

## **Intrnational Conference**

**What is the relevance of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* today?**

### **Call for Papers**



### **Résumé :**

In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* Peter Bürger maintained that “the norm of all contemporary aesthetic theory is Adorno’s aesthetics.” What remains of this « norm » of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* more than forty years after its publication?

### **Announcement :**

This two-day international conference will take place at the University of Rennes 2, in October 2017, and will be presided by Christophe David (senior lecturer, History and Critique of the Arts) and Florent Perrier (senior lecturer, Practical Arts and Poetics). The conference will be conducted in French and English.

## Argument :

*Ästhetische Theorie* was written between 1961 and 1969 and published posthumously in 1970 in the unfinished state that Adorno's death made permanent. The beginning of the 1960s are the years of what we call "contemporary art," which emerged from the avant-garde tradition and defined new directions in modern art. Adorno partook in the *Ferienkurse* of Darmstadt (Adorno, *Kranichsteiner Vorlesungen* [1955-1966], Suhrkamp, 2014) without any illusions concerning the differences (philosophical, political, generational) that separated him from the young musicians to whom he spoke. Adorno shared his criticisms of the concept of "documenta," and his lectures were themselves emblematic of this tension in contemporary art, which *Ästhetische Theorie* would then reformulate.

If the central artist in Adorno's philosophy of art from the 1930s was Schönberg, in the 1960s this key position was given to Beckett, to whom *Ästhetische Theorie* is dedicated. To situate matters, as Adorno does, let us recall that all his thought on art is shaped by the fact of Auschwitz and the resounding question he first raised in 1949 (in the essay, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft") and repeated in 1966 (in *Negative Dialektik*): that is, the question of whether or not art, and poetry in particular, is still possible after Auschwitz.

*Ästhetische Theorie* is also written in the wake of Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, and of his first major reflections on the culture industry that Adorno initially undertook with Horkheimer during their sojourn in the United States as political refugees. We may even say that *Ästhetische Theorie* provides the theory of the autonomous work of art that the critique of the culture industry had made normatively necessary.

But the autonomy of art, in Adorno's conception of it, defines itself dialectically as the autonomy of art as a form of culture and as form of society. Thus *Ästhetische Theorie* contains an ontology of the work of art that insists on its "double character." The work of art is "both autonomous and *fait social* [a social fact or reality]." If art becomes social it is by "the antagonistic position it adopts in relation to society,

and it only occupies this position as autonomous art.” It is not for contingent reasons that, in Adorno’s lectures and writings, aesthetics overlaps with (political) sociology and the (political) criticism of culture. In the “administered world,” the autonomy of art becomes the reference *par excellence* of all criticism—the autonomy of art, in fact, becomes for Adorno the basis from which to think moral and political autonomy. Every work of art, even “the most sublimated [...] hides something that resembles ‘The world must be changed’.”

What connects the autonomy of works of art to the imperative autonomy of human beings? “Artworks correspond to the objective need for a transformation of consciousness that could become a transformation of reality.” Autonomous art offers freedom in the empirical world, and in this way it is part of a utopian movement. “By separating themselves rigorously from the empirical world, from their otherness, works of art testify to the need for the world itself to become otherwise: in this way artworks are the unconscious schemata of the world’s transformation.”

Thus the question of utopia and of emancipation is reformulated along new lines that pertain directly to the history of thought on aesthetics: specifically, we must now ask, in what sense can art be considered unconscious schemata? Here again some contextualization is necessary. Adorno was part of the tradition in the philosophy of art for which art is first and foremost a form of expression. It is from this point of view, very much indebted to Cassirer, that *Ästhetische Theorie* aims to rethink mimesis. For Adorno, this is the precise reason why thinking art is so difficult, “for that which is qualitatively contrary to the concept is difficult to conceptualize.”

In this way, the aesthetic basis of Adorno’s thinking of moral and political questions itself evidently harks back to the origins of aesthetics, as a specifically modern field of inquiry on specific kinds of perception that originates with Baumgarten and with the question of sentient knowledge —“art in its totality is the secularization of transcendence.” It is in this way that art intrinsically challenges the so-called *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, to the extent that it expresses or reveals a non-conceptual form of knowledge. As such the goal of

philosophical interpretation of works of art “cannot be their identification with the concept, their absorption in the concept; yet it is through such interpretation that the truth of the work unfolds.”

One cannot help but hear here, especially in the developments of *Ästhetische Theorie* on the enigmatic dimension of art, an echo of the conception of criticism that Benjamin reveals in his thesis on the “Romantic Concept of Criticism.”

Adorno knows the tradition of thought on aesthetics. All the great names of German aesthetics (and not only them) are present in *Ästhetische Theorie*. Indeed, it is because he has «tradition in himself» that he can «hate it properly,» to borrow a phrase from *Minima Moralia*, and that he can, moreover, offer a truly fresh perspective on what the beautiful, the sublime, mimesis, and so on, actually mean.

The posthumous publication of *Ästhetische Theorie* was preceded in 1967 by the collection *Ohne Leitbild*, subtitled *Parva esthetica*, which brought essays together such as «Résumé über Kulturindustrie,» or «Die Kunst und die Künste,» and juxtaposed essays on art as *fait social* with others that considered art from the angle of its autonomy.

This should suggest to us again the extent to which the philosophy of art behind *Ästhetische Theorie* goes well beyond the usual boundaries assigned to scholarly reflection on art. It not only expands on the critique of the culture industry but, more fundamentally, it develops a critique of culture as such. Adorno examines aesthetics from a political perspective, and sets aesthetics on the horizon of human emancipation, without for all that compromising on the most demanding requirements of philosophy.

It is undoubtedly by virtue of Adorno’s success in the elaboration of this double objective that Peter Bürger could then, in his *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1974) make a compelling case for a new normative standard in the criticism and philosophy of art: “the norm of all contemporary aesthetic theory is Adorno’s aesthetics.” In 1983, however, Albrecht Wellmer would be equally justified in qualifying

matters (in his landmark essay, “Truth-Appearance-Reconciliation: Adorno and the Aesthetic Rescue of Modernity”): “If the patterns of Adorno’s thought and even his ways of reacting intellectually found a home in the thoughts and feelings of artists, writers and intellectuals, *Ästhetische Theorie* had a less favorable fate in the centers of academic aesthetics and literary criticism.”

There was an “after Adorno” (we may recall that *After Adorno* in which the name detaches itself in red, on the cover of the anthology edited by Rainer Rochlitz in 1990) in which Adorno’s greatness is celebrated, only then to take note of his fall. Let us say, then, that we find ourselves today, almost fifty years after Adorno began his book on *Ästhetische Theorie*, in a situation that is “well after Adorno.” It is in view of determining this situation that we pose the question: What is the relevance of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* today?

### **Indicative bibliography :**

James Hellings, *Adorno and Art : Aesthetic Theory contra Critical Theory* de James Hellings, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2014.

Marcus Quent und Eckardt Lindner (éditeurs), *Das Versprechen der Kunst. Aktuelle Zugänge zu Adornos Ästhetischer Theorie*, Turia + Kant, Vienne, 2014.

Albrecht Wellmer, « Über Negativität und Autonomie der Kunst : die Aktualität von Adornos Ästhetik und blinde Flecken seiner Musikphilosophie », in *Dialektik der Freiheit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt-am-Main, 2005, pp. 237-278.

Ruth Sonderegger, « *Ästhetische Theorie* », in Richard Klein, Johann Kreuzer et Stefan Müller-Doohm (editors), *Adorno-Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, J. B. Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart, 2011, pp. 414–427.

Rolf Wiggershaus, « *Ästhetische Theorie* », in Axel Honneth (editor), *Schlüsseltexthe der Kritischen Theorie*, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden, 2006, pp. 81–84.

## **The organizing committee and the scientific committee :**

The organizing committee is constituted and we will communicate the members of the scientific committee as soon as possible.

## **Modalities of submission :**

This call of papers is addressed to scholars working in aesthetics, in philosophy of art, in political philosophy, in sociology, in history of art, in musicology, in literary history, literary theory, and so on.

The questions we would like to explore during the two days of the conference are the following:

The pre-history of *Ästhetische Theorie*. The point is to explore how these questions, which became thematic in the 30s and 40s (the fetish character of art, dissonance, and so on) find themselves changed, or unchanged, in *Ästhetische Theorie* in the 60s, to determine the ongoing or transformed role of the decisive early influences (for instance, that of Georg Lukàcs) or the exchanges with his friends (Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Alfred Sohn-Rethel). What is the role of Schönberg in *Ästhetische Theorie* now that this artist no longer has a central position? What are the differences between the Schönberg of the first part of the *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (written in 1940-41) and that of the Darmstadt conferences?

The relation between *Ästhetische Theorie* and the courses on aesthetics of the 1950s (*Vorlesungen. Ästhetik* [1958-59], Surkamp, 2012).

The references to the aesthetic tradition (Baumgarten, Schiller, Rosenkranz, Corce, Dewey, Dilthey, and so on) and the “metacritical” moments (the critique of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, and the other towering figures in the history of art criticism). The major aesthetic questions that are replayed or reinvented: appearance, mimesis, natural beauty, artistic beauty, the sublime, and so on. The relation between *Ästhetische Theorie* and *Ohne Leibild. Parva aesthetica*.

The major elements in the analysis of the critique of the culture industry. The dialectical opposition between autonomous art and administered art in the culture industry. What place does the critique of culture occupy in *Ästhetische Theorie*? And how might *Ästhetische Theorie* help inform the critique of culture today?

The articulation between *Dialektik der Aufklärung* and *Ästhetische Theorie* is also played out in the identification of art as a symbolic form that partakes in (as a “secularization of transcendence”) the movement of emancipation from myth. The political and moral import of art as a symbolic form, then, as it emerges against the backdrop of Auschwitz, and against the epoch of the culture industry and the industries of culture.

The approach and analysis of the arts (music, literature, cinema, etc.) and of artworks (*Ästhetische Theorie* contains numerous highly suggestive analyses of works that evidently demand further development) the classical artists (Bach, Baudelaire, Beethoven, Goethe, Wagner) and the modern ones (Beckett, Brecht, Celan, Kafka, Picasso, Valéry) in *Ästhetische Theorie*. The question of the avant-gardes (and of all the “isms”). The treatment of contemporary art (by means, for example, of the young musicians of Darmstadt). The question of the relation of the philosophy of the arts. Philosophy, interpretation and criticism or critique.

The question of the political or of politics in *Ästhetische Theorie*. Works of art play a role in the political transformation of the administered world. Administered world and administered art. Aesthetic autonomy and political liberty. The question of utopia: “Every artwork has a utopian function to the extent that, through its form, it anticipates a reality that would at last be itself [...] But because utopia—what is not yet—is veiled in darkness, it maintains through all its mediations that character of a memory, a memory of the possible against the real, something like the imaginary compensation for the catastrophe of universal history.” Is *Ästhetische Theorie* indeed a “materialist and dialectical aesthetics”? What relation does *Ästhetische Theorie* have to Marx?

The proposed papers may be sent in French, German, English or Spanish (a title and summary of no more than 15 or 20 lines) should be sent before October 20<sup>th</sup> 2016 to Christophe David ([christophe.t.david@wanadoo.fr](mailto:christophe.t.david@wanadoo.fr)) and Florent Perrier ([florentperrier@hotmail.fr](mailto:florentperrier@hotmail.fr)). Please include a notice of 5 to 6 lines (full name, university affiliation if you have one, your most important articles or books). Your talk must not exceed 25 minutes and may be delivered in French or English.