thought finds satisfaction in itself [...] If the thought really yielded to the object, if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye.”<sup>14</sup>

And now let’s ask the implicit question directly: how great is the distance between the desires of the dialectical Master-Grinch and anti-dialectical Anti-Oedipus?<sup>15</sup>

I imagine coupling Adornian aesthetics with affect theory in a Benjaminian dialectical image, “an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash [...] in the now of its recognizability.”<sup>16</sup> A leap across time, a historical short-circuit that bypasses the

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<sup>13</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA, 2006): 4.

<sup>14</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York, 1999): 27-28.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> *Arcades Project*, 473.

disabling intercession of a cultural studies whose polarity-thinking is only an inverted form of Hegelian identity-thinking.

Both the Grinch and the plateau-hoppers might emerge strangely potentiated from this obscene clinch, each released by the other from their impasses. The affect theorists' generalized concern with emergent potentials pushes Adorno to yield his thought to the products of the culture industries until some of them, too, "start talking under [his] lingering eye." For his part, Adorno reminds the affect theorists that the sensuously mimetic moment of self-yielding still "needs the rationality [it] scorns, and needs it precisely at the moment of concretion."<sup>17</sup>

In the parallax view the two sides can never meet. But the dialectical image promises to change that. "In order for a part of the past to be touched by the present instant, there must be no continuity between them."<sup>18</sup> Who knows whether it will work. Try it.

Perhaps he is no longer roaming the ramparts. But the Grinch must certainly be turning in his grave. Good. At least now his remains are looking a bit more lively.

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<sup>17</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Arcades Project*, 470.