

GRADUATE STUDENT ESSAY PRIZE WINNER

A PHILOSOPHY THAT IMITATES ART? THEODOR W. ADORNO'S CHANGING CON- STELLATIONS¹

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Theodor W. Adorno claims that a philosophy that tried to imitate art would defeat itself, yet he seems to have based his own model for philosophical interpretation, which he compares to changing constellations, on Gustav Mahler's musical montage (the first Ländler from the second movement of the Ninth Symphony.) The paper first examines two aspects of montage that Adorno mentions in his reading of the Ländler: (1) its reified working material and (2) its combinatory procedure. Next, these aspects are located within the interpretive model advanced in the inaugural lecture of 1931. The latter part of the paper makes a case for the philosophically binding force of constellations by drawing on the concepts of aesthetic semblance [ästhetischer Schein] and praxis.

It does not seem that Adorno advocated a philosophy that borrowed from art. From his inaugural address comes the trenchant statement: "It would be better just to liquidate philosophy once and for all and dissolve it into the particular disciplines than to come to its aid with a poetic ideal which means nothing more than a poor ornamental cover for faulty thinking."²

¹ I wish to thank Iain Macdonald, Louise Campbell, Martin Desrosiers, Russ Manitt, Pierre-François Noppen and all those who offered comments on my paper at the CSCP annual conference in Edmonton in October 2010.

² Theodor W. Adorno, "Die Aktualität der Philosophie," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, (ed.) R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 1:332, tr. by B. Snow as "The Actuality of Philosophy," in *Telos*, n. 31 (Spring 1977), 125. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AP. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the German, then to the English text.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno is no less plain: “A philosophy that imitated art, that would turn itself into a work of art, would expunge itself.”³ Despite these ostensible claims, commentators have registered an uncanny similarity, if not between Adorno’s philosophy and particular artworks, then, at least, between the modernist programme and his own.

This article supports the reading of Adorno’s philosophy as largely indebted to modern music. It contests, however, the common reduction of modern music to twelve-tone technique, which is only one development in a movement whose inception Adorno dates to around 1910.⁴ To identify Adorno’s work with twelve-tone music is to ignore both his sometimes heated criticism of dodecaphonic technique and his support of the early, heroic period of modernism. After briefly taking up Adorno’s criticisms of twelve-tone technique, this paper will seek to show that, consciously or not, Adorno modelled his method of philosophical interpretation—his method of constructing configurations or constellations of concepts—on one of the earliest articulations of modernism: the montage with which the second movement from Mahler’s Ninth Symphony begins. The last section of the paper pursues the question as to whether such philosophy in imitation of art then ceases to be philosophy at all.

A Possible Model: Schoenberg

The catchphrase “twelve-tone philosophy” has become what Adorno would call a cookie-cutter expression, or *Pfefferkuchenausdruck*, named after the gingerbread that comes stamped out in its stereotypical shapes. The comparison with Schoenberg most likely has its source in Susan Buck-Morss’ chapter on art and theory, where she states:

Not yet disillusioned as to the potential of Schönberg’s twelve-tone techniques...Adorno went radically far in transposing

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik Negative*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:26, tr. by E. Ashton as *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 15. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ND. Translation modified.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:9, tr. by R. Hullot-Kentor as *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AT.

Schönberg's method from the musical to the philosophical mode. There was a parallel between his own abandonment of philosophical first principles and Schönberg's abandonment of tonal dominance, also between his aversion to harmonious totalities and Schönberg's use of dissonance and rhythmic irregularity.⁵

It is conceivable that the contradictions that Adorno judged irreconcilable in thought parallel Schoenberg's dissonances, which, it may be recalled, no longer fulfil the purely ornamental function that tradition allotted to non-chord tones. It is also conceivable that Adorno drew the consequences for philosophy from the very first atonal compositions, which precede the dodecaphonic period, when he denied any absolute foundation. However, contrary to Buck-Morss' characterisation here, twelve-tone music does not deny first principles, but replaces the principle of tonality with its own. For what is peculiar to the twelve-note composition is that every note can be traced back either to an ordered set of the twelve tones that exhausts the chromatic scale or to one of the row's permutations. What counts as a permutation is also highly formalised. The permutations are generated by submitting the original row in its entirety to one or more of three procedures: transposition, inversion or retrogression. The result of twelve-tone technique is what Adorno calls "the integral artwork" [*das integrale Kunstwerk*], a work where each note can be justified within the totality by referring to these few ground rules.⁶ Like tonal music, twelve-tone music tends to eliminate functionless dissonance. Thus, Adorno makes a clear distinction between the rationalisation of dissonance into the dodecaphonic system and the use that Schoenberg, Berg and Webern made of dissonance during the brief phase of so-called free atonality. According to Adorno, no pre-established rule, external to the individual

⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 131.

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 12:71, tr. by R. Hullot-Kentor as *Philosophy of New Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 57. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PNM.

work itself, governed the dissonances of these free atonal works, composed “out of pure freedom, out of a kind of all-sided actuality of hearing.”⁷

Yet, it would be an exaggeration to claim, as Adorno does, that the twelve-tone technique submits the subject to a blind system that strips him of all spontaneity. (PNM, 12:68/55) The introduction of constraints into the practice of composition does not automatically make the resulting music a calculation. Schoenberg compared the permutations of the row to different perspectives on a singular object. Twelve-tone composition tends to close in on its object, without determining it entirely, for at this stage of serialism, and even in the cases of its strict application, the technique itself does not determine rhythm, contour, register, timbre, dynamics, articulation, tempo or expression. Furthermore, no rule governs the use of the forty-eight permutations of the series (twelve transpositions of the four linear aspects of the row). The choice of the permutations, the order of those selected and the frequency of their occurrence are all up to the composer. The row itself may occur to the composer in a flash, an *Einfall*. Shortly after Schoenberg’s death, Adorno, softening his earlier position, acknowledged the role that spontaneity played in twelve-tone composition: “To this day the potentiality of the twelve-tone technique has remained open. It does in fact permit the synthesis of a procedure which is completely free and yet completely strict.”⁸

The reactionary aspect of dodecaphonic composition seems to lie not in the supposed impossibility of spontaneity, but in the principle of setting off in advance what is foreign to its object and forbidding any relation with this other. In other words, the work of twelve-tone composition was not, as Schoenberg framed it, to break out of the row, to create an analogue of modulation and so to speak to the idea of going beyond the existing order in some way. Furthermore, the transition to a

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “*Schwierigkeiten*,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 17:266, tr. by S. Gillespie as “Difficulties,” in *Essays on Music*, (ed.) R. Leppert, (Berkeley: Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2002), 654.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951),” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.1:174, tr. by S. and S. Weber as “Arnold Schoenberg 1874–1951,” in *Prisms*, (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), 167. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AS.

new row cannot be the goal of twelve-tone composition because the row resists detection by the listener: “What tonality was once able to achieve by virtue of modulatory proportions cannot be repeated by a technique, the very sense of which lies in its not appearing outwardly.” (AS, 10.1:174/167) Twelve-tone composition, thus, seems to be concerned with what is achievable within certain parameters. Yet, the idea of the integral artwork was already implicit in the earlier phase of free atonality. For example, very little in the fourth of Anton Webern’s *Fünf Sätze* for String Quartet falls outside the basic (unordered) material: a semitone shift transposed up a perfect fourth and then up a tritone, (B–C–E–F–E-sharp–F-sharp).⁹ Modern music raises serious doubts not only about the ultimate resolution of differences, but also about the possibility of going beyond established limits, or of even recognising them. It may be asked whether Adorno’s philosophy exhibits the same ambivalence, if not outright resignation, in the face of powerful conventions.

The Model of Mahler’s Montage

To be fair, Schoenberg is not the only aesthetic model that Susan Buck-Morss sees in Adorno’s philosophy. She suggests that, prior to his 1934 essay “The Dialectical Composer,” Adorno shared Walter Benjamin’s support of montage as “the form legitimate for a critical representation of the fragmentation and decay of bourgeois reality.”¹⁰ However, Adorno came to be more critical of montage, particularly surrealist montage. According to Buck-Morss, the surrealist tendency to project subjective meanings onto purely random juxtapositions, as opposed to breaking up the immediacy of the reified fragments with the aid of interpretation, struck Adorno as irrational. (*Ibid.*, 127–28) Adorno was thus supposed to have completely abandoned montage as a model. However, an important work from Adorno’s montage period, his inaugural lecture from 1931, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” was supposed to have, in her words, “governed his theoretical efforts for the rest of his life.” (*Ibid.*, 23) According to Buck-Morss, the inaugural lecture aptly describes the kind

⁹ George Perle, *Serial Composition and Atonality: An Introduction to the Music of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern* (Berkeley: Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 16–19.

¹⁰ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 127.

of interpretation that Adorno would employ in his texts on Wagner, Ravel, jazz and Kierkegaard, where he proceeds by bringing a constellation of many concepts to bear on an object. (*Ibid.*, 96–121) The present section argues that constellations do indeed show the traces of the earlier aesthetic model, following a montage logic of rupture and not the logic of continuity encountered in the integral artwork.

Adorno was indeed critical of surrealist collage, even comparing it to pornography.¹¹ However, he had very little disparaging to say about the opening *Ländler* from the second movement from Mahler's Ninth Symphony, a very late work composed before but premiered under Bruno Walter some months after Picasso made his first collages in the spring of 1912.¹² In *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* Adorno is surprisingly favourable toward this "first exemplary case of musical montage."¹³ But the brief passage devoted to the *Ländler* is surprising for another reason: it bears a striking resemblance to the inaugural lecture. An examination of the two texts will reveal to what extent montage works as an artistic model for Adorno's philosophy.

According to the brief passage in *Mahler*, montage presents two aspects. First, montage is a form inherently critical of artistic creation. Adorno refers to the "quotation-like themes" of the first *Ländler* of the movement. (M, 13:304/161) While Mahler did insert literal self-quotations into this section, what Adorno underlines here is Mahler's way of making the original sound old. As the Mahler scholar Henry-Louis de La Grange points out: "Mahler invented most of the pseudo-popular melodies contained in his symphonies."¹⁴ So, whether the mon-

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Rückblickend auf den Surrealismus," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 11:104–105, tr. by S. Weber Nichol森 as "Looking Back on Surrealism," in *Notes to Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1:87.

¹² Mahler's scores may be consulted *via* the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP) portal [<http://imslp.org/>].

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler. Eine musikalische Physiognomik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 13:304, tr. by E. Jephcott as *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 161. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as M.

¹⁴ Henry-Louis de La Grange, "Music about Music in Mahler: Reminiscences, Allusions, or Quotations?," in *Mahler Studies*, (ed.) S. Hefling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 139.

tage material is existing spa music or whether it is original music “made from deformed clichés,” the montage principle requires first of all scraps of matter deadened through familiarity. (M, 13:304/162) In other words, montage is specifically concerned with the reified.

The second aspect of montage that Adorno brings out is the constant recombination of these reified pieces, or what he calls “decomposition and lopsided reunification.” (M, 13:304/161) Montage presents diverse elements without attempting to harmonise them into an organic whole.

Stephen E. Hefling has noted both the fragmentary aspect and the combinatory aspect of Mahler’s musical montage. He observes that the opening section of the movement

owes much of its clumsiness to a relentless tonic-dominant and diatonic emphasis on C major, plus the avoidance of cumulative, goal-directed periodic phrasing and directionality; this music proceeds by repetition and seemingly random phrase groupings for eighty-nine bars, driven chiefly by the droning triple time of the peasant dance.¹⁵

These two aspects can be seen in more detail. First, the elements appear as “fragments” because, contrary to the narrative convention that organises phrases in antecedents and consequents, Mahler, while he makes use of these tropes that signal beginnings and endings of phrases, juxtaposes them in absurd combinations. (M, 13:304/161) The very first statement of the movement, uttered by the bassoons and violas, the repeated time-giving figure with its little run-in of sixteenth notes, is no doubt an opening gesture. Yet, it opens onto no theme. Instead, the clarinets respond with a time-giving figure of their own: yet another opening gesture. The musical progress is stalled again when the bassoons and violas give the tempo again, yet this time they do not repeat the motif. After this interruption, the horns in F and the bass clarinet provide what could be conceived as the consequent to what now appears retrospectively as the antecedent, the clarinet-choir figure. However, the broken antecedent and consequent do not give the effect of a whole because the

¹⁵ Stephen E. Hefling, “The Ninth Symphony,” in *The Mahler Companion*, (ed.) D. Mitchell and A. Nicholson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 480.

fragment of the bassoon-viola motif disturbs the flow of phrasing. We are left with only pieces of themes, heedlessly juxtaposed.

Secondly, the fragments are combined *and* recombined, placed in “seemingly random phrase groupings,” which is not always the case for montage in other art forms.¹⁶ The bassoon-viola time-giving motif introduces the clarinet antecedent¹⁷, only to break it off abruptly¹⁸; it also introduces the “cumbersome” [*Schwerfällig*] fiddle theme and its ponderous repeated down strokes of the bow¹⁹, and, finally, it accompanies the high woodwinds’ light comment on the fiddle theme.²⁰ The time-giving motif clumsily repeats its lead-in gesture, even where there is nothing to lead in. Motifs so change their functions as they fall into different groupings. Opening figures, grotesquely distorted, serve to disconcert where they cannot announce a dance already in progress. When these broken elements do happen to fall in the right places, they perform their functions senselessly, as if the correctness of these performances were accidental.²¹ The *Ländler* seems like nothing so much as a magic workshop of wind-up toys, where each mechanism repeats its stereotypical movement unaware of the total impression, or even of what its neighbour is doing.

However, upon closer inspection, the clockwork performances show minute deviations: the reified fragments change. The “bold” [*keck*] horn trill motif jumps up a perfect fourth from the springboard of concert E when first combined with the cumbersome, grinding fiddler’s theme.²² It then narrows the interval to a major third, springing up from concert F twice: the original motif is thus softened; yet the delicate effect is lost under the clarinet entry.²³ When the theme repeats, the horn twice cuts its trill short with two eighth notes, as if jolted by the machine-like running quavers in the rather unmelodic melody line of these two bars.²⁴ But when the trill motif combines with the “graceful” [*grazioso*] string

¹⁶ Hefling, “The Ninth Symphony,” 480.

¹⁷ 9/II, measures 1-4 with pick-up.

¹⁸ 9/II, measures 5-7 with pick-up.

¹⁹ 9/II, measures 8-10 and on with pick-up.

²⁰ 9/II, measure 29 with pick-up.

²¹ 9/II, measure 33 after [18], the pick-up.

²² 9/II, measure 13.

²³ 9/II, measures 14-15.

²⁴ 9/II, measures 23-25.

theme, it first leaps up a *perfect fifth* to concert B, prettifying itself for these new surroundings, then again narrows the interval, this time to an *augmented fourth*. However, the narrower interval is not repeated this time. The motif stops there, as if at once caught listening, disgusted by the suddenly suave turn of the music, which seems to incline to admire itself.²⁵

So this montage not only reproduces clichés, but also produces something else, for its elements change slightly to become what Adorno calls *variants*. Mahlerian variants outline a basic shape while substituting details. Adorno develops this concept most attentively in his discussion of the first movement of the Fourth Symphony. (M, 13:237-39/90-91) Diverse patterns of six sixteenth notes usually taking up the last beat and a half of the measure vary an initial statement, the falling sixteenth-note motif linking the first and second halves of the main theme.²⁶

Although banal, this initial motif is remarkably flexible. Its incremental transformation through the course of the movement marks it out from the variation on a theme. According to Adorno, a variation is “continuous” with its theme, whereas every variant begins again. (M, 13:235/88) This quality of trial and error is noticeable right in the first variant of the movement: when the initial figure, which merely descends the scale, is taken up by the violas, it rises and then falls, yet preserves the stepwise motion of the original.²⁷ Further along, the figure gains a final eighth note, incorporates the interval of a third and is bumped to different beats.²⁸ Little by little, the motif frees itself from the constraints imposed by its function in the theme: it experiences a dramatic widening of intervals and appears also in rhythmic augmentation in the contrabassoon part.²⁹ This great profusion of forms is not the work of genius, but of forgetfulness. While variations presuppose the genius of the classically-ordering subject, obsessively retaining a theme in consciousness through all its transformations, variants are the recitations of oral tradition, each a different retelling, and presuppose a collective subject. Their retrospection addresses a critique of the immediately present. The vari-

²⁵ 9/II, measures 5-6 after [18].

²⁶ 4/I, measure 5.

²⁷ 4/I, measure 9.

²⁸ 4/I, measures 1 and 2 before [9], for example.

²⁹ 4/I, measures 6-8 after [12] (flutes, clarinets, contrabassoon), for example.

ation supports the theme, while the variant calls it into question: with the variant, “no theme is positively, unambiguously there.” (M, 13:235/88) Beside variants, themes are revealed as “reifications,” which “are not freely posited by the subject,” which “assert their inauthenticity against its presumption of control” and which “escape the hand of the composer.” (M, 13:236/89)

The presence of variants in Mahler’s *Ländler* saves this musical montage from the criticism that Adorno will level in *Aesthetic Theory*, where “montage is the inner-aesthetic capitulation of art to what stands heterogeneously opposed to it.” (AT, 7:232/155) Rather than just blindly reproducing the immediately given, Mahler lets an improvisation appear in his montage: the variant, which points up the reified as stable only in appearance. The variant’s potential to cast the reified in a different light is the often-neglected ray of hope in Adorno’s infamous essay “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.”

The term “regressive listening” does not refer to individual instances of decline in auditory abilities, but to a social failure to realize the possibilities inherent in musical achievements. Musical achievements grow inaudible as music is increasingly dictated by the social form of the commodity. Regressive listening attaches itself to what it knows in advance about the object, its exchange value, rather than confronting what is properly new and unknown, the object’s irreducible, iridescent qualities. Mahler’s solution to the problem of regressive listening is not exactly the new and unknown, but the faithful presentation of the problem itself. In other words, his solution is not to advance Western music at any price and, in so doing, establish the New as the absolute criterion of art; rather, he wishes to mask the new and unknown under the appearance of the old and familiar by introducing slight differences into what bears the outward appearance of pure repetition:

As little as regressive listening is a symptom of progress in consciousness of freedom, it could suddenly turn around if art, in unity with the society, should ever leave the road of the always-identical.

Not popular music but artistic music has furnished a model for this possibility. It is not for nothing that Mahler is the scandal of all bourgeois musical aesthetics. They call him uncreative because he suspends their concept of creation itself. Everything

with which he occupies himself is already there. He accepts it in its state of *deprivation*; his themes are expropriated ones. Nevertheless, nothing sounds as it was wont to; all things are diverted as if by a magnet. What is worn out yields pliantly to the improvising hand; the used parts win a second life as variants.³⁰

Adorno called the variant the “*differentia specifica*” of the progressive Mahlerian technique. (M, 13:233/86) Disguising the new as the old is Mahler’s unique solution to mindless musical repetition, which the composer hates, but cannot destroy by *fiat*. While art on its own is powerless to solve the problem of mindless social repetition, that of commodity fetishism, Mahler, by presenting this problem in his own domain, asks a question of exchange society.

On one hand, the universality of the problem of fetishism does seem to make Mahler’s *Ländler* model transferable to other domains, such as philosophy. But, on the other hand, in the inaugural lecture, Adorno insists on the need of philosophy not only to present problems, but to resolve them as well. There is neither perfect continuity nor absolute rupture between art and society, and so the translation of musical solutions into other disciplines is problematic at best.

The Construction of Constellations

In his inaugural address, Adorno set forth the programme of philosophical interpretation as follows:

Just as riddle-solving is constituted, in that the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various groupings long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears—so philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences [*Wissenschaften*], into changing constellations, or, to say it with less astrological and scientifically more current ex-

³⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 14:49–50, tr. as “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” in *Essays on Music*, 314–15.

pression, into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears. (AP, 1:335/127)

Philosophy, Adorno was here suggesting, should not argue linearly from premises to conclusion, but should let solutions appear in an almost spatial manner, emerging out of the organisation and reorganisation of received micro-elements. These “smallest elements” from the disciplines are concepts, as there is no part of knowledge that philosophy can work with that is smaller. (AP, 1:336/127) As with the “quotation-like themes” of Mahler’s musical montage, the concepts serve as reified working material. (M, 13:304/161) For the concepts that come down from the different disciplines are much like clichés, each occurrence stamped out by entrenched techniques, methodologies, procedures and practices that presume to control reality through repetition. The concepts also owe their apparent rigidity to the tendency of the disciplines to “accept their findings, at least their latest and deepest findings, as unbreakable [*unauflöslich*] and static.” (AP, 1:334/126, translation modified) If philosophy chooses to work with the smallest elements to come down from the disciplines, it is precisely to demonstrate that findings are capable of breaking apart, while the combinatory art demonstrates that findings are mobile.

Adorno names the combinatory art with a metaphor: concepts are placed “in changing constellations.” (AP, 1:335/127) This is definitely a surprising comparison, considering that in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* Adorno criticized the “openly astrological” way in which Kierkegaard’s concepts, “conjoined” rather than defined or deduced, held the individual existence in a terrified thrall to blind fate.³¹ In his work on Kierkegaard, the constellation takes on a decidedly negative connotation: Adorno associates Kierkegaard’s constellations with history that appears as eternity. Enormous Kierkegaardian categories (aesthetic, ethical, religious) are unwieldy spheres whose unabashedly Pythagorean overtones elevate them beyond any useful comparison with reality. The spheres command a formidable power, as a passage that Adorno cites

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:131, tr. by R. Hullot-Kentor as *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 91. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as K.

from the *Unscientific Concluding Post-Script* attests: “‘If ever the position of the stars in the firmament has signified something fearful, then the position of the categories in this situation signifies something other than laughing and jesting’ (VII, 433).” (K, 2:131/91) Adorno takes Kierkegaard to task not for constructing a “context of related concepts” (K, 2:132/92), but for failing to recognise this seemingly natural sign of fate as a humanly-produced construction:

Kierkegaard, in contrast to Hegel, failed to achieve historical concretion—the only authentic concretion; he absorbed it into the blind self, volatilized it in the empty spheres: he thereby surrendered philosophy’s central claim to truth—the interpretation of reality—while calling on a theology from which his own philosophy extracted the pith. (K, 2:133/93)

Kierkegaard does not overcome Idealism because his criticism of Hegel amounts to a mere abstract negation of the claim that the real is rational. But if Adorno is not himself to reproduce Idealism unwittingly, his criticism of Kierkegaard must do more than simply reverse the claim that blind universals doom individuals to terror-stricken paralysis. For the fear that Kierkegaard associates with the spheres is real. But in describing the fearsome categories as entirely natural celestial bodies, Kierkegaard glosses over that share of fear that may be traced to structures created and modifiable by human beings. Things could be otherwise, but the nineteenth-century bourgeois gentleman remains immobilised in his interior, blind to the fact that the cause of his fear is the effect of his practices. A true critique of Kierkegaard’s irrationalism, in contradistinction to an abstract negation of it, is required to draw out the historical content of the spheres in order to divert them from their natural course.

Kierkegaard’s constellations do have a historical content, but their real timeliness is inaccessible to the Kierkegaardian philosophy because the concepts that form them are abstract. The real timeliness of Kierkegaard’s constellations lies in their advance of conceptual practice: juxtaposing concepts in figures is new, and, better still, responds critically to what knowledge takes itself to be. The practice of *defining* concepts, belonging to that former grand age of axioms and foundations, reduces knowledge to tautology, while the practice of *deriving* concepts from one another takes refuge in an ideal of organic continuity that pos-

tulates heredity and the individual's identity over time. But the obsessive need for certainty of these two conceptual practices gives up the aspect peculiar to anything worth knowing: the moment of the new. In this respect, the inorganic quality of constellations seems to oppose them to twelve-tone technique, which postulates the ideal of living growth in deriving its permutations, which conserve the proportions of the original row.

With the sudden conversion of one category into another, Kierkegaard demands a moment of the entirely new for knowledge. However, Kierkegaard's demand for the entirely new is lost because his constellations lose their object and withdraw into an aesthetic, into an interior world of images. Adorno claims that the aesthetic in philosophy is not condemnable, "provided that the objects are chosen correctly, that they are real." (AP, 1:344/133) The rescue of this aesthetic for philosophy may begin by venturing outside the province of the individual existence, which, despite its appearance of isolation, embodies the tendencies of society in seemingly private reactions against the historical requirements for systematisation and identity. To make Kierkegaard's hidden critique of epistemology effective in the world, philosophy would have to work with the very things that presume to access knowledge: specialised scientific concepts, concepts isolated mechanically through definition or bound by their parent concepts to serve the needs of specialisation or of a grand philosophical system. These are Kierkegaard's real target. Adorno, thus, appropriates Kierkegaard's ideas that concepts could touch on one another and that these meetings would mark sudden, inorganic transformations, not divergences along the lines of continuous growth and reproduction. Such sudden transformations do not themselves come from what is actual, but must be produced by the thinker. However, in insisting that the thinker use scientific concepts to interpret reality, Adorno hopes to shore up safeguards against his philosophy becoming an aesthetic. By taking into account the stage of development of each concept in the advance of its determinations, the philosopher works materially with concepts. In the attempt to bring together what the division of labour and the specialisation of the disciplines have separated, the implicit history of such concepts limits the ways in which they can enter into the constellation. The philosopher experiences the real in working always *against* these limits. The expression that describes this work that is both strict and free is "exact imagination":

An exact imagination; imagination that abides strictly within the material that the sciences present to it and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement: aspects, granted, which imagination itself must originally generate. If the idea of philosophic interpretation that I tried to develop for you is valid, then it can be expressed as the demand to answer the questions of a pre-given reality each time, through an imagination that rearranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements, the exactitude of which has its control in the disappearance of the question. (AP, 1:342/131, translation modified)

In addition to its implicit critique of Kierkegaardian aestheticism, this passage offers insight into philosophy's possibility of going beyond the sciences, even though philosophy and science may share the same materials. Adorno develops a philosophical interpretative model that does not counter the reification of scientific concepts with its own creations of pure fantasy, but imagines only characteristics of a possible construction of this blind, reified material. The model of exact imagination turns out to be a critique of the model of the new offered by tonal music: that of modulation. For modulation raises the possibility of defeating a certain regime, but this change of order necessarily implies a change of elements. The fall of an established order, thus, happens at the expense of certain members of this established order. How Adorno conceives of the new is in fact very much like the idea of twelve-tone music, which advances not in refusing the material of the existing order, the row and its permutations, but in helping this material to a rational organisation. For the entirely rational organisation of twelve-tone music also depends on an imagination capable of "originally generating" *transitions*, which could very well be *juxtapositions*, from one permutation to the next, from one simple result of reified procedures to the next. Thus, Schoenberg's resignation, his confiding of the composition to the row, is nothing other than his critique of the model of the new offered by tonal music in modulation. Although twelve-tone music does not attempt to go beyond the *material* limits established by the row and the procedures performed on it, as an *organisation* of transitions between permutations, twelve-tone music does go beyond, in that each transition must be fashioned anew

and may even introduce an interval or a chain of two intervals into the composition that was not dictated by the row.

Hence, one may say that exact imagination characterises the artistic process as well as Adorno's interpretive one, for a *Ländler* or a twelve-tone row is every bit material as a group of scientific concepts, in that it poses difficulties to the imagination through its historical determination, in the past uses of a certain word, in the past uses of a certain interval, in the past uses of the slow waltz known as the *Ländler*. But if the reality of a construction crystallised only in the work with material, then philosophy would be no more bound to reality than art. Since working with scientific concepts in and of itself does not save Adorno from the charge of aestheticism, it may be asked whether there is anything that distinguishes the constellation from art or whether the imitation of musical montage deprives constellations of their philosophically binding force. However, we can name two ways in which philosophy nonetheless achieves the binding force that separates it from art: (1) it dissolves social illusions, rather than heightening aesthetic ones of its own manufacture and (2) it preserves the practical aspect of concepts, which is to say that, despite being ripped from their contexts, these concepts still intend objects.

The Constellation Is Not Art

One of the main terms that Adorno associates with form suggests that it is the place of a convergence between art and philosophy: unlike soundness, validity, quality or greatness, coherence [*Stimmigkeit*] is a criterion that speaks to both artworks and philosophical works. Coherent form is the emergence of something *other* out of an arrangement of what is, and whether the construction is made from musical tropes or concepts reified through the processes of knowledge accumulation and technological innovation, the term could be evoked.

Adorno denies, however, that philosophy and art converge in their form. (ND, 6:26/15) For art and philosophy differ as concerns the *mode* of this other that they attempt to convene. In the artwork, the non-existent appears "as if it existed." (AT, 7:128/82) An appearing non-existent is aesthetic semblance: "Even radical art is a lie insofar as it fails to complete [*herzustellen*] the possible that it produces [*herstellt*] as semblance." (AT, 7:129/83, translation modified.) The mode of the non-

existent in art is, thus, that of the *promise*, the promise of the completion of possibility, for “[b]y its form alone art promises what is not.” (AT, 7:128/82) Mahler’s Ninth Symphony *promises* the end to reification because its freely-ordered differences *appear* to give every worn-out individual new life, as if the only reification that existed existed in this piece of music. The appearance of new life in the minute variants is the work’s *promesse du bonheur*. The philosophical text, by contrast, does not present the non-existing reification-free world as if it existed, so it promises nothing. Even when it makes the need for a changed reality pressing, it does not claim to realise the change. The task of philosophical criticism is not to make possibility appear as if realised, but to show that there is more possibility than we know what to do with. Finding unrealised possibilities is the task of philosophical criticism, including the criticism of works of art, which purport to realise every possibility that they raise. Contrary to their semblance of achievement, works of art really succeed only if their possibility exceeds their actuality. Yet, the “plus” (*Mehr*) of excessive possibility is never instantly perceptible, nor immediately available. The variant turns out to be a power that exceeds the limits of the Ninth Symphony, but only in light of what Schoenberg achieved with this power in his twelve-tone compositions: “In Mahler’s conception of the theme as a gestalt with mobile motivic content the practice of Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique is prefigured, with its tendency toward stable rhythmic patterns filled with tones in changing row forms.” (M, 13:235/88)

So, Adorno’s constellations are not themselves artworks because the concepts do not promise another reality, but, bereft of this reconciling and consoling semblance, constellations limit themselves to a critique of the merely existing.

However, an added complication arises. Mahler’s music consistently wears away at its semblance character. The properly *philosophical* negativity that destroys illusions is also at work in Mahler’s *Ninth*. Adorno speaks of the “irreconcilable and obtrusive negativity” of the second movement. (M, 13:304/161) While the movement may portray a possible solution to the problem of how something completely new breaks into the established order, it also leaves important clues that this possibility is not presently available. Mahler’s very choice and ironic handling of reified material frankly spoils the illusion of the artwork as a natural generator (and achiever) of

possibility: “Art’s semblance [*Schein*] of being the utterance of creation is shattered by the recognition of its own reified [*dinghaften*] elements.” (M, 13:267/123, translation modified) Refusing all idolatry, the late Mahler does not create, but only remembers past possibilities that were missed. The old *Ländler* form itself signals that any solution to appear belongs to a moment in the past, to conditions that exist no longer. Furthermore, the disproportion between the awkward, dangerously heavy pieces of themes and the spirit of idle obliviousness with which they are juggled together is a self-conscious nod to music’s unreality.

However, despite the tendency of Mahler’s montage to pierce illusions, the scope of the disenchanting gesture is limited by the non-conceptual character of music. For aesthetic semblance does not entirely define the work of art: its non-conceptual character is also essential to it. Here Adorno’s comments on the essay might be appropriate:

Nothing can be interpreted out of something that is not interpreted into it at the same time. The criteria for such interpretation are its compatibility with the text and with itself, and its power to give voice to the elements of the object in conjunction with one another. In this, the essay has something like an aesthetic autonomy that is easily accused of being simply derived from art, although it is distinguished from art by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance.³²

The non-conceptual character of Mahler’s musical montage breaks with practice. His music is not oriented toward present practice or even the practice of his day. “Art is the ever broken promise of happiness” because we cannot act on the past, lost possibilities that it presents. (AT, 7:205/136) Yet, precisely because *we cannot act* does the broken promise of aesthetic illusion spell truth: “Art’s *promesse du bonheur* means not only that hitherto praxis has blocked happiness but that happiness is beyond praxis.” (AT, 7:26/12)

Constellations must, however, provide answers and so bear the seriousness of everything that concerns itself with practice: “Earnestness

³² Theodor W. Adorno, “*Der Essay als Form*,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 11:11, tr. by S. Weber Nichol森 as “The Essay as Form,” in *Notes to Literature*, 1:4-5.

means here that the answer does not remain mistakenly in the closed area of knowledge, but that praxis is granted to it.” (AP, 1:338/129) The critique of scientific reification implicit in Adorno’s model is not a simple copy of Mahler’s solution to musical reification: Adorno does not seek to provoke philosophical equivalents of variants. Rather, he seeks *to interpret* such variants, or what he calls “unintentional reality”:

The task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret unintentional reality, in that, by the power of constructing figures, or images (*Bilder*), out of the isolated elements of reality, it negates (*aufhebt*) questions, the exact articulation of which is the task of science,... a task to which philosophy always remains bound, because its power of illumination is not able to catch fire otherwise than on these solid questions. (AP, 1:335-36/127)

The point of interpreting the unintentional is to demonstrate that the concepts to come down from the disciplines, like the themes that Mahler’s variants criticise, are “reifications,” which “are not freely posited by the subject” and which “assert their inauthenticity against its presumption of control.” (M, 13:236/89) If Adorno recommends a critical practice that borrows its concepts from the disciplines, it is because he is interested in criticising what passes for rationality. Such concepts intend real objects and are, therefore, attached to practice. But the total control over the environment that these concepts are supposed to provide is illusory because consciousness cannot “grasp the totality of the real.” (AP, 1:325/120)

For alongside the reality that the sciences intend with their concepts comes an overwhelming non-intentional reality: the radioactive soil, unliveable habitats and accidental deaths of concepts’ progress. The traditional way of dealing with this refuse or by-product of instrumental conceptual practice has been to ignore it or else to try to eliminate it by refining the concepts. However, this practice has not so far produced a more understandable reality because it is set up to produce and keep producing reality as we know it, and because it is not well suited for unriddling this loss. Adorno proposes a form of critique that chooses and fashions its concepts for the purpose of unravelling, not for the purpose of manufacturing the identical. In order to interpret what is *not* intended in a concept, but nonetheless real, this form of critique attempts to zero in on

this reality by bringing to bear on it a constellation of concepts that themselves do *not* intend this reality, nor imply one another. The art of sudden transition produced by an exact imagination, on the one side, and the possibility of concepts to hang together, on the other, do not lie in these individual elements as they are in and of themselves, nor in some supposed common origin in the depths of the human soul. As they do not unconceal hidden intentions or meanings of that which is, they should in no way incite fear and paranoia. Adorno's conjunctions of concepts are not the "conjuring signs" (K, 2:131/91) of "blind demons" (AP, 1:334/126), but the forms of reality that attempt to save rationality from itself. Through human-scale interpretation *via* these separate, real elements, Adorno's constellations aim at releasing the individual from the terror that Kierkegaard's categories evoke.

Philosophy, according to Adorno, "persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation: nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings." (AP, 1:334/126) The sciences seem to have a surer practice, yet are founded on a conceptual illusion. The finer determination of a concept that proves key to overcoming some resistance of reality only ever gives the appearance of equilibrium between reality and reason because there is no refinery that does not produce waste. Constellations are just progress in the consciousness of waste. It is "only in traces and ruins" that reason is "prepared to hope that it will ever come across correct and just reality" (AP, 1:325/120) because these dregs, or, according to an expression of Freud's that Adorno likes to quote, this "'refuse of the world of appearance,'" cannot but speak against what we take to be correct and just. (AP, 1:336/128, translation modified) If fragments of the most advanced theories were centred on the reality of their waste, we would be in a position to consider at what point the real by-products of conceptualisations undermine the reasonableness of certain practices. Changed practice is, thus, an aim of such a work of configuration-construction. Tightening a concept can be a sort of defence mechanism against a perceived attack on what is reasonable and civilised. Rather than provoke this defensive response, philosophy could initiate an interpretation of the Freudian slips of science. The unintentional, the natural lapse, what breaks in on the frozen, formalised second nature, shows that identical conditions cannot be indefinitely reproduced. In

Mahler and in Adorno, the lapse is the sign of hope against endless reification. While art and philosophy alone are in no position to eliminate reification, their truth is now tied to the determination of its illusion.

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