

***Bilderverbot:
Adorno & the Ban on Images***

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Declaration:

I, Sebastian Truskolaski, hereby confirm that the content of this thesis is entirely my own.

Signature: _____

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Acknowledgments:

I'd like to thank my family, my supervisors and my friends who generously commented on sections of this thesis. Vielen Dank.

Abstract:

My thesis examines the significance of Theodor W. Adorno's recurrent reference to the Old Testament ban on making images of God: the 'Bilderverbot'. In particular I focus on three facets of this figure that occur at prominent junctures of Adorno's work: his 'imageless materialism' (Chapter One), his 'inverse theology' (Chapter Two) and his 'negative aesthetics' (Chapter Three). In each case I argue that Adorno strips the image ban of its religious associations and enlists it in the service of a broadly Marxian critique of capitalist modernity. The ban on picturing the absolute is rendered as a ban on pre-determining a future in which all historical antagonisms are reconciled. As Adorno argues, only an unflinching criticism of the present can throw into relief the contours of an 'imageless' Utopia. I approach Adorno's writings with a view to his sources, many of which contain notable references to the image ban that span the history of modern German thought. They include: Marx and Lukács, Benjamin and Bloch, Kant and Hegel, as well as Hölderlin, Kafka and Schoenberg. By emphasising these elective affinities, I aim to shed light on Adorno's singular application of the figure of the image ban to his critical project. In this regard, I hope to dispense with certain prevalent characterisations of Adorno as a quietistic aesthete advanced by critics such as Habermas, Taubes and Agamben. Far from designating a merely historical curio, I argue that Adorno's singular appropriation of the image ban serves as a potent model for thinking an aesthetics of resistance in the present.

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Prelude:
Adorno and the Ban on Images

“Die Kinder haben keine Zukunft. Sie fürchten sich vor der ganzen Welt. Sie machen
sich kein Bild von ihr, nur von dem Hüben und Drüben, denn es läßt sich mit
Kreidestrichen begrenzen.”¹

Ingeborg Bachmann

In an essay titled ‘Sacred Fragment’ (1963), Theodor W. Adorno gestures towards an irreducible iconoclasm at the heart of Arnold Schoenberg’s unfinished opera *Moses und Aron* (1932).² Schoenberg’s Exodus-adaptation “is in pieces”, we are told; it is “fragmentary, like the tables of the law which Moses smashed”.³ This sense of fragmentation is thematised in Act Two, Scene Four of Schoenberg’s libretto – an episode that has been memorably committed to film by the French directors Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet.⁴ It portrays Moses’ descent from Mount Sinai where he had received the tables with the Ten Commandments “written with the finger of God”.⁵ Upon returning, Moses finds that the Israelites had grown restless during his forty-day absence. They had urged his brother Aron to reinstate their old religious ways: “[g]ive us back our Gods to worship; let them bring us order”.⁶ Under the threat of death, Aron had relented. “O Israel, I return your gods to you, and also give you to them, just as you have demanded”.⁷ Famously, Aron had proceeded to fashion an effigy in the form of a golden calf: “common and visible, *imaged* in gold”.⁸ The Israelites, in turn, had frenziedly worshipped this idol. Schoenberg’s stage notes laconically sum up the action: “[b]urnt offerings are brought to

¹ “The children have no future. They are afraid of the whole world. They do not make themselves an image of it; they only picture hopscotch squares, for they can be delimited in chalk.” Ingeborg Bachmann, “Jugend in einer österreichischen Stadt”, in *Werke, Bd. 2: Erzählungen*, ed. Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum & Clemens Münster (Munich: Piper, 1980), 86-87 [My translation]

² Schoenberg composed the first two acts of his opera between 1930-32, i.e. before his re-conversion to Judaism and his forced emigration to the United States in 1933. Schoenberg omitted the second ‘a’ in his spelling of Aron because the amount of letters in the title would have otherwise tallied 13 – a bad omen, in his view. The English translators of Schoenberg’s libretto apparently did not share his concern. Cf. Allen Shaw, *Arnold Schoenberg’s Journey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 148

³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Sacred Fragment: Schoenberg’s ‘Moses und Aron’”, in *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), 225

⁴ Cf. Barton Bryg, “Musical Modernism and the Schoenberg Films”, in *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 139-163

⁵ Exodus, 31:18

⁶ Arnold Schoenberg, “Moses and Aaron (Act Two, Scene Two)”, in *Schoenberg’s ‘Moses and Aaron’, with the Complete Libretto in German and English*, ed. Karl Wörner, trans. Paul Hamburger (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 161

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid [My emphasis]

the altar";⁹ *"wild drunkenness overtakes everyone"*;¹⁰ *"extravagant dancing"*;¹¹ *"blood off'rings"*;¹² *"Destruction and Suicide"*;¹³ *"Erotic Orgy"*.¹⁴ Upon witnessing the Israelites' idolatrous excesses, Moses furiously smashes the tables with the law: "[a]nd it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount. And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it."¹⁵ As is well known, the Book of Exodus proceeds to detail how Moses and the sons of Levi go on to slay all those who had partaken in the dance around the golden calf as punishment for their "great sin".¹⁶ The law is rewritten in Moses' hand and God's authority is restored. Schoenberg, however, omits these occurrences, choosing instead to draw out the confrontation between the two brothers in order to illuminate the fundamental stakes of their conflict: "God's eternity opposes idol's transience";¹⁷ "[n]o folk can grasp more than just a partial image, the perceivable part of the whole idea".¹⁸ God *cannot* be pictured; God *must* be pictured – if only for pedagogical reasons. This designates the "tragic" dimension of *Moses und Aron*: "the insoluble conflict between the finite and the infinite inherent in the subject matter Schoenberg chose."¹⁹ Against this backdrop, the Viennese composer's "biblical opera" invites two preliminary observations.²⁰

i.) Insofar as the origin of the law cannot be dissociated from Moses' breaking of the tables, the source of its authority remains obscure. That is, the relation between law, authority and scripture remains somewhat under-determined – a considerable stumbling block for any subsequent effort to ground binding behavioural guidelines on the basis of scripture.²¹ At the same time, though, inasmuch as Moses acts in response to the Israelites' effort to supplant God with an intermediary – an idol – the breaking of the tables is supposed to substantiate the very law whose physical trace it obliterates, namely: the "Jewish prohibition on making images".²²

⁹ Ibid, 169

¹⁰ Ibid, 173

¹¹ Ibid, 174

¹² Ibid, 177 [My emphasis]

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid, 179

¹⁵ Exodus, 32:19-20

¹⁶ Exodus, 32: 31

¹⁷ Schoenberg, "Moses und Aron (Act Two, Scene Five)", 187

¹⁸ Ibid, 189

¹⁹ Adorno, "Sacred Fragment", 226

²⁰ Ibid, 225

²¹ I derive this point from a talk by Andrew Benjamin titled 'Images, Iconoclasm and the Founding of the Law', held at Kingston University on 27 October 2015.

²² Adorno, "Sacred Fragment", 230

This peculiar incongruity extends into the manifest motivations that underlie the biblical injunction “[t]hou shalt not make unto thee any graven image”.²³ For one thing, we are told, the God of Israel is a “jealous” God; he demands an exclusive commitment.²⁴ Yet Moses’ destruction of the golden calf seems only to confirm “the charismatic power of the idol”.²⁵ In other words, if the golden calf poses a threat to God’s authority – if it rouses His jealousy – then surely the primacy of the monotheistic worldview is ultimately compromised. At the same time, we are assured, the ban on using earthly means for picturing the absolute is not simply a way to manage God’s jealousy; rather, it is supposed to guard against the gravest of hubristic errors: the attempt to determine that which eludes all determination. Thus “[t]he central effort of philosophical religion”, as Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit observe, “is the attempt to attain a proper *metaphysical* conception of God.”²⁶ Not only is such a conception necessary for the purposes of proper worship – after all, the ban on idol worship is nothing if not a practical directive – it also constitutes the “high point of religious life.”²⁷ This ‘high point’, however, is marked by a double bind. For if the outlawing of idolatry goes hand in hand with Moses’ smashing of the law, if the pronouncement of this prohibition thus assumes an ill-founded legislative authority – “to act as the mouthpiece of the Almighty is blasphemy for mortal man” – might it not be objected that the ‘Jewish prohibition on making images’ is essentially self-transgressive; that the commandment against idol worship contains its own infraction as an ineluctable condition of its formulation?²⁸

ii.) As we have noted, Schoenberg’s libretto stops short of covering the events outlined in Exodus 34 – the passage that describes how God summons Moses to Mount Sinai a second time, in order to have him write a set of replacement tables. Schoenberg’s omission is striking because the episode instantiates the very contradiction that he seeks to stage: the replacement tables are “no longer identified as ‘God’s handiwork’”, as Rebecca Comay highlights; they are “inexorably marked as substitute or simulacrum”.²⁹ But if we concede this point, might it not be objected that the re-drawing of the tables relies on the very self-transgression of the law that we

²³ Exodus, 20: 4

²⁴ Exodus, 20: 5

²⁵ Rebecca Comay, “Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*”, in *Sites of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 342 [My emphasis]. Sigmund Freud observes an analogous mechanism in animistic practices. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Totem & Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1966)

²⁶ Moshe Halbertal & Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 2 [My emphasis]

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ Adorno, “Sacred Fragment”, 225. The fact that Aron acts as Moses’ spokesman and that Moses, in turn, relays the word of God is significant in this regard.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 344

outlined above – an act of second-degree idolatry? In other words, does the fact that Moses’ rewrites a law that originally appeared as *God’s* ‘handiwork’ not mark out the replacement tables as idols in their own right?

To begin with, these two preliminary observations concerning Schoenberg’s biblical subject matter serve to frame the subsequent discussion in a double sense. With regards to the former point – Exodus 32 – this means the following: if the image ban chiefly concerns an immeasurable excess of absolute ideas over their limited representations, then Judaism’s ‘*metaphysical* conception of God’ – invoked above by Halbertal and Margalit – points beyond the sphere of Exodus. In other words: if the outlawing of images principally follows from a desire to attain a ‘*metaphysical conception*’ of God – rather than, say, from a fear of His jealous retribution – then it follows that Judaism appears above all as a ‘*philosophical* religion’. In this regard, Moses’ destruction of the golden calf is supposed to signal the triumph of a certain metaphysical-philosophical understanding of the absolute over the fateful-mythical model that undergirds iconophilic paganism. God is intellectualised. To be sure, such a portrayal of Judaism runs the danger of equating the history of biblical monotheism with that of reason *tout court*. This premise resounds in various ways throughout the work of early 20th century thinkers from the orbit of the so-called *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Abraham Geiger, Leo Baeck, Hermann Cohen).³⁰ It is of interest in the present context because the *Wissenschaft* account of a religion of reason is, in turn, taken up and critically recast in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) – the speculative pre-history of subjectivity co-authored by Adorno and Max Horkheimer during their American exile. “The disenchanted world of Judaism”, we are told, “propitiates magic by negating it in the idea of God. (...) It places all hope in the prohibition on invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the rejection of any faith which claims to depict it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion.”³¹ But Adorno and Horkheimer do not endorse this view as such. They quickly qualify their apparent equation of Judaism and enlightenment by arguing that “[m]yth” – the fateful realm of paganism – is already a form of “enlightenment” and that, in turn, subsequent forms of “enlightenment” – including monotheism – revert to “mythology”.³² What is at stake here is an immanent un-working of a seamless history of reason in the singular. As in the case of Sigmund Freud’s *Moses & Monotheism* (1939), the speculative pre-history of Judaism serves

³⁰ Cf. Irene Kaufmann, *Die Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums: 1872-1942* (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2006)

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 17

³² *Ibid.*, xviii

as a case in point. We will return to these matters in due course. For now it suffices to note the following: what interests us here is less what Adorno and Horkheimer may have had to say about the chief proponents of reform Judaism in Weimar Germany (presumably their support for the broadly Neo-Kantian progressivism of early 20th century Social Democracy would have been met with some suspicion); rather, what concerns us is that in both cases – for better or worse – the image ban appears as a philosophical-historical *trope*: a figure of rationalisation. Inasmuch as Adorno and Horkheimer insist that such rationalisation perpetually risks reverting into its opposite, however, we must ask: is it possible to challenge the ills of a civilisational meta-narrative that places the image ban at its centre, by mobilising this figure and turning it against itself?

With regards to the latter point – Exodus 34 – Comay’s allusion to a tension between ‘original’ and ‘simulacrum’ similarly points to a wider philosophical issue. In this regard it might be said that Moses’ smashing and rewriting of the law is echoed in the fundamental bifurcations that span the *longue durée* of “Western metaphysics”:³³ essence vs. appearance, form vs. content, subject vs. object. This is borne out etymologically. Plato famously distinguishes the world of eternal and unchanging Forms (*eidoi*, ‘ideas’) from that of mere representations (*eikones*, ‘images’).³⁴ Sensible objects are mere shadows of the truth, partial and inadequate copies. Accordingly, the task of philosophy is to perforate the world of appearances, to determine the relationship between true ideas and deceitful images. Notwithstanding Nietzsche’s consequential attack on such *Hinterwelt* metaphysics,³⁵ Alain Besançon, Horst Bredekamp and others argue that iconoclasm – at least as it has come to be associated with the various strands of Exodus-reception, from the Babylonian Talmud (*Avodah Zara*) to the Byzantine *Eikonomachía*; from the Council of Trent to Islamic aniconism – is an eminently philosophical undertaking: the clearing away of *eidola* (‘apparitions’) that obscure the true relation between the finite and the infinite.³⁶ (In this regard, the role of Neo-Platonism in

³³ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Vol. 1: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. D.F. Krell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 10. On the remarkable commonalities between Heidegger and his self-avowed antipode Adorno, see: Alexander García Düttmann, *The Memory of Thought: An Essay on Heidegger and Adorno*, trans. Nicholas Walker (London: Continuum, 2002)

³⁴ Cf. Plato, “Book VII (514a-517a)”, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 193-196

³⁵ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” & “How the ‘Real World’ at Last Became a Myth”, in *Twilight of the Idols & The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 1989), 45-49 & 50-51; Friedrich Nietzsche, “Of the Afterworldsmen”, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 1969), 58-60

³⁶ Cf. Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010); Marie-Jose Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Carlos M.N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)

shaping Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought from Maimonides to Augustine and Avicenna can hardly be overstated.)³⁷ As above, the iconoclastic impulse is effectively identified with the triumph of reason: ‘the denunciation of illusion’. By that token it is unsurprising that the image ban should survive into the present as a discourse of sublimity – from Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790) to Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Inhuman* (1988).³⁸ Is it the case, then, that the biblical interdiction against idol worship has come to designate – above all – an entrenched philosophical *topos*?

It is not our aim here to dissolve the far-flung history of the image ban into the annals of philosophy. Rather, the genealogy of iconoclasm outlined by Comay, Halbertal, Margalit, Besançon, Bredekamp and others forces a narrower question: *in what sense can the tension that is designated by the Old Testament ban on making images of God help to critically interrogate the historical narrative that connects the sequence of transpositions outlined above – from Aron’s rendering of God in the form of an image to Schoenberg’s portrayal of Aron’s ‘sin’ in the form of an opera; from Adorno’s essay on Schoenberg’s musical adaptation to Straub and Huillet’s filmic rendition thereof?* Put differently: *is it possible to call upon the image ban – in its capacity as a philosophico-historical marker, rather than a theological edict – to formulate a critical theory of the present?*

The present study aims to explore the conspicuous recurrence of the Old Testament ban on making images of God throughout Adorno’s writings: from his musical works on Beethoven, Mahler and Schoenberg to his literary analyses of Hölderlin, Kafka and Beckett; from his political musings on Marx, Engels and Lenin to his sporadic reflections on painting (Corot). To be sure, Adorno’s references to the image ban recall this figure’s prominent place in the history of modern German thought – a lineage that extends from Mendelssohn to Kant, Hegel, Cohen and beyond. Adorno’s intimate familiarity with this tradition, in addition to his well-documented ignorance of theological sources,³⁹ indicate that his outwardly biblical lexicon in fact owes more to a deep engagement with the history of philosophy than to the concerted study of scripture. In any case, Adorno openly heeds the verdicts of his intellectual forerunners

³⁷ Cf. Dermot Moran, “Neoplatonism and Christianity in the West” & Sarah Pessin “Islamic and Jewish Neoplatonism”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism*, eds. Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, Paulina Remes (London: Routledge, 2014), 508-524 & 541-558

³⁸ The ban on images might equally be used to tell a certain history of modern art from Kasimir Malevich to Ad Reinhardt. However, no such effort can be accommodated here.

³⁹ Cf. Stefan Müller-Dooht, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 19ff

Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, arguing that “positive religion has lost its (...) validity”;⁴⁰ that “[t]raditional theology is not restorable.”⁴¹ Far from lamenting the displacement of traditional religion in the present, though, Adorno turns the waning of ecclesiastical authority into an opportunity: by dint of its perceived redundancy, the image ban is transformed into a potent philosophical device. It signifies a refusal of the sense that that “which merely is”,⁴² is in fact everything. Despite his much-maligned verdict that the moment for a Marxian actualisation of philosophy has been “missed”,⁴³ Adorno’s abidance by the image ban is supposed to signal his commitment to a mode of philosophical critique which aims to hold open the possibility that things might yet be otherwise. A discourse of Utopia displaces that of transcendence: “Utopia as the harmony between man and nature”,⁴⁴ Utopia as the longing for “undeluded happiness, including bodily pleasure, the wish for an end to suffering”.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Adorno is aware that “one may not cast a picture of Utopia in a positive manner”; “one can only talk about Utopia in a negative way”.⁴⁶ To form an image of Utopia is to render it in terms of the present situation and thus “to garnish the status quo with its ultimate apologia.”⁴⁷ The stakes are high. In the “administered world” even utopian longing – the longing for a drastically different future – constantly risks reverting into its opposite.⁴⁸ Accordingly, the central aim of the present study is to illuminate the sense in which the image ban informs Adorno’s effort to safeguard the minimal space within which something like a radical societal transformation might yet be thought.

In aiming to respond to these issues, I focus on three aspects of Adorno’s thinking: his ‘imageless materialism’ (Chapter One), his ‘inverse theology’ (Chapter Two) and his ‘negative aesthetics’ (Chapter Three). Broadly speaking, each of these chapters concerns a seemingly discrete field of inquiry: the immanent critique of materialism (Chapter One), the paradoxical recovery of metaphysics (Chapter Two) and the bearing out of their tension in aesthetic theory (Chapter Three). This tension, for its part, attests to the mutual implication of these seemingly

⁴⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses Upon Art and Religion Today”, in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 647

⁴¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Theologie, Aufklärung und die Zukunft der Illusion”, in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VIII*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 2003), 235 [My translation]

⁴² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 19 [Translation altered]

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3

⁴⁴ Alfred Schmidt, “Der Begriff des Materialismus bei Adorno”, in *Adorno Konferenz 1983*, eds. Ludwig v. Friedenburg & Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 25 [My translation]

⁴⁵ Simon Jarvis, “Adorno, Marx, Materialism”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 80

⁴⁶ Theodor W. Adorno & Ernst Bloch, “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing (1964)”, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes & Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 9

⁴⁷ Comay, “Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*”, 348

⁴⁸ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xi

divergent registers: a meta-critique of philosophy whose material correlate is supposed to lie in the history of man's (self) domination; a declared solidarity with metaphysics in the face of its purported fall; and an aesthetics that is thought to bear the weight of a displaced hope for something beyond the spell-bound sphere of existence. In a letter to Gershom Scholem, dated 14 March 1967, Adorno schematises these connections with reference to *Negative Dialectics*: “[i]n the immanent epistemological debate” – the opening sections of the book – “once one has escaped from the clutches of idealism, what I call the primacy of the object (...) seems to me an attempt to do justice to the concept of materialism. (...) But the materialism involved here is no conclusive, fixed thing; it is not a worldview. This path to materialism is totally different from dogma, and it is this fact that seems to me to guarantee an affinity with metaphysics, I might almost have said, theology.”⁴⁹ To the extent that Adorno's question about the possibility of a properly materialist metaphysics – not to say ‘theology’ – is finally reformulated as a question concerning the possibility of modern art, however, the singular outline of his “imageless image of Utopia” comes into focus.⁵⁰ All three chapters, then, are couched in the historical narrative outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* whose credo, we have already seen, proclaims that ‘myth is already enlightenment’ and that ‘all enlightenment reverts to mythology’. With respect to this maxim, each chapter places Adorno into a dialogue with an array of authors, whose work orients his argument: Marx vs. Engels and Lenin (Chapter One), Kafka and Benjamin vs. Schmitt (Chapter Two), Hegel vs. Kant (Chapter Three). In each case, a recent voice is introduced to complement the historical exposition: Meillassoux (Chapter One), Agamben/Taubes (Chapter Two), Lyotard (Chapter Three). These voices are intended to show that Adorno's concerns continue to polarise opinion even almost fifty years after his death. By centring each chapter around a prominent reference to the image ban or another related figure, I propose to reorganise Adorno's uneasily systematic “anti-system” around the notion of imagelessness:⁵¹ a “thinking beyond itself”, a thinking “into *openness*”.⁵² I take it that this is a timely task for at least two reasons: first, if Adorno's bleak assessment of his own historical situation has only been confirmed by subsequent events, then his echo of the Marxian claim that only a “ruthless criticism of all that exists” can hold open the possibility of historical

⁴⁹ Theodor W. Adorno & Gershom Scholem, *Der Liebe Gott wohnt im Detail: Briefwechsel, 1939-1969*, ed. Asaf Angermann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2015), 414 [My translation]

⁵⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, ed. Eberhard Ortland (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 52 [My translation]

⁵¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx

⁵² Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 68

change gains poignancy.⁵³ Second, and more modestly, if the reception of Adorno's work has long been dominated by a somewhat incongruous effort to read the negative dialectic as a "guide on how to live less wrongly" (beneath all the layers of supposed hyperbole), then insisting on the uncompromising negativity of Adorno's thinking means nothing less than defending his thought against its self-avowed defenders: from Jürgen Habermas to Seyla Benhabib.⁵⁴ The dual motivation of this study is thus at once to foreground the iconoclastic tendencies of Adorno's thought and to free him from the yoke of certain liberal misreadings. (How and why exactly will become apparent as we go along.) Certainly, this effort is not exhaustive. My aim here has been neither to comprehensively reconstruct, nor to complete Adorno's philosophical project against the backdrop of its reception. Certainly, the sense of fragmentation that is thematised in Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* applies equally to Adorno's suspicion of totality. Rather, I have sought to single out the image ban as a leitmotif of Adorno's thought, whose significance – both critical and heuristic – has been largely overlooked. Under this aspect it remains to ask: *what is the significance of the image ban for the overall architectonic of Adorno's thought?*

⁵³ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 3: 1843-1844* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 142

⁵⁴ Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: How to Live Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 75

Chapter 1:

Imageless Materialism

“*Quelle que soit la valeur, la puissance de pénétration d’une explication, c’est encore et encore la chose à expliquer qui est la plus réelle – et parmi sa réalité figure précisément ce mystère que l’on a voulu dissiper.*”¹

Paul Valéry

“What could be at work in the Marxist rendition of the theological prohibition of images?”² This question posed by the philosopher Rebecca Comay at the beginning of her essay ‘Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*’ (1997) addresses itself to the unlikely pairing of an ostensibly biblical motif – the Old Testament ban on making images of God – with an emphatically worldly disposition: historical materialism. Comay alludes here to the conspicuous recurrence of the image ban in certain articulations of what has come to be known – for better or worse – as ‘Western Marxism’: a critical re-imagining of the materialist philosophy of history outlined in works such as Karl Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923) and Georg Lukács’ *History and Class-Consciousness* (1923).³ As Comay notes, the improbable tension between ‘materialism’ and ‘theology’ that characterises particular strands of this tradition – from Ernst Bloch to Walter Benjamin – is discernible, not least, in the work of Theodor W. Adorno.⁴ In fact, Comay’s question is occasioned by a striking passage from Adorno’s magnum opus *Negative Dialectics*, (1966) fittingly titled ‘Materialism Imageless’. There Adorno writes the following:

Representational thinking would be without reflection – an undialectical contradiction, for without reflection there is no theory. A consciousness interpolating images, a third element, between itself and that which it thinks would unwittingly reproduce idealism. A body of ideas would substitute for the object of cognition, and the subjective arbitrariness of such ideas is that of the authorities. The

¹ “Whatever the value and penetrative power of an explanation, the thing being explained is still and always the most real, and within its reality figures precisely the mystery that we have been trying to dissipate.” Paul Valéry, *Valéry’s Oeuvres, Vol. II*, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 738 [My translation]

² Rebecca Comay, “Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*”, in *Sites of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 339

³ For a useful historiography of the term ‘Western Marxism’, see: Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976)

⁴ For an influential overview of the ‘theological’ streak running through the works of Bloch, Benjamin *et al*, see: Michael Löwy, *Redemption & Utopia – Jewish libertarian Thought in Central Europe*, trans. Hope Heaney (London: Athlone Press, 1992)

materialist longing to grasp the thing aims at the opposite: it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity. At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute spirit. The perspective vanishing point of historic materialism would be its self-sublimation, the spirit's liberation from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfilment. Only if the physical urge were quenched would the spirit be reconciled and would become that which it only promises while the spell of material conditions will not let it satisfy material needs.⁵

Above all, this passage seems to stake an epistemological claim: that a purportedly materialist form of cognition which interpolates *images* – ‘a third element’ – between consciousness and ‘that which it thinks’ in fact ‘unwittingly reproduces idealism.’ Adorno’s phrasing thus recalls the traditional opposition of materialism and idealism – the realm of ‘material needs’ vs. that of ‘absolute spirit’.⁶ It acknowledges a “*risk* that supposedly materialist thinking will involuntarily turn into its opposite”,⁷ namely: into a form of subjective domination that – according to the terms laid out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) – Adorno associates with certain unnamed ‘authorities’. But which ‘authorities’ are envisaged here? To be sure, Adorno’s reference to ‘representational thinking’ (*Abbildendes Denken*) calls to mind the various forms of ‘reflection theory’ (*Abbildtheorie*) that punctuate the history of materialism from Democritus to Locke.⁸ In this respect, the German term *Abbild* – ‘image’, ‘depiction’ – takes centre stage.⁹ Yet Adorno’s formulation suggests that the locus of the problem lies elsewhere – in “the Eastern countries” – as

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 207

⁶ It is worth noting that Adorno’s 1931 inaugural address as *Privatdozent* at the University of Frankfurt begins by outlining a motive that will remain decisive for all of his subsequent work: the rejection of idealism, broadly conceived of as the view that “the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real”. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, trans. Benjamin Snow, *Telos*, No. 31 (Spring 1977): 120

⁷ Simon Jarvis, “Adorno, Marx, Materialism”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 96 [My emphasis]

⁸ Certainly Adorno views Lukács’ defence of ‘reflection theory’ in his account of literary realism as an extension of this problem. However, for reasons of brevity we must sidestep this issue here. Cf. Georg Lukács, *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle*, trans. John & Necke Mander (New York: Harper and Row, 1964); Theodor W. Adorno, “Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács’ *Realism in Our Time*”, in *Notes to Literature, Vol. 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 216-240

⁹ The prefix *Ab* – roughly translatable as ‘of’ – already implies that an *Ab-bild* is an image of an image so to speak: an impermissible tautology if nothing else.

he puts it.¹⁰ Notwithstanding this somewhat indelicate derision of the so-called ‘East’, it is striking that Adorno speaks here of a “materialism come to political power”, of “governmental terror machines” that “entrench themselves as permanent institutions, mocking the theory they carry on their lips”.¹¹ Accordingly, his invective appears to be directed chiefly against the official materialist doctrines of the Soviet sphere, not least perhaps Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s meta-scientific opus *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908). This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that Adorno explicitly names Lenin in the paragraph preceding the one from which the long citation above is drawn.¹² But if Adorno’s objections are in fact directed against the official materialisms of the ‘Eastern Countries’, then Comay’s question – ‘what could be at work in the Marxist rendition of the theological prohibition of images’ – bifurcates: what kind of ‘Marxism’ is at issue here? What kind of materialism does it presuppose?

Certainly, any effort to answer these questions today cannot go unqualified. That is to say, inasmuch as the theoretical and political sway of the Soviet Union has been all but consigned to the history books, Adorno’s objections to the functionaries of ‘Diamat’ may appear to have lost much of their currency. However, as I will argue, ‘Materialism Imageless’ points beyond its immediate context, raising wider questions about a ‘state of fulfilment’ whose ‘promise’ (frustrated in both ‘East’ and ‘West’ alike) continues to haunt a present whose definitive feature appears to be the relinquishment of any sense “that things *should* be different”.¹³ Revisiting Adorno’s interrogation of ‘representational thinking’, then, is no mere exercise in the history of ideas; rather, it holds fast to what he describes elsewhere as a “Utopia of cognition”.¹⁴ We will return to this point below. For now it suffices to note that in Adorno’s view ‘the materialist longing to grasp the thing’ means nothing less than a radical reconfiguration of the relationship between the ‘subject’ and ‘object’ of thought with respect to their socio-historical analogue – the

¹⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 206

¹¹ Ibid, 204

¹² As Adorno writes: “When Lenin, rather than go in for epistemology, opposed it in compulsively reiterated avowals of the noumenality of cognitive objects, he meant to demonstrate that subjective positivism is conspiring with the powers that be.” Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 205-206. This is further borne out in a lecture, dated 17 January 1963, where Adorno describes “the big book by Lenin about ‘Empirio-Criticism’, which through a sort of dogmatic repetition declares the objective reality of the world vis-à-vis its reduction to subjective givens.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie, Bd. 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 200 [My translation]

¹³ Ibid, 203 [My emphasis] Despite his misgivings about the concept of Utopia, Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the forfeiture of the emancipatory impulse underlying Marx’s thought (especially in the context of Francis Fukuyama’s declaration of ‘the end of history’ in 1989) appears to chime with Adorno’s considerations. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Verso, 1993)

¹⁴ Ibid, 10 [Translation altered]

relationship between ‘man’ and ‘nature’ in the administered world. Accordingly, elaborating a concept of materialism means not least a “reinterpretation of the meaning of ‘thinking’ itself”,¹⁵ albeit not without certain caveats. For what can we really say about a “cognition that neither merely depicts nor constitutes things – how is it to be thought?”¹⁶ This query raised by Adorno’s erstwhile student Alfred Schmidt concerns precisely the requisite conditions for articulating a mode of materialist cognition that staves off the sacrificial logic which Adorno associates with ‘identity thinking’. The leitmotif of this effort is the ‘theological ban on images’; its locus is the moment when materialism and theology come to ‘agree’. But what is the nature of this agreement? In other words, “[h]ow can a materialist prohibition against images be enunciated” without transgressing against itself?¹⁷ After all, the ‘Utopia’ intended by Adorno’s ‘imageless’ materialism – “harmony between man and nature”, as Schmidt puts it – is itself subject to the ban on images.¹⁸ As he insists, “one may not cast a picture of Utopia in a positive manner”; “one can only talk about Utopia in a negative way”.¹⁹ To form any image of Utopia is to predetermine it from the standpoint of the present situation and thus “to garnish the status quo with its ultimate apologia.”²⁰ How, then, are we to make sense of Adorno’s utopianism with respect to the two outwardly incongruent motifs under investigation: materialism and the image ban?

In order to answer these questions we must clarify two issues: firstly, what does Adorno mean when he speaks of ‘materialism’? And secondly, what prompts him to invoke the ‘theological ban on images’ in the course of elaborating his views? Accordingly, the first part of this chapter aims to contextualise these efforts by considering the following: i.) What does Adorno mean by the mode of ‘representational thinking’ that he attacks in ‘Materialism Imageless’? ii.) In what terms does he criticise this intellectual modality? iii.) How do his criticisms apply to certain recent developments in philosophical materialism, particularly those collected under the banner of ‘Speculative Realism’ – a current whose precepts have frequently been likened to those of dialectical materialism? What does this say about the actuality of Adorno’s thought?

¹⁵ Jarvis, “Adorno, Marx, Materialism”, 97

¹⁶ Alfred Schmidt, “Der Begriff des Materialismus bei Adorno”, in *Adorno Konferenz 1983*, eds. Ludwig v. Friedenburg, & Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 25 [My translation]

¹⁷ Comay, “Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*”, 342

¹⁸ Schmidt, “Der Begriff des Materialismus bei Adorno”, 25 [My translation]

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno & Ernst Bloch, “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing (1964)”, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes & Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 9

²⁰ Comay, “Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*”, 348

Having thus laid the contextual grounds for our subsequent discussion, the second part of this chapter considers two central questions: i.) What is the relationship between the entwined concepts of ‘image’ and ‘imagelessness’ that Adorno’s criticisms yield? (After all, the notion of an image *ban* presupposes a conception of the *image*.) ii.) What are the somatic, affective and rhetorical features of the ‘imageless’ materialism that is thrown into relief by Adorno’s objections to Lenin *et al*? By considering these questions I aim to discern the contours of Adorno’s concept of materialism under the aegis of the image ban with a view to weighing it up against both his ‘inverse theology’ and his aesthetic theory in subsequent chapters. All the while, the goal is to illuminate the critical impetus that motivates Adorno’s singular recourse to an Old Testament motif in the elaboration of his critical theory.

I: Adorno & Materialism

i.) The Theory of Reflection:

We have suggested above that in ‘Materialism Imageless’ Adorno’s intimation of the ‘theological ban on images’ follows from a critique of what he describes laconically as ‘representational thinking’. Citing Adorno’s references to Lenin, we asserted that such a mode of thinking refers – above all – to certain theories of reflection that gained traction during the early part of the 20th century as part of the official Soviet codification of Marx’s critique of political economy. Although we will find that the origins of reflection theory can be traced back to Pre-Socratic and Hellenic Atomism, its specifically Soviet variants are couched in a self-avowedly scientific materialist worldview (complete with a fully-fledged epistemology) which is derived largely from Friedrich Engels’ particular portrayal of his and Marx’s common efforts laid out in works including *Anti-Dühring* (1878), *Dialectics of Nature* (1883) and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886).²¹ Without presuming to summarise the sense in which early Marx-reception depends on certain tropes that are distinctly Engels’ own – a task that is, in any case, tangential inasmuch as Adorno appears to have only a passing familiarity with these

²¹ It goes beyond the remit of the present chapter to outline the differences between Marx and Engels’ respective approaches. Suffice it to note that the identity of their positions was assumed by many Soviet readers, not least amongst them Lenin. An important discussion of this theme can be found in the doctoral thesis of Alfred Schmidt, which was written under the supervision of Adorno and Horkheimer. Cf. Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: New Left Books, 1971)

texts – the present effort to unpack the concept of an ‘imageless’ materialism must nonetheless take stock of at least some characteristic features of the “traditional *Marxism*” that gives rise to the aforementioned theories of reflection, if only to establish them as a foil for our subsequent discussion.²² As will become apparent, Adorno’s conceit is that his critique of such a ‘*Marxism*’ brings into focus the proper object of historical materialism: the alleviation of bodily suffering. In order to grasp this, though, we must begin by considering the following: a.) What are the epistemological precepts of Engels’ concept of materialism? b.) In what sense does Lenin elaborate a theory of reflection on the basis of Engels’ views?

a.) In the present context the salient point regarding Engels’ concept of materialism is twofold: firstly, the characterisation of his and Marx’s project – taken up in different ways by figureheads of the Second Socialist International (e.g. Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein), on the one hand, and leading Bolsheviks (e.g. Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin), on the other – yields a “general law of development of nature, society, and thought” which is essentially *ontological*.²³ That is to say, in *Dialectics of Nature* Engels postulates a general correspondence between socio-political, philosophical and natural processes whose significance for the development of ‘traditional Marxism’ can hardly be overstated: “what is valid for nature” – the material world as such – “must also be valid for history”; “[p]olitical praxis is (...) the consummation of historical” and – by extension – natural “laws”.²⁴ Broadly speaking, then, Engels’ construct depends on a reversal of G.W.F. Hegel’s philosophy of nature.²⁵ That is to say, Engels *follows* Hegel in portraying the dialectic as the fundamental ‘law’ of nature, whilst *refusing* this law’s deduction from philosophical first principles, i.e. its subjective anchoring. Whereas the dialectic is believed to be at work “*in the external world*”, it is supposed to be merely “*mirrored by human thought*”.²⁶ As Ingo Elbe explains, for Engels the ‘law’ of the dialectic is thus “split into ‘two sets of laws’”: into “the dialectic of ‘the external world’”, on the one hand, “and the dialectic of ‘human thought’”, on the other.²⁷ The latter is thus understood to provide “merely a passive mental *image* of the

²² Ingo Elbe, “Between Marx, Marxism and Marxisms – Ways of Reading Marx’s Theory”, *Viewpoint Mag*, last altered October 2013, accessed 20/10/2015: <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/10/21/between-marx-marxism-and-marxisms-ways-of-reading-marxs-theory/#rf43-2941> [My emphasis]

²³ Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, trans. Clemens Dutt (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1940), 34

²⁴ Ingo Elbe, “Between Marx, Marxism and Marxisms – Ways of Reading Marx’s Theory”

²⁵ Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

²⁶ J.B.S. Haldane “Preface”, in Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, vii [My emphasis]

²⁷ Ingo Elbe, “Between Marx, Marxism and Marxisms – Ways of Reading Marx’s Theory”

former”, rather than acting as its active arbitrator.²⁸ Engels fleshes out this claim in a letter to his friend Conrad Schmidt, dated 01 November 1891: “[t]he inversion of the dialectic in Hegel rests on this, that it is supposed to be the ‘self-development of thought’, of which the dialectic of facts is (...) only a reflection, whereas the dialectic in our heads is in reality the reflection of the actual development going on in the world of nature and of human history in obedience to dialectical forms.”²⁹ By dislodging the dialectic from ‘human thought’ and locating it in the ‘external world’, Engels purports to place its locus in matter itself. He thus “‘applies’ Hegelian categories to” e.g. “the biological concept of the cell” in order to demonstrate their operation in nature – an operation for which empirical science is, in turn, supposed to offer tangible proofs.³⁰ Engels thus suggests that Hegel’s dialectic is marked by a simple mind-matter dichotomy that is unduly weighted in favour of thought. Undoing this supposed confusion means chiefly a reversal of these terms – putting the dialectic back on its feet. Sidestepping for a moment the sense in which this reading underestimates the tensions between ‘thought’ and ‘matter’ – subject and object – in the Hegelian dialectic, Engels’ contention appears to be two-pronged: on the one hand, he aims to demonstrate the interconnectedness of *all* fields of intellectual inquiry (philosophy, political economy and the natural sciences are all seen as evincing the same historical tendency whose law is supposed to be dialectical in the materialist sense described above); on the other hand, this unifying endeavour is thought to put his political project on a firm footing – the authoritative ground of empirical science.

However, the consequence of this scheme escapes Engels’ intentions. His view that ‘the dialectic in our heads’ is merely a ‘*reflection* of the actual development going on in the world’, tends to portray man as a mere “product of evolution and a passive reflection of the process of nature, not however as a productive force”.³¹ This occurs at the expense of Engels’ foremost concern – the affirmation of *praxis* – a point that is at odds with the declared intentions of older works, such as Marx’s famous ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (1845). After all, the ‘Theses’ open with the well known estimation that “[t]he chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (...) is” precisely that “the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of*

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 520

³⁰ Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, 52 [My emphasis]

³¹ Ibid, 55-56 [My emphasis]

contemplation, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively.”³² Might it not be said, then, that Engels’ later judgement that “the dialectical laws are really laws of the development of nature” leaves little room for such ‘activity’?³³ Does his argument not entail that the ‘external world’ appears as a mere fact, a rigid ontological system wherein man is “limited to a mere mirroring of the factual”, i.e. the “uncritical reproduction of existing relationships in consciousness”?³⁴

We will return to this point in due course. For now let us note that – secondly – Engels’ assertion that history is coterminous with certain natural processes, and that man merely mirrors these parallels in consciousness, leads him to unwittingly endorse a form of historical *determinism*. That is to say, if in Engels’ view the natural sciences prove that the dialectic lies ‘in the external world’ – e.g. in the development of cells – and history as such is presented as the analogue of this process; if man, in turn, merely ‘mirrors’ these developments in consciousness at the expense of any sense of praxis, then it follows that history is imbued with a sense of inevitability. A deterministic concept of development thus comes to occupy a central place in “Marxist doctrine”.³⁵ On this reading, socialism is effectively hypostatized as the inevitable *telos* of history.³⁶ Accordingly, the broadly neo-Kantian evolutionism of Social Democrats like Bernstein faces a similar theoretical impasse as the revolutionary materialism of Lenin, despite their well-documented differences. Leaving these entanglements to one side, it warrants emphasising only the following: if we agree to the terms of this reconstruction, then the mode of ‘representational thinking’ derided by Adorno appears to mean precisely the epistemological precepts of Engels’ materialist dialectic, which are – in turn – taken up and elaborated by Lenin. The question thus arises as to what the consequences are of arguing that dialectics lies in things and that man merely mirrors their seemingly inevitable developments in consciousness.

b.) In order to answer this question we must briefly sketch the outlines of the argument laid out in Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908). Accordingly we should note that Lenin’s book was written in the wake of the failed revolution of 1905. It is couched in a string of factional

³² Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, “Theses on Feuerbach”, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5: 1845-1847* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 3

³³ Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, 27

³⁴ Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, 56

³⁵ Ingo Elbe, “Between Marx, Marxism and Marxisms – Ways of Reading Marx’s Theory” [My emphasis]

³⁶ As Adorno sarcastically observes, “in the mightiest, most differentiated didactic edifices of dialectical materialism, a conception of the world is developed in which hunger, fear and self-denial actually *cannot* exist”. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie, Bd. 2*, 179 [My translation and emphasis]

debates within the Bolshevik Party, which ostensibly concern certain developments in the natural sciences. The backdrop to this intra-Bolshevik conflict is the prevalent sense that a “crisis” has occurred in modern physics that threatens the primacy of ‘matter’, which – in Lenin’s view – ensures the very grounding of materialism.³⁷ Above all, the discovery of radioactivity is supposed to have led to a widespread rejection amongst both physicist and philosophers “of an objective reality existing outside the mind”; a sentiment that – in turn – provokes “the replacement of materialism” (at least as Lenin sees it) “by idealism and agnosticism”:³⁸ a relapse of scientific Marxism into bourgeois complacency. Without wishing to reconstruct the intricacies of these debates, it suffices to note that Lenin’s misgivings are directed chiefly at Alexander Bogdanov’s major three-volume work *Empirio-Monism* (1904-1906), which for its part draws extensively on theories developed by the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach.³⁹ In brief: if Mach argues that physics proceeds not from the study of ‘matter’, but rather from the study of sense-experience – “[n]ot bodies produce sensations, but element-complexes (sensation-complexes) constitute the bodies”⁴⁰ – then Bogdanov’s effort to ensure the scientific grounding of Marxism must be understood along similar lines. Like Mach, “Bogdanov espoused a strict empiricism and denied the possibility of a priori knowledge of any sort at all”.⁴¹ Instead, he “defined reality in terms of experience: The real world is identical with human experience of it.”⁴² Bogdanov’s specifically Marxist manoeuvre, then, is to recast the *individual* experiences described by Mach into those of a *collective* subject, namely: the proletarian class itself. As he contends, “[t]he basis of ‘objectivity’ must lie” not in matter, but “in the sphere of collective *experience*”.⁴³ That is, “[t]he objective character of the physical world consists in the fact that it exists not for me individually but for everyone, and for everyone has a definite meaning, exactly (...) as it does for me.”⁴⁴ Accordingly, knowledge of the external world – and, moreover, the ability to change it – is not based on the merely subjective

³⁷ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Collected Works, Vol. 14: Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 252

³⁸ *Ibid*, 258

³⁹ Mach’s presence at this juncture opens up another possible avenue of inquiry in connection with the so-called ‘imageless thought controversy’ surrounding Oswald Külpe – a psychologist whose theories drew extensively on both Mach and Husserl. However, given our present focus we must sidestep this issue here. Cf. Oswald Külpe, *Outlines of Psychology, Based Upon the Result of Experimental Investigation*, trans. Edward Bradford Titchener (London: Swann, Sonnenschein & Co., 1901)

⁴⁰ Ernst Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations and the Relation of the Physical to the Psychological*, trans. C.M. Williams & Sydney Waterlow (New York: Dover, 1959), 29

⁴¹ David G. Rowley, “Bogdanov and Lenin: Epistemology and Revolution,” *Studies in East European Thought*, No. 48 (1996): 5

⁴² *Ibid*

⁴³ *Ibid*

⁴⁴ *Ibid*

whims of individuals. Rather, “[r]eality’ is made up of the shared perceptions of the collective consciousness of a society.”⁴⁵

Despite the prominent invocation of a proletarian consciousness, Lenin charges that Bogdanov’s idiosyncratic adaptation of Mach cannot escape its rooting in a fundamentally subject-centred outlook. Accordingly, the prioritisation of sense-experience is said to displace the primacy of mind-independent matter. The political consequence of this displacement is taken to mean that the materialist imperative to political praxis is transformed into an academic exercise, which Lenin associates with bourgeois quietism. To bolster this claim, Lenin outlines a highly polemical account of the history of philosophy in terms of a dichotomy between ‘idealism’ and ‘materialism’. In a characteristically sweeping gesture, he charges that “the idealism and agnosticism which characterized not only the Russian Machists but also Berkeley and Kant was the result of an (...) erroneous philosophical decision by all of them to adopt an empiricist epistemology.”⁴⁶ That is to say, the purportedly bourgeois “belief that our knowledge of the world is constructed out of a field of sense-data resulted in this sense-data becoming an insuperable barrier between human consciousness and the external world”.⁴⁷ This ‘belief’ in turn gives rise to all manner of sceptical attitudes that forestall political action by effectively prioritising mind over matter. The glaring fallaciousness of Lenin’s identification of Mach with Kant and Berkeley hardly needs pointing out. Suffice it to note that all the while his aim is to defend a broadly Engelsian concept of materialism in the face of the supposed threat posed to it by the ‘crisis’ in modern physics. It is the character of this defence that interests us here. If the ‘insuperable barrier’ between ‘human consciousness’ and ‘the external world’ is the consequence of an ‘erroneous ... decision’ to ‘adopt’ certain allegedly quietistic forms of ‘empiricism’, then any effort to defend the concept of ‘matter’ requires – above all – an alternative *epistemology*. Significantly, Lenin provides this by way of a theory of reflection. How so?

In Lenin’s estimation, “sensation”, rather than ‘constituting bodies’, appears as “the direct connection between consciousness and the external world.”⁴⁸ The world is above all material and consciousness is determined by *it*, not vice versa. Sense data is said to mirror the world as-it-really-is existing independently *of* and external *to* consciousness. Accordingly, Lenin argues that

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Lance Byron Richey, “Editor’s Introduction – Pannekoek, Lenin and the Future of Marxist Philosophy”, in Anton Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher: A Critical Examination of the Philosophical Basis of Leninism* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), 43

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, 51

“sensation, perception, idea, and the mind of man generally” are to be regarded “as an *image* of objective reality”.⁴⁹ As far as Lenin is concerned, this framework guarantees the simple primacy of matter over ideas: “consciousness is only an *image* of the external world, and it is obvious that an *image* cannot exist without the thing *imaged*, and that the latter exists independently of that which *images* it.”⁵⁰ The proof that these images are bearers of objective truth is supposed to be provided by scientific experimentation, the analogue of which is seen as political praxis – a claim that is left largely unsubstantiated. Accordingly Lenin appears to contradict himself when he contends that “[i]t is absolutely unpardonable to confuse, as the Machists do, any particular theory of the structure of matter with the epistemological category” of matter itself.⁵¹ But if no ‘particular theory’ can pose a challenge to ‘matter’ as an ‘epistemological category’, then ‘matter’ itself – along with the revolutionary politics that it supposedly ensures – is dogmatically elevated to an unhistorical invariant. As Lance Byron Richey observes:

In effect, Lenin is responding to the revolution which occurred in modern physics around the turn of the last century and the challenge it posed to traditional materialism by separating out the scientific and theory-laden features of it (...) and retaining only the philosophical content of it. The result is a conception of matter stripped of any specific theoretical content and instead assigned the philosophical task of guaranteeing the extra-mental reference of our mental concepts.⁵²

It cannot presently be our task to reconstruct the sense in which the traditional view of matter does in fact become defunct in modern physics, albeit not in the way that Lenin outlines. Nor can it be our task to determine in what ways this development may or may not complicate the scientific self-understanding of Marx’s theories and their reception.⁵³ Suffice it to note that insofar as Lenin’s view of matter is apparently immune to any scientific contestation, his effort to escape the trappings of idealism runs the danger of underwriting (rather than refuting) the positions he rallies against: “so much the worse for the facts”.⁵⁴ But if Adorno claims that these

⁴⁹ Ibid, 267 [My emphasis]

⁵⁰ Ibid, 69

⁵¹ Ibid, 129

⁵² Richey, “Editor’s Introduction”, 53

⁵³ For an influential defence of Lenin’s ‘scientific’ materialism, see: Louis Althusser, “Lenin and Philosophy”, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 23-67

⁵⁴ Adorno and others commonly attribute this line to Hegel, although to the best of my knowledge it does not appear anywhere in Hegel’s writings. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy”, in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 31

ostensibly theoretical problems have far-reaching political consequences – what kind of ‘Marxism’ is conceivable on the basis of Lenin’s materialism? – then the precise nature of his criticism warrants further investigation.

ii.) *Adorno’s Critique of Reflection Theory:*

We have suggested, then, that in ‘Materialism Imageless’ Adorno criticises the official materialist doctrines of the ‘Eastern Countries’ by charging that certain “*deficiencies*” in their epistemological frameworks – e.g. their elevation of matter to an ontological invariant – are used to justify a political configuration where, “on the threadbare pretext of a dictatorship (...) of the proletariat (...), governmental terror machines entrench themselves as permanent institutions” thus “mocking the theory they carry on their lips.”⁵⁵ Rather than “going in for epistemology”, Adorno charges that Lenin’s “political requirements turned him against the goal of theoretical cognition” with the “disastrous result” that “the unpenetrated target of criticism remains undisturbed (...) and not being hit at all (...) can be resurrected at will in changed constellations of power.”⁵⁶ Adorno thus asserts that Lenin tends to unwittingly reproduce the imperialism of spirit that he seeks to refute in a view of reality as seamlessly causal-mechanical. However, this view is open to criticism on at least two points. Firstly, it might be argued that Adorno’s rejoinder to *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is no less glib than Lenin’s retort to Bogdanov. If Adorno’s point will be that dialectical materialism rests on an unacknowledged metaphysical basis which curtails the particularity of matter, then the lack of differentiation with which he treats Lenin’s admittedly problematic book is somewhat alarming. Secondly, it is not clear that bad politics necessarily follow from bad philosophy. If Adorno’s objection to Lenin hinges on the claim that *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is insufficiently dialectical, then it is unclear how postulating an immediate causal relation between theory and praxis is supposed to remedy this problem. Nevertheless, we note the following: if, as we suggested, Adorno’s critique of ‘representational thinking’ throws into relief the contours of his own conception of materialism – a point to which we will turn in due course – then we must begin by clarifying two points: a.) In what sense does Adorno pit Hegel against Lenin by playing on the ambiguity of the ‘reflection’ in ‘reflection theory’? b.) In what sense does Adorno liken Lenin’s ‘reflection theory’ to Pre-

⁵⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 204

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 204-205

Socratic/Hellenic Atomism?

a.) To the extent that Adorno's polemic appears to be directed at the epistemological precepts of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, his play on the ambiguity of the term 'reflection' (*Reflexion*) takes on a particular significance. As we have seen above, Adorno writes that 'representational thinking would be *without* reflection – an undialectical contradiction, for without reflection there is no theory'. The equivocality of this term is fortuitously captured by the translation of the German *Reflexionstheorie* as 'reflection theory'. After all, the term 'reflection' connotes both mirroring and thinking in English and German alike. On the one hand, then, we have already noted that for Engels and Lenin 'reflection' principally means the imagistic reproduction of reality in the mind, which is – in turn – said to affirm the unshakable primacy of the material world as existing independently of and external to consciousness. (It is telling that Adorno appears to associate Lenin's reflections with idols and fetishes. As he argues, "[w]hat clings to the image remains idolatry, mythic enthralment."⁵⁷ By extension, he appears to identify the image *ban* with the monotheistic injunction against idol worship: "[d]emythologisation, the thought's enlightening intent, deletes the image character of consciousness."⁵⁸ On the other hand, Adorno means a mode of theoretical 'reflection', which he somewhat imprudently associates with Hegel.⁵⁹ As he writes, "[d]ialectics is a moving-through-contradictions. Without the moment of reflection, i.e. without the moment when a thing appears in its otherness (...) dialectics is in fact unthinkable."⁶⁰ This association is ill advised because, as Adorno knows full well, Hegel connects the term 'reflection' with certain perceived shortcomings in the philosophies of Kant and Fichte. 'Reflection' is on the side of the Understanding, which is thought to have no purchase on the absolute.⁶¹ In spite of this apparent misreading, though, Adorno's attempt to marshal Hegel against Lenin rightly locates the 'deficiency' of Soviet materialism in its fraught relation to German Idealism. In order to grasp the full weight of this claim, however, we must briefly consider it in light of the epistemological framework underlying Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

⁵⁷ Ibid, 205

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ The derivation of 'theory' from the Greek *theoros* (spectator) and of 'speculation' from the Latin *specere* (to look) is not lost on Adorno. Vis-à-vis the imagistic rhetoric of Leninist reflection theory, our opening question might thus be reformulated as: what kind of 'vision' is at stake in the formulation of an 'imageless' materialism?

⁶⁰ Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Bd. 2, 215 [My translation]

⁶¹ Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf & C.H. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977)

(1806), if only because Adorno explicitly invokes this text against the notion of ‘representational thinking’.⁶²

Without presuming to detail the enormous scope of Hegel’s propaedeutic effort to outline a “science of the experience of consciousness”,⁶³ our present focus requires that we note the following: Hegel’s *Phenomenology* starts out by critically recasting the notion of cognition laid out in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787). Hegel describes Kant’s outlook as a kind of “natural assumption”:⁶⁴ before one can start to deal with philosophy’s “proper subject matter one must first of all come to an understanding about cognition (...) either as the instrument to get hold of the absolute, or as the medium through which one discovers it.”⁶⁵ Hegel rejects this view on two counts: firstly, he argues that Kant’s effort to delimit the conditions of possibility and the limits of legitimacy of cognition *before* cognising, so to speak, is akin to the absurd attempt to learn how to swim without getting into the water;⁶⁶ secondly, he argues that Kant’s “fear of falling into error” leads him to falsely distinguish “between ourselves and (...) our cognition”.⁶⁷ Instead, Hegel suggests that consciousness is co-extensive with cognition and that its truth is attained processually. Significantly for our purposes, Adorno appears to view reflection as the motor of this process. Accordingly, he portrays phenomenology as the de-familiarisation of certain established modes of cognition *through* reflection. He acknowledges that Sense-Certainty, Perception, Understanding, etc. are partial articulations of what is ultimately recouped as absolute knowing, absolute cognition; that the progression through these stages follows from consciousness discovering the immanent limitations of each of its shapes. Upon *reflection* – Adorno suggests – the simple ‘here and now’ of Sense-Certainty, for instance, is revealed to be an empty universal, which contradicts its claim to be cognisant of a given particular. In turn, this contradiction forces consciousness into motion so that this incongruity might be overcome. Consciousness thus encounters itself as though it were looking in a mirror. This dialectical drive, conceived of as the reflexive movement of consciousness through contradiction, produces a series of shapes-of-consciousness whose sum appears as the history of its education to the standpoint of

⁶² Cf. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie, Bd. 2*, 178 [My translation]. This is by no means to suggest – as Robert Brandom and others have done – that the *Phenomenology* is reducible to a work of epistemology, only that its epistemological armature helps to structure the text’s far-reaching metaphysical dimensions; something that Adorno is keenly aware of.

⁶³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 56

⁶⁴ Ibid [My emphasis]

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol. III*, ed. Robert F. Brown, trans. Robert F. Brown, J.M. Stewart & H.S. Harris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 263

⁶⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 47 [Translation altered]

science.

Despite Adorno's somewhat tendentious use of Hegel, his invocation of the *Phenomenology* helps to clarify his objections to the proponents of 'representational thinking'. Broadly speaking, his criticism hinges on the claim that Lenin's theory of reflection corresponds to Hegel's description of Sense-Certainty – a naïve mirroring of purportedly objective reality in the senses: 'this', 'here', 'now'. By disavowing Hegel's supposed emphasis on reflection, however, Adorno suggests that Lenin cannot move forward from this stage. Accordingly, 'reflection theory' is – in fact – 'without reflection' and, indeed, without dialectics. That is, Adorno pits Hegel against Lenin by arguing that whilst "[d]ialectics lies in things" (he is a materialist after all) "it could not exist without a consciousness that reflects it".⁶⁸ Since contradiction – the antithetical moment in all dialectics – can only be reflected within consciousness, "the moment of subjectivity or reflection cannot be taken out of the dialectic. Where this does nonetheless happen" – as in Lenin's Engelsian reading of Hegel – "the philosophical grounds for a transition to a state-religion are laid, wherein we can observe with horror the deterioration of dialectical theory."⁶⁹ That is to say, "[w]hat is not reflected in itself does not know contradiction" and insofar as it 'does not know contradiction', it is eminently undialectical.⁷⁰ Adorno continues: "the perversion of dialectical materialism into the state religion of Russia is theoretically based on the defamation of that element as idealistic."⁷¹ (The proliferation of religious metaphors is decisive here. The idolatrous 'images' of Lenin's reflection theory are worshipped at the altar of Russia's 'state religion' – an image that further conjures the personality cult surrounding Lenin.) Adorno's critique of Lenin, then, seeks to highlight the inadequacy of 'reflection' *through* 'reflection', i.e. meta-critically. That is to say: on Adorno's reading, there is a materialist moment to Hegel's Speculative Idealism and hence to the 'bourgeois' subjectivity that Lenin seeks to disavow. But what does this say about the purported 'risk that supposedly materialist thinking will involuntarily turn into its opposite'? In order to answer this question we must turn to the second aspect of Adorno's plaint: his identification of Soviet materialism with Pre-Socratic/Hellenic Atomism.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 206

⁶⁹ Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Bd. 2, 215 [My translation]

⁷⁰ Theodor W. Adorno: *Against Epistemology – A Metacritique: Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, trans. Willis Domingo (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1982), 27 [My emphasis]. NB – the English translation of *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie* as *Against Epistemology* completely obfuscates Adorno's intention to provide an immanent reworking of epistemological categories: a meta-critique.

⁷¹ Ibid [My emphasis]

b.) Having thus determined the sense in which Adorno's critique of 'reflection theory' plays on the ambiguity of the term 'reflection', it is worth calling to mind that – in a second step – he likens the epistemological precepts of Lenin's dialectical materialism to those of Pre-Socratic and Hellenic Atomism, particularly as advanced by Democritus and Epicurus. Adorno argues as follows: 'reflection theory' is rooted in "an Epicurean-style materialist mythology, which invents the emission by matter of little images".⁷² The "naïve replica-realism" of Leninist epistemology is thus said to depend on a "materialist metaphysics, such as that advanced by antique Epicureanism, with its thesis that we continually receive little images from matter".⁷³ In turn, this 'thesis' raises questions about how "matter, which was previously characterised as wholly without soul or spirit, i.e. causal-mechanical material in the sense of Democritus comes to emit such images in the first place?"⁷⁴ Notwithstanding the fact that Adorno's analogy appears in a kind of philosophical shorthand, what interests us here is how the alignment of Moscow and Athens allows him to expose certain unacknowledged metaphysical presuppositions that underlie Lenin's purportedly scientific mode of 'representational thinking'.

In his lecture series on *Philosophical Terminology* (1963) Adorno outlines a highly condensed history of materialism, which includes some notable passages on Atomism.⁷⁵ Herein he traces a development leading from Democritus' Pre-Socratic effort to "fixate the essence of matter" to Epicurus' Hellenic "attempt to establish a materialism solely on the basis of experience".⁷⁶ Adorno highlights two aspects of this progression: on the one hand, he follows

⁷² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 205. This is, of course, a very partial account of Adorno's relationship to Epicurus. Whilst Adorno is certainly critical of some epistemological precepts associated with Epicurean Atomism, his own notion of happiness as bodily fulfilment is clearly indebted to Epicurus.

⁷³ Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Bd. 2, 213-214 [My translation]

⁷⁴ Ibid [My translation]. To be sure, Adorno's analogy between Soviet materialism and Pre-Socratic Atomism must be taken with a pinch of salt. Unlike Heidegger, for instance, his knowledge of Ancient Philosophy is resolutely second hand. In his lectures on *Philosophical Terminology* (1963), for instance, Adorno cites Eduard Zeller's *A History of Greek Philosophy* (1865) and Friedrich Albert Lange's *History of Materialism* (1866/1875) as his main sources. In an aside, he also refers to the surviving fragments of Marx's doctoral dissertation on *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (1841). A more thorough investigation of the latter might have prompted him to redraw the genealogy of Marx's concept of materialism in order to contrast it with its Engelsian re-imagination – a task that is laudably taken on in Schmidt's doctoral dissertation. In the absence of more substantial philological evidence, however, Adorno's effort to uncover a Marxian materialism beyond its Soviet codification remains tacit. Cf. Eduard Zeller, *A History of Greek Philosophy, From the Earliest Period to the Time of Socrates*, trans. Sarah Frances Alleyne (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1881); Cf. Frederick Albert Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance*, trans. Ernest Chester Thomas (London: Trubner & Co., 1877); Cf. Karl Marx, "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature", in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 1: 1835-1843* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), 25-27

⁷⁵ Lectures 34-43 sketch a history of materialism from Democritus to Marx. Since these lectures coincide with Adorno's work on *Negative Dialectics*, they contain numerous echoes of passages such as 'Materialism Imageless'.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 190-91 [My translation]

Friedrich Albert Lange in arguing that “we have every reason to suppose that many features of the Epikurean Atomism (...) are due to Demokritos”.⁷⁷ That is, insofar as Democritus’ “whole philosophy was finally absorbed by Epikuros”,⁷⁸ the two are *de facto* interchangeable. On the other hand, he distinguishes between Epicurus’ alleged “anti-scientism”⁷⁹ – his eudemonic commitment to bodily pleasure – and Democritus’ “fully formed scientific system”.⁸⁰ (The significance of this discontinuity will become apparent in due course.) To begin with, however, Adorno describes the sense in which Democritus divides the physical universe into two distinctive realms: ‘atoms’ and ‘void’. Atoms (from the Greek *atomos*: ‘indivisible’) are the irreducible building blocks of all material entities, a sentiment that is expressed in the thesis that ‘nothing arises out of nothing’, i.e. that “*nothing that is can be destroyed*”; that “[a]ll change is only combination and separation of atoms.”⁸¹ In turn, atoms are said to move through space, which is conceived of as an infinite void. (As Lange puts it, “[n]othing exists but atoms and empty space: all else is only opinion.”)⁸² Over the course of their movements, then, atoms either repel one another or combine into groups that ultimately constitute objects, which is to say that “[n]othing happens by chance, but everything through a cause and of necessity.”⁸³ Once constituted, the continual movements of atoms cause these objects to change, thus accounting for phenomena such as growth, decay, etc. In other words, “[t]he variety of all things is a consequence of the variety of their atoms in number, size, figure and arrangement; there is no qualitative difference of atoms.”⁸⁴ Against this backdrop the Epicurean theory of perception comes into focus. As Adorno reports, in Epicurus’ view all matter continually emits “fine particles”, which are absorbed by our sense organs.⁸⁵ The origin of our sense impressions – “mental images” – is thus due to a constant flow of such particles from the surface of material bodies.⁸⁶ As Lange expounds, it is thus that “actual material copies of things” are said to “enter into us.”⁸⁷ Accordingly, it is the impact of these particles on our sense organs that enables us to

⁷⁷ Lange, *History of Materialism*, 25

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 17

⁷⁹ Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Bd. 2, 210 [My translation]

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 191 [My translation]

⁸¹ Lange, *History of Materialism*, 19

⁸² *Ibid.*, 22

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 20

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 27

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 106

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

perceive the ‘images’ sent out by matter. But in what sense does Adorno deem this outlook to be coextensive with Lenin’s theory of reflection?

The answer to this question hinges on the sense in which Adorno differentiates between Democritus and Epicurus. As he argues, in Epicurus “the moment of sensory perception is far more forcefully accentuated than in Democritus”.⁸⁸ It alone is presented as the “true source of cognition”; relative to it “[s]pirit is (...) something thoroughly derivative, dependent, secondary.”⁸⁹ That is to say, “sensory perception and” – indeed – “sensory *pleasure* have a much greater status” in Epicureanism than in the “objectively oriented” natural-scientific model that typifies “Democritean materialism”.⁹⁰ However, insofar as Lange notes that Epicurus takes up his forerunner’s Atomism part and parcel, he is caught in a contradiction. Accordingly, Adorno asks: how is it possible “to simultaneously teach the being-in-itself of nature as something independent of us, whilst assuming that our sensory perception is the source of all cognition?”⁹¹ In order to square this contradiction, we are told, “Epicurus is forced to posit a metaphysical thesis, which is irreconcilable with Materialism’s *denial* of metaphysics”,⁹² namely: that matter, ‘which was previously characterised as wholly without soul or spirit, i.e. causal-mechanical material in the sense of Democritus’ emits images, whose truth is verified by sensory experience. The convergence with Leninist reflection theory is thus characterised as follows:

This reflection theory, then, played a significant role in the history of Marxist materialism. To this day it lives on in the form of DIAMAT reflection theory, according to which theory is supposed to be an *image* of reality, regardless of the fact that whilst the spiritual and intentional may be directed at particular states of affairs – it may mean them, make judgements about them – it does not resemble them (...) imagistically.⁹³

⁸⁸ Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Bd. 2, 212 [My translation]

⁸⁹ Ibid [My translation]

⁹⁰ Ibid [My translation]

⁹¹ Ibid [My translation]

⁹² Ibid, 214 [My translation and emphasis]

⁹³ Ibid [My translation and emphasis]. To be sure, Adorno’s identification of Lenin’s dialectical materialism with Epicurean Atomism is not as seamless as he would like. For instance, if he is suggesting that there is an absolute correspondence between Democritus’ belief that ‘*nothing happens by chance*’ and Lenin’s alleged historical determinism, then this reading glaringly omits the Democritean doctrine of the atomic swerve – *clinamen* – which states that the movements of atoms are ultimately random, a claim that is supposed to account for the existence of man’s free will in an otherwise mechanistic universe. By the same token: if, according to Adorno, Democritus’ quasi-Eleatic view that ‘*nothing that is can be destroyed*’ resounds in Lenin’s estimation that matter – the supposed guarantor of praxis – appears as an irrefutable philosophical principle, then this assertion presupposes the very trans-historical continuity that it sets out to criticise.

Finally, then, the critique of ‘representational thinking’ that we have sought to elucidate begins to take shape. As Adorno argues, Lenin’s theory of reflection reproduces precisely those *meta*-physical presuppositions that it seeks to recant by assigning an *extra*-physical quality to ostensibly disenchanted matter. By positing the mysterious ability of mind-independent bodies to emit ‘little images’, whose truthfulness is confirmed through sensory reflection; by elevating this reality to the status of an unalterable philosophical principle and by asserting this principle as the guarantor of revolutionary praxis, Lenin’s concept of materialism succumbs to the very “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” that it aims to overcome.⁹⁴ That is to say, Lenin fetishises matter by imbuing it with life-like qualities, whilst simultaneously reifying man by turning him into a passive object: a reflecting mirror. It follows that if the official materialist doctrines of the so-called ‘East’ aid the ‘uncritical reproduction of existing relationships in consciousness’, then the kind of ‘Marxism’ that these doctrines serve to ground is not only theoretically deficient but also politically bankrupt. (At least this is Adorno’s claim.) Accordingly, Adorno contends that Lenin’s trans-historical metaphysics of matter embeds man in a system of seamlessly determined nature that belies “the possibility of freedom, whilst” paradoxically “speaking at the same time of spontaneous action, even revolution.”⁹⁵ Wherever materialism consigns itself to affirming such a total order of blind nature, it betrays its emancipatory intention – a failure that has everything to do with the image-character of thought.

It remains for us to consider how this tendency lives on in certain contemporary schools of thought, particularly those grouped under the name of ‘Speculative Realism’.

iii.) Speculative Realism:

Having thus sketched the outlines of Adorno’s misgivings about Lenin’s mode of ‘representational thinking’, it remains to explore how his opposition reverberates today – 25 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Accordingly, we must account for how certain characteristics of Lenin’s philosophy (rather than, say, his party-political activity) recur – conspicuously and problematically – in the context of a more recent intellectual current, namely:

⁹⁴ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 35: Capital, Vol. 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), 81

⁹⁵ Schmidt, “Der Begriff des Materialismus bei Adorno”, 18 [My translation]

the programme for a ‘Speculative Realism’⁹⁶ laid out in Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* (2006).⁹⁷ After all, it has repeatedly been pointed out that Meillassoux’s book “often sounds like a repetition of Lenin’s ill-famed *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*”; that “*After Finitude* can effectively be read as *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* rewritten for the twenty-first century”.⁹⁸ Before proceeding to interrogate this claim, however, it bears emphasising that Lenin’s spectral presence at this juncture is revealing for at least two reasons: firstly, because it throws into relief the sense in which Meillassoux’s attempt to think mind-independent matter tacitly draws on an older model to delineate how a “transformative materialism” might be thought today;⁹⁹ secondly, because if it is true that *After Finitude* seeks to “complete and correct the programme of Marxist philosophy undertaken by Lenin”¹⁰⁰ – a point whose validity has yet to be demonstrated – then it follows that the kind of social and political change that is conceivable on this basis is covered by Adorno’s critique of dialectical materialism.¹⁰¹ Without wishing to speculate on Meillassoux’s express political commitments (neither Marx nor Lenin are named in *After Finitude*),¹⁰² the consequence of this peculiar convergence points back to our opening wager: that purportedly materialist thought tends to relapse into its opposite; that its theoretical deficiencies serve to ground an idolatrous “political creed”.¹⁰³ Set against this backdrop, then, Adorno’s critique of Lenin *et al* yields its contemporary resonance, allowing us to approach his concept of an ‘imageless’ materialism as more than a historical curio. In order to do so, however, we must begin by asking what is at stake in *After Finitude*.

⁹⁶ For a useful overview of the genesis of ‘speculative realism’ and the diverse theoretical positions that have come to be collected under this banner – from Graham Harman’s ‘object-oriented-ontology’ to Iain Hamilton Grant’s ‘neo-vitalism’ – see: Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek & Graham Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy”, in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 1-18

⁹⁷ Cf. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008)

⁹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 625. See also: Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 246; Nathan Brown, “The Speculative and the Specific: on Hallward and Meillassoux”, in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 156; Adrian Johnston, “Empiricism”, in *The Meillassoux Dictionary*, eds. Peter Gratton & Paul J. Ennis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 62

⁹⁹ Peter Hallward, “Anything is Possible: a Reading of Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*”, in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 141

¹⁰⁰ Brown, “The Speculative and the Specific”, 163

¹⁰¹ For an interesting Adornian critique of Meillassoux, see: Daniel Spaulding, “Inside Out”, *Mute Magazine*, last altered 20/10/2015, accessed 27/11/2015: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/inside-out-0>

¹⁰² Despite Meillassoux’s evident debt to Alain Badiou, the outwardly a-political tenor of his writing has not gone unnoticed. Cf. Svenja Bromberg, “The Anti-Political Aesthetics of Object Worlds and Beyond”, *Mute Magazine*, last altered 25/07/2013, accessed 27/11/2015: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/anti-political-aesthetics-objects-and-worlds-beyond>

¹⁰³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 215

Put briefly, Meillassoux's claim is two-pronged: on the one hand, he argues that it is possible to gain determinate knowledge of absolute reality through philosophical speculation; on the other hand, he argues that it is possible to demonstrate the sense in which reality is radically contingent. "Nothing is necessary, apart from the necessity that nothing be necessary. Anything can happen, at any place and at any time, without reason or cause."¹⁰⁴ But if Meillassoux's concern is with reality itself, then this does not mean thinking "about what *is*" so much as it means thinking about "what *can* be":¹⁰⁵ not 'being' (*être*) but 'may-being' (*peut-être*), as Peter Hallward observes. In other words, "[i]f Meillassoux can be described as a 'realist', then the reality that concerns him does not involve the way things are" – this is only a first step – "so much as the possibility that they might always be otherwise."¹⁰⁶ Broadly speaking, then, Meillassoux expounds these theses in two steps: a.) Through a critique of what he calls 'correlationism'; b.) Through a radicalisation of what he describes as 'Hume's problem'. How so?

a.) Meillassoux's effort to demonstrate that we can know mind-independent matter depends on his objections to a central tenet of critical philosophy whereby "we only ever have access to the *correlation* between thinking and being" – subject and object – "and never to either term considered apart from the other".¹⁰⁷ In the main, Meillassoux argues that European philosophers since Kant mistakenly surmise that "anything (...) totally a-subjective cannot be",¹⁰⁸ since objectivity can only be construed on "the foundations of the cognition in which it is grounded".¹⁰⁹ From Hegel to Heidegger, we are told, philosophy has univocally demanded various forms of mediation between thought and being. It is the defensibility of this relation – "whether it be clarified through logical judgement, phenomenological reduction, historical reflection, linguistic articulation, pragmatic experimentation or inter-subjective communication" – which supposedly determines the legitimacy of any present claim about reality.¹¹⁰ Meillassoux illustrates this predicament by citing the Preface to the second edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787).

¹⁰⁴ Hallward, "Anything is Possible", 130

¹⁰⁵ Quentin Meillassoux, "Speculative Realism", *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, vol. 3 (2007): 393 [My emphasis]

¹⁰⁶ Hallward, "Anything is Possible", 131

¹⁰⁷ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5 [My emphasis]

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 38

¹⁰⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 507

¹¹⁰ Hallward, "Anything is Possible", 135

Herein Kant famously likens the endeavour of critical philosophy to “the first thoughts of Copernicus”:¹¹¹ the so-called Copernican turn. Whereas, in Kant’s view, traditional metaphysics assumed that “our cognition must conform to objects” (the metaphorical analogue of the sun’s supposed revolution around the earth) we must now consider the reverse: that objects “conform to our cognition”,¹¹² i.e. that the earth revolves around the sun. Without presuming to recount the intricacies of Kant’s first *Critique* in the form of an aside, the comparison with Copernicus is important because – as Meillassoux points out – it contains an awkward slippage.

[I]t has become abundantly clear that a more fitting comparison for the Kantian revolution in thought would be to a ‘Ptolemaic counter-revolution’, given that what the former asserts is not that the observer whom we thought was motionless is in fact orbiting around the observed sun, but on the contrary, that the subject is central to the process of knowledge.¹¹³

The point is clear: if Copernican heliocentrism places *reality* at the centre of intellectual inquiry, then Kant’s critical turn entails a geocentric ‘counter-revolution’, such that *man* becomes the measure of matter.¹¹⁴ Notwithstanding the bias of Meillassoux’s reading,¹¹⁵ his objection serves to frame the very question that he shares with Lenin: how can philosophy regain access to mind-independent matter beyond its correlation with a thinking subject? In order to answer this question, Meillassoux proposes to complicate the Kantian picture by introducing the problem of ‘ancestrality’, i.e. statements about events anterior to the emergence of any form of human consciousness.¹¹⁶ Accordingly he asks: “[h]ow are we to grasp the meaning of scientific statements bearing explicitly upon a manifestation of the world that is posited as anterior to the emergence of thought and even of life – posited, that is, as anterior to every form of human relation to the world?”¹¹⁷ Put in Kantian terms: “how is one to legitimate the assertion that

¹¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 110

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 118

¹¹⁴ Hallward, “Anything is Possible”, 135

¹¹⁵ For a biting account of the shortcomings in Meillassoux’s critique of Kant, see: Andrew Cole, “Those Obscure Objects of Desire”, *Artforum*, <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201506&id=52280>, accessed 07/01/2016

¹¹⁶ It hardly seems coincidental that one of the chapters in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* bears the title “Did Nature Exist Prior to Man?”

¹¹⁷ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 9-10

something subsists beyond our representations when one has already insisted that this beyond is radically inaccessible to thought?”¹¹⁸

Certainly, Meillassoux is not advocating a simple regression to pre-Kantian dogmatism. Rather, he seeks to “overcome the correlational obstacle to his acausal ontology” by showing that Kant’s “correlationist critique of metaphysical necessity *itself* enables (...) the speculative affirmation of non-necessity”.¹¹⁹ To this end Meillassoux enlists an unlikely ally – Hegel – whose critique of Kant he claims to turn against itself. As he argues, “instead of concluding that the in-itself is unknowable”, Hegel transforms the correlation between thought and being into “the *only* veritable in-itself”.¹²⁰ If Kant’s “instrument of empirico-critical de-absolutisation” becomes the “model for a new type of absolute”,¹²¹ then this has a double consequence. On the one hand, absolute knowledge is laudably reintroduced (*we can* know absolute reality); on the other hand, a slippage in the first *Critique* is retroactively illuminated. In turn, the correlation of thought and being itself is supposed to be exposed as a mere contingency. As Hallward explains: “the correlationist” – Kant – “in order to guard against idealist claims to knowledge of absolute reality” – Hegel – “accepts not only the reduction of knowledge to knowledge of facts” (that is, to knowledge of appearances within certain irreducible intellectual strictures); he also accepts that this ‘reduction’ itself is nothing but a fact amongst other facts: “another non-necessary contingency”.¹²² The point for Meillassoux is that “if such correlating reduction is not necessary then it is of course possible to envisage its suspension”.¹²³ In other words, “the only way the correlationists can defend themselves against idealist absolutisation requires them to admit ‘the impossibility of giving an ultimate ground to the existence of any being’, including the impossibility of giving a ground for this impossibility.”¹²⁴ It is in this tacit admission that Meillassoux locates the ‘affirmation of non-necessity’ on which his project hinges. Far from experiencing things-in-themselves as the limits of thought, he pronounces their ‘facticity’ as

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 38. As Meillassoux is surely aware, Kant does not require one to witness an occurrence first-hand for its material remnants to be accounted for. “All that is required is an ability to grasp the event in terms of (...) the relation between what (a) sensible intuition can perceive of it or its traces, and (b) the conceptual conditions that order our perception of temporal events (...) as a causal succession.” It is unclear, then, that it *is* in fact impossible for ‘correlationists’ to think a world anterior to its givenness. “What’s less obvious”, Hallward notes, “is how we might think such a world without thinking it”. Hallward, “Anything is Possible”, 138

¹¹⁹ Hallward, “Anything is Possible”, 136 [My emphasis]

¹²⁰ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 53 [My emphasis]

¹²¹ Ibid, 52

¹²² Hallward, “Anything is Possible”, 136

¹²³ Ibid

¹²⁴ Ibid

knowledge of their absolute reality. But if Meillassoux thus circumscribes the existence of mind-independent matter, then this raises the question as to how he proposes to *know* the sheer contingency of its modality.

b.) In order to grasp this we must briefly consider the second aspect of the argument announced above, namely: Meillassoux's radicalisation of 'Hume's problem'. As he recounts, Hume – in those sections of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) that contest the principle of sufficient reason – teaches that “any cause may actually produce any effect whatsoever, provided the latter is not contradictory.”¹²⁵ In other words, “we may well be able to uncover the basic laws that govern the universe – but the cause that underlies those laws themselves, and which endows them with necessity, will remain inaccessible to us.”¹²⁶ (This is another reason why the subject-object correlation in post-Kantian thought is presented as being ultimately arbitrary.) Meillassoux concedes Hume's basic point but objects that he shies away from the full consequence of his insight. Instead of abandoning the idea of causal necessity, Hume simply consigns it to a realm beyond demonstration. In the end, he is thus said to “believe blindly in the world that metaphysicians thought they could prove.”¹²⁷ By contrast, Meillassoux contends that the impossibility of rationally grounding the principle of sufficient reason – of demonstrating that things are as they are of necessity – in fact *proves* that there is no such reason or necessity at all. “Rather than try to salvage a dubious faith in the apparent stability of our experience” – Meillassoux speaks of *fideism* in this regard – “we should affirm the prospect that Hume refused to accept”: that “an infinite variety of ‘effects’ might emerge on the basis of no cause at all, in a pure eruption of novelty *ex nihilo*.”¹²⁸

Here a decisive difference between Meillassoux and Lenin comes into focus. Whereas Lenin holds that ordinary sense experience provides the ultimate *proof* of matter's primacy – a primacy that, in turn, ensures the pre-eminence of transformative political praxis – Meillassoux argues that it is precisely the ‘stability’ of ordinary sense experience that *prevents* us from surrendering to the full consequence of absolute contingency: to transformation ‘*ex nihilo*’. Hallward describes this shift as follows: the “[c]onversion of Hume's problem into Meillassoux's

¹²⁵ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 90 [My emphasis]

¹²⁶ *Ibid*

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 91

¹²⁸ Hallward, “Anything is Possible”, 132 [My emphasis]

opportunity” requires a “deflation of experience and the senses”.¹²⁹ It requires, in other words, “that thought must free itself from the fascination for the phenomenal fixity of laws, so as to accede to a purely intelligible Chaos capable of destroying and of producing, without reason, things and the laws which they obey.”¹³⁰ That is to say, ‘intelligibility’ takes the place of ‘phenomenal fixity’; ‘speculation’ takes the place of ‘reflection’.¹³¹ Meillassoux proceeds to buttress this point by reviving the ostensibly pre-critical notion of a purely ‘intelligible’ form of intuition so as to overturn the supposed strictures of Kant’s critical turn. He extrapolates from the Cartesian account of objective reality’s ‘primary qualities’, i.e. those aspects of matter – e.g. weight – that can be determined independently of its phenomenal appearance. But if Descartes conceives of these qualities in geometric terms – in terms of an object’s physical parameters – then Meillassoux goes one step further by isolating this mathematical aspect from extension altogether: “what is mathematically conceivable” – however hypothetical – “is absolutely possible.”¹³² In other words, the irrefutable reality of a mind-independent matter whose modality is utterly contingent is supposedly proven *ex hypothesi* through recourse to mathematics.¹³³ But how does all this relate to Adorno’s critique of ‘representational thinking’?

I take it that there are at least two aspects of Speculative Realism that resonate with the critique of ‘Diamat’ outlined above: one regarding the locus of transformative agency in Meillassoux’s philosophy, the other regarding the tendency of *After Finitude* to relapse into idealism. How so? The first point concerns Meillassoux’s equivocation between meta-physical and physical necessity, that is, between “epistemology and ontology”.¹³⁴ We have already seen a version of this equivocation in Engels and Lenin’s view that the material world evinces a kind of dialectical-developmental logic – that cells as much as societies necessarily evolve according to a historical dynamic that proceeds through overcoming internal contradictions, sublating them and carrying them forward into ever-higher degrees of articulation which are in turn mirrored by consciousness. By contrast, Meillassoux seems to invert this tendency by claiming to deduce the

¹²⁹ Ibid, 133

¹³⁰ Quentin Meillassoux, “Spectral Dilemma”, *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, Vol. 4 (2008): 274

¹³¹ Whether or not Meillassoux appreciates the irony that his re-imagination of Lenin’s realism re-stages Hegel’s speculative critique of Kant’s philosophy of reflection is unclear.

¹³² Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 126

¹³³ It is not our task here to reconstruct Meillassoux’s foray into Cantorian set theory. Suffice it to note that, in his view, Cantor allows him to challenge our belief in the stability of natural laws by arguing that they stem from an untenable ‘probabilistic’ calculation.

¹³⁴ Hallward, “Anything is Possible”, 137

absolute contingency of being by transposing Hume's metaphysical repudiation of the principle of sufficient reason onto physical and natural laws. From this he infers that "there is *no* cause or reason for anything to be the way it is", and that consequently the transformation of material conditions may be both absolute and instantaneous.¹³⁵ Although the consequence of the Engelsian-Leninist materialist dialectic is a strong form of historical *necessity*, whereas the outcome of Meillassoux's speculative-realist deduction is an absolute form of *contingency*, both positions converge in mistaking metaphysical claims for binding natural-scientific models. But whereas the former over-determines the course of the historical dynamic that is supposed to follow from the identification of physics and metaphysics, the latter can provide no real account of what drives its process of transformation. Accordingly, Meillassoux – for his part – has no adequate substitute for what others have called "substance, or spirit, or power, or labour."¹³⁶ That is to say, "[h]is insistence that anything might happen" *ex nihilo* "can only amount to an insistence on the bare possibility of radical change."¹³⁷ If Meillassoux's model is thus supposed to 'correct and complete' the shortcomings of Engels and Lenin's ontological determinism, then it is unclear how the strictures which the latter unwittingly impose on revolutionary praxis are supposed to be lifted by displacing the affirmation of matter from the domain of the sensual to that of the mathematical. Despite this shift of emphasis, Meillassoux ultimately faces the same problem as Engels and Lenin: by hypostatizing a trans-historical metaphysics of matter – be it on the basis of sense-certainty or mathematics – all three belie the possibility of freedom whilst paradoxically speaking at the same time of spontaneous and total transformation.

The second point worth noting here concerns the view that "[i]n trying to maintain the speculative sovereignty of philosophical reason",¹³⁸ Meillassoux in fact reintroduces idealism at the level of form. It is unclear why an account of material reality in terms of pure number should be any less anthropocentric than its verification through sense-impressions. The claim that the meaning of 'ancestral statements' can be grasped apart from a thinking subject does not account for the fact that the very terms of their mathematical reformulation stem from the eminently human discourse of mathematics. As Hallward explains:

¹³⁵ Ibid, 138 [My emphasis]

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ Ibid

¹³⁸ Alberto Toscano, "Against Speculation, or, a Critique of Critique: A Remark on Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* (After Colletti)", in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 91

As a matter of course, every unit of measurement, from the length of a meter to the time required for a planet to orbit around a star, exists at a fundamental distance from the domain of number as such. If Meillassoux was to carry through the argument of ‘ancestrality’ to its logical conclusion, he would have to acknowledge that it would eliminate not only all reference to secondary qualities like colour and texture but also all conventional primary qualities like length or mass or date as well. What might then be known of an ‘arche-fossil’ (...) would presumably have to be expressed in terms of pure numbers alone (...). Whatever else such (...) knowledge amounts to, it has no obvious relation with the sorts of realities that empirical science tries to describe.

Meillassoux’s misstep, then, lies in the presumption “that a speculative philosophy in conjunction with a mathematized science can struggle against abstractions that are perceived as mere errors of the intellect, and not as abstractions that have any basis in a social, material and extra-logical reality.”¹³⁹ That is to say, the mathematical form of Meillassoux’s argument undermines its purportedly materialist content. As such, it relapses into idealism. His parochial defence of mind-independent matter tends to obfuscate the material grounds of techno-scientific and capitalist abstraction. In this respect, Adorno’s critique of ‘representational thinking’ in fact applies as much to *After Finitude* as it does to *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. It remains to see, though, what this peculiar convergence reveals about the stakes of Adorno’s ‘imageless’ materialism.

Let us recap: over the course of the preceding pages we have recounted Adorno’s critique of ‘representational thinking’ with reference to the epistemological precepts of dialectical materialism. Building on this reconstruction we have attempted to weigh up the actuality of Adorno’s objections by mapping them onto Meillassoux’s programme for a Speculative Realism; a timely task insofar as *After Finitude* has repeatedly been likened to Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. In both cases the point has been to demonstrate that Adorno allows us to uncover the common metaphysical presuppositions that underpin these materialist philosophies. However, the claim that the political deficiencies of dialectical materialism follow directly from its theoretical shortcomings presumes a somewhat *un*-dialectical relation between theory and praxis. Accordingly it might be objected that Adorno’s criticisms tend to reproduce the very lack

¹³⁹ Ibid

of mediation between mind and matter that he derides in Engels, Lenin and others. Adorno wrestles with this issue in a late text titled ‘Marginalia on Theory and Praxis’ (1969). Herein he identifies the division between thought and action with the separation of subject and object, a schism that – in turn – sits in a wider historical narrative outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. “Just as the division of subject and object cannot be revoked immediately by a decree of thought” – a point to which we will return below – “so too an immediate unity of theory and praxis is hardly possible: it would imitate the false identity of subject and object and would perpetuate the principle of domination that posits identity and that a true praxis must oppose.”¹⁴⁰ Leaving this point in suspense for a moment, we note that the motivation for our protracted reconstruction has been twofold: firstly, to prepare the ground for a discussion of Adorno’s singular reorientation of the concept of materialism in terms of the Mosaic interdiction against idol worship; secondly, to suggest that this reorientation throws into relief Adorno’s own view of a non-dogmatic Marxian materialism, whose central concern is not the prioritisation of ‘matter’ or the valorisation of ‘praxis’, but the abolition of bodily suffering. The remainder of this chapter aims to explore this far-reaching shift of emphasis.

II: Adorno & The Image Ban

The preceding pages have paid close attention to the opening lines from the passage of ‘Materialism Imageless’ cited at the outset, where Adorno observes that ‘a consciousness interpolating images, a third element, between itself and that which it thinks would unwittingly reproduce idealism.’ As we have seen, Adorno’s critique targets the ‘representational’ character of dialectical materialism – an epistemological precept that he polemically likens to idol worship. We noted, then, that this sardonic interjection aligns Adorno’s concept of an ‘imageless’ materialism with the monotheistic proscription of idol worship. (‘What clings to the image remains idolatry, mythic enthrallment’; ‘demythologisation, the thought’s enlightening intent, deletes the image character of consciousness.’) In order to grasp the full weight of this quip, however, we must consider the remaining lines of ‘Materialism Imageless’ in light of two questions: i.) How are we to understand the relationship between image and imagelessness expressed in Adorno’s verdict that ‘the full object could be conceived’ only ‘in the absence of

¹⁴⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Marginalia on Theory and Praxis”, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, ed. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 26

images’? ii.) What are the somatic, affective and rhetorical features of the materialism that stems from Adorno’s reference to a ‘resurrection of the flesh’, i.e. his estimation that ‘the perspective vanishing point of historic materialism would be its self-sublimation, the spirit’s liberation from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfilment’? Surely the move from ‘matter’ to ‘flesh’ requires some degree of qualification.

i.) *Image & Imagelessness:*

In order to determine the relationship between ‘image’ and ‘imagelessness’, stipulated above, we must consider the following proviso: if the image ban designates a negation of the images associated with Leninist reflection theory and hence a confrontation between ‘representational’ and ‘non-representational’ thinking, then the locus of what we have called Adorno’s ‘Utopia of cognition’ – a mode of grasping and acting upon objectivity beyond instrumentality, intentionality and means-ends relations – lies precisely in the particular dynamic that is unfolded in the latter part of the passage cited at the outset.¹⁴¹ Put differently: if, as we suggested, ‘the materialist longing to grasp the thing’ means nothing less than a radical reconfiguration of thinking as such,¹⁴² if – in turn – this intellectual modality is supposed to stave off the sacrificial logic that Adorno associates with Soviet-style socialism and cold-war capitalism alike;¹⁴³ and if, finally, formulating such a mode of materialist cognition hinges on the figure of the image ban, then it follows that his phrasing illuminates – however tacitly – the vexed political stakes of the

¹⁴¹ To be sure, Adorno’s concept of the image cannot be reduced to its adverse association with Soviet reflection theory. For one thing, the tension between image and imagelessness is closely connected with Adorno’s immeasurable debt to a mode of thinking-in-images detailed in Benjamin’s ill-fated *Habilitationsschrift* on the *Origin of the German Mourning-Play* (1928). For an in-depth account of Adorno’s application of Benjamin’s philosophy of the image, see: Peter Fenves, “Image and Chatter: Adorno’s Construction of Kierkegaard”, *Diacritics*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring 1992): 99-114

¹⁴² The haptic connotation of ‘grasping’ as a mode of ‘thinking’ anticipates Adorno’s effort to elaborate a mimetic mode of cognition in *Aesthetic Theory*. See Chapter Three of the present study.

¹⁴³ As we will find, Adorno presupposes a rather grandiose historical meta-narrative which identifies both the unfreedom of life under Soviet rule and the asymmetry of capitalist exchange relations with thought’s tendency to subsume particulars under universals: a logic that is in turn likened to the *quid pro quo* of ancient sacrificial rites, which – for their part – are said to recur in the terrible ‘logic’ of the Nazi extermination camps. This trans-historical sequence of likenesses, presented under the banner of a dialectic of enlightenment, is a stumbling block for the cogency of Adorno’s claims. If animistic sacrifice is nourished by the same logic as state socialism, capitalist exchange and Nazi genocide; if consequently ‘identity thinking’ is always already the dominant mythological feature of human history; and if this always-already-identitarian regime plays out in the domains of epistemology, ethics, ontology, etc. then surely Adorno’s model tends to reproduce precisely the totalitarian rancour that it seeks to immanently overturn. That is to say, insofar as everything is always already ‘identity thinking’, Adorno struggles to leave any room for the particularity whose loss he laments. We will return to these matters over the course of the subsequent chapters.

idiosyncratic ‘Marxism’ that we have been exploring following Comay’s cue.¹⁴⁴ The question in each case relates to how Adorno figures this ‘Utopia of cognition’, with all of its far-reaching resonances, if it cannot be ‘positively pictured’. In particular, I take it that he makes use of two strategies, which can be placed under the headings: a.) *Inversion*; b.) *Negation*.

a.) The dynamic figure of ‘inversion’ designates a characteristic movement of Adorno’s dialectic: the paradoxical attempt to glean an inverted image of reconciliation between the subject and object of thought from within the “bewitched, distorted and upside-down world” of capitalist modernity.¹⁴⁵ Adorno thus gestures *ex negativo* towards a positive third term (thesis-antithesis-synthesis) by dwelling in the moment of dialectical contradiction, i.e. by refusing what he considers to be an extorted form of rapprochement between subject and object. This emphasis on non-identity, however, is not reducible to a merely methodological quirk.¹⁴⁶ Rather, Adorno views dialectical antitheses as philosophical expressions of socio-historical antagonisms. These demand that we highlight their incommensurability, push against their limit and strengthen our resolve that ‘things *should* be different’ – a resolve that, for its part, cannot be satisfied abstractly. In brief, by emphasising what is false, Adorno seeks the inverse image of what is true.¹⁴⁷ To illustrate this point he upends a famous dictum from Benedict Spinoza’s correspondence with Albert Burgh: ‘*Verum Index sui et falsi*’¹⁴⁸ becomes “*Falsum (...) index sui et veri*”.¹⁴⁹ In the

¹⁴⁴ The question of Adorno’s politics has been the cause of heated debate at least since his public break with the German student movement in 1969. As is well known, during this time a number of student leaders – chiefly Hans-Jürgen Krahl – denounced Adorno on the grounds of his alleged quietism. Cf. Hans-Jürgen Krahl, “Der politische Widerspruch der Kritischen Theorie Adornos”, in *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung: Von der Flaschenpost zum Molotowcocktail, 1946-1995, Bd. 2*, ed. Wolfgang Kraushaar (Hamburg: Rogner & Bernhard, 1998), 673-675; Theodor W. Adorno “Resignation”, in *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 289-294

¹⁴⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 3: Critique of Political Economy*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 2073

¹⁴⁶ The peculiar compulsion on the part of analytically minded commentators, such as Fabian Freyenhagen, to derive a ‘normative’ ethical programme from Adorno’s philosophy by framing his negative dialectic as a pragmatic calculus that can be applied at will to any situation is frankly perplexing. Cf. Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy: How to Live Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

¹⁴⁷ For a discussion of how this bears on Adorno’s notion of an ‘inverse theology’, see pp. 104-112 of the present study.

¹⁴⁸ “The true is the index of itself and of that which is false”. Benedict Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding / The Ethics / Correspondence*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (London: Dover Books, 1955), 417 [Translation altered]

¹⁴⁹ ‘The false is the index of itself and of that which is true’. Adorno & Bloch, “Something’s Missing”, 11. Both Adorno and Marx play on this maxim elsewhere. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno “Notes on Kafka”, in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber & Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 246; Karl Marx, “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction”, *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 1: 1835-1843* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), 112

present context this strategy of syntactical inversion is remarkable to the extent that it reflects back on Adorno's iconoclastic critique of dialectical materialism. Might it not be said under this aspect that the 'false' images of Leninist reflection theory yield a negative imprint of their opposite, a kind of "mirror-writing"?¹⁵⁰ If so, then Adorno might be seen to provide us with the tools for destabilising the language of 'reflection' by playing on the metaphors of 'mirroring' in terms of codes, puzzles and riddles – a tactic that recalls Leonardo Da Vinci's practice of encrypting sensitive texts by inverting their script. Benjamin's presence is palpable when we learn that it is the task of philosophical "interpretation" to discern the truth-content of such puzzle images (*Vexierbilder*) by reading them as though they were sacred texts.¹⁵¹ "Dialectics discloses (...) every image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth."¹⁵² This tendency is borne out in Adorno's *Habilitationsschrift, Construction of the Aesthetic* (1933), which contains some notable passages on Søren Kierkegaard's description of a curious 19th century contraption:¹⁵³ the so-called "window mirror" (*Reflexionsspiegel*).¹⁵⁴ In order to grasp this point, however, we must briefly situate Adorno's discussion of this detail in the context of his argument.

Broadly speaking, Adorno's study of Kierkegaard considers the Danish thinker's immanent critique of Hegel as a bourgeois counterpart to Marx's concurrent confrontation with Speculative Idealism. "Although both rejected Hegel's identity theory because it lost sight of lived reality, Kierkegaard rested his case on the reality of individual existence" – a tendency that Adorno sees echoed in the work of Martin Heidegger – "whereas for Marx existence is a social category."¹⁵⁵ In Adorno's estimation, Kierkegaard's view that "life is utterly meaningless" – an expression of his melancholic individualism – thus contrasts with the Marxian emphasis on societal transformation.¹⁵⁶ As Susan Buck-Morss observes, Adorno's attempt to "explode" Kierkegaard's philosophy of inwardness from the inside out thus shows itself as having two principle aims:

¹⁵⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 247 [Translation altered]

¹⁵¹ Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy", 126

¹⁵² Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 18. Given the quasi-Judaic provenance of Adorno's philosophy of imagelessness, it is noteworthy that he asserts a primacy of the scriptural.

¹⁵³ Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Pt. I*, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 354

¹⁵⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 42

¹⁵⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 114

¹⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 36

firstly, “to rob (...) existentialism of its validity, and to justify simultaneously a (...) Marxist alternative”; and secondly, “to argue against the view (...) that aesthetics was the realm of subjective immediacy and irrationalism, and to validate in its place the Hegelian conception of aesthetics as a medium for knowing objective truth”.¹⁵⁷ In order to demonstrate the validity of these claims, Adorno seeks to expose the internal contradictions of Kierkegaard’s thought so as to glean from them the unintended expression of historical truth: that “the inner realm into which the logic of his theory led” – the subject’s retreat from the object world – “was itself a historical manifestation, marking the passing of the bourgeois era”.¹⁵⁸ What is at stake here is nothing less than the spellbound relation between subject and object under the rule of capitalist exchange relations. Adorno seeks to highlight this by reversing the hierarchy of existential ‘spheres’ – aesthetics, ethics, religion – outlined in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous opus *Either/Or* (1843). As is well known, Kierkegaard views the aesthetic sphere as the lowest stage of his dialectic. It is associated with the sensual, with worldly matter, rather than with the higher domains of ethics and religion. Johannes the Seducer, in whose guise Kierkegaard narrates those sections of *Either/Or* that outline the aesthetic attitude, is emblematic of this outlook. Accordingly, Adorno homes in on the portrayal of Johannes’ relation to his material surroundings: his furnishings. The ‘window mirror’ in Johannes’ apartment becomes a case in point:

Why can’t you just be nice and quiet? What have you done all morning but shake my awnings, tug at my window mirror and the cord on it, play with the bellpull wire from the fourth floor, push against the windowpanes – in short, proclaim your existence in every way as if you wanted to beckon me out to you?¹⁵⁹

Adorno comments on the inside/outside relation in this passage as follows: “[t]he window mirror is a characteristic furnishing of the spacious nineteenth-century apartment”;¹⁶⁰ “[t]he function of the window mirror is to project the endless row of apartment buildings into the isolated bourgeois living room”;¹⁶¹ “[t]he window mirror testifies to objectlessness – it casts into the apartment only the semblance of things – and isolated privacy.”¹⁶² Adorno views this seemingly innocuous

¹⁵⁷ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 114

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 116

¹⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 354 [Translation altered]

¹⁶⁰ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 42

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*

¹⁶² *Ibid*

feature of Johannes' lodgings as a material expression of Kierkegaard's inward turn. It inadvertently registers "the alienation of subject and object".¹⁶³ That is to say, the window mirror stands for the fact that, "[i]n Kierkegaard there is so little of a subject/object in the Hegelian sense as there are given objects; there is only an isolated subjectivity" – the private resident of the 'spacious nineteenth-century apartment' – "surrounded by a dark otherness."¹⁶⁴ In other words, Johannes is connected to the world of objects only in semblance – by the reflections from the 'window mirror'. On this basis Adorno draws the following analogy:

In his philosophy the knowing subject can no more reach its objective correlative than, in a society dominated by exchange-value, things are 'immediately' accessible to the person. Kierkegaard recognised the distress of incipient high-capitalism. He opposed its privations in the name of a lost immediacy that he sheltered in subjectivity. He analysed neither the necessity and legitimacy of reification nor the possibility of its correction. But he did nevertheless (...) note the relation of commodification and the commodity form in a metaphor that need only be taken literally to correspond with Marxist theories.¹⁶⁵

This 'metaphor that need only be taken literally' is none other than that of the bourgeois *intérieur*: the smoke and mirrors of Johannes' reified consciousness. To put it simply, Adorno's question is how to mobilise this figure, how to turn the impasse of Kierkegaard's objectless interiority against itself. In what sense can the reflections from the window mirror be seen to contain a negative image of their opposite? Like Marx's account of the "*camera obscura*",¹⁶⁶ the window mirror casts into the apartment an image of the 'upside-down' world of capitalist production. But as Adorno suggests, these projections do not re-double the world so much as they "displace and estrange" it by literally putting it on its head.¹⁶⁷ (But what might it mean to put something on its head that is already upside-down? Would that not mean putting the world on its feet?) Whatever we make of this, the metaphorical thrust of Adorno's phrasing appears to be that the window mirror divulges the perversion of the present as the code of its own undoing – 'the mirror writing of its opposite' – not as a "blueprint for Utopia" but as an "encrypted message"

¹⁶³ Ibid, 27

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 29

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 39

¹⁶⁶ Karl Marx, "The German Ideology", in *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5: 1845-1847* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 36

¹⁶⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247

containing a “‘prolegomenon’ to a new reality”.¹⁶⁸ This ‘message’ requires philosophical ‘interpretation’ – the labour of criticism – in order to uncover the history of domination that lies concealed in Johannes’ petrified interior. There may be “no true life in the false”,¹⁶⁹ but the negative contours of a reconciliation between subject and object shine through the cracks and fissures of the present. As such, the notion of inversion marks a paradoxical affirmation of Utopia, whilst accepting that philosophy has no positive claim to it.

b.) Having thus established the sense in which Adorno plays on the figure of inversion in order to invoke an image of Utopia that does not transgress the ban on positively picturing it, it now remains to see how he marshals the force of negation that is operative in the *ban* on images. As Adorno notes, “[t]he right of the image is rescued in the faithful observance of its prohibition”, an ‘observance’ that is – in turn – associated with the Hegelian notion of “determinate negation”.¹⁷⁰ But what kind of a ‘right’ is envisaged here? Once again the matter hinges on Adorno’s singular remodelling of Hegel. ‘Determinate negation’ – a term whose meaning we will explore momentarily – is enlisted in the services of a *negative* dialectic, i.e. a dialectic that defers the moment of synthesis on the grounds that such reconciliation is co-extensive with the overcoming of societal injustice. In order to grasp this, though, we must briefly consider the place of determinate negation in Hegel’s thought.

The broad outlines of what Hegel means by determinate negation can be found in the Introduction to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As above, Hegel’s exposition turns on his critique of Kant. Insofar as objects are only knowable as appearances, they are supposed to remain indeterminate. This is because the differentiation of one object from another (*this-not-that*) – a differentiation which proceeds through negation (*this-not-that*) – cannot, so long as it is governed by the sceptical consciousness that Hegel associates with Kant, truly determine an object. In Hegel’s estimation, then, Kant stalls at the recognition that there is a difference between *this* and *that* but he is unable to adequately express this difference. As we have seen in our discussion of Meillassoux, Hegel claims to overcome this impasse by absolutising it: the Kantian thing-in-itself is knowable *as* unknowable. Hegel associates this gesture with a certain productivity of the negation contained in the judgement *this-not-that*. When the result of a dialectical reflection is

¹⁶⁸ Elizabeth Pritchard, “Bilderverbot Meets Body in Theodor W. Adorno’s Inverse Theology”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (July 2002): 307

¹⁶⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 39 [Translation altered]

¹⁷⁰ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 18

“conceived as it is in truth, namely, as a determinate negation, a new form has thereby immediately arisen”.¹⁷¹ In other words, if the appearance of an object is followed by reflection on whether it is adequate to the conception of knowledge held by the subject at a given stage of consciousness; and if – in turn – the object is found lacking so that a new one is posited, which includes the unity of the process that produced it, then negation does not just produce nothing: it produces a “determinate nothingness” which follows the arithmetic principle that the negation of a negation yields a positive term.¹⁷² (Hegel describes this cumulative movement of supersession as ‘sublation’: *Aufhebung*).¹⁷³ As we have already alluded to, in the case of the *Phenomenology* this insight – first articulated vis-à-vis Kant – inaugurates a movement through all conceivable stages of consciousness. Its sum appears as the standpoint of absolute knowing from whence the true work of philosophy – outlined in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1816) – can finally begin. It is well known, too, that Adorno explicitly conceives of his philosophical enterprise along Hegelian lines. However, to the extent that Hegel’s philosophy is supposed to chart a purposeful forward-movement of the development of consciousness,¹⁷⁴ Adorno charges that what “wins out” in a *positive* dialectic is in fact an “anti-dialectical principle: that traditional logic which, *more arithmetico*, takes minus times minus for a plus.”¹⁷⁵ By contrast, Adorno contends that “[t]o negate a negation does *not* bring about its reversal”; *negative* dialectics “proves, rather, that the negation was not negative enough.”¹⁷⁶ That is, insofar as Adorno views philosophical contradictions as expressions of societal antagonisms, dialectics must not prematurely smooth over its antitheses lest it succumb to vulgar automatism. Accordingly Adorno argues that Hegel shies away from the full consequence of the negativity that drives his dialectic. He “could not resolve the contradiction between his dialectic and his experience: it was this alone that forced Hegel the critic to maintain the affirmative.”¹⁷⁷ To affirm the moment of synthesis means to sanction the status quo. A genuine resolution of the contradictions between thesis and antithesis would mean nothing less than the reconciliation between subject and object, man and nature, i.e. the overcoming of the dialectic of enlightenment. Without presuming to recount in detail the

¹⁷¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 51

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ The German verb *Aufheben* literally means ‘to pick up’ or ‘to preserve’.

¹⁷⁴ Certainly, many of Hegel’s most influential readers do not read him this way.

¹⁷⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 158

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 159-60 [My emphasis]

¹⁷⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy”, in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 80

premises of Adorno's negative dialectic, it remains to ask how this critical re-imagination of determinate negation plays out in the present context.

To be sure, if the 'image' of a reconciliation between subject and object – Utopia – were simply sublated in the act of banning it, i.e. if Adorno's argument followed the positively dialectical schema of determinate negation, then the true life would irresistibly emerge from the false. In other words, the iconoclastic criticism of Leninist reflection theory would necessarily resolve into a higher form of cognition, just as the monotheistic injunction against idol worship ineludibly supersedes polytheistic paganism in Hegel's philosophy of religion.¹⁷⁸ But given that Adorno identifies the synthetic moment of Hegelian dialectics with the actualisation of philosophical universality – a clear echo of Marx's final thesis on Feuerbach – he cannot settle for such a causally determined 'image'. That is to say, if in Adorno's view the historical moment for such a synthesis has been "missed",¹⁷⁹ as the famous opening line from *Negative Dialectics* proclaims; if philosophy is thus suspended in the moment of contradiction, and its principal task is marked out as perpetual critique, then the *ban* on images means – above all – holding open the possibility that what is depicted by 'representational thinking' is not everything. This sentiment is forcefully expressed in a passage from 'Marginalia on Theory and Praxis', where Adorno writes: "[t]he hostility to theory in the spirit of the times, the by no means coincidental withering away of theory, its banishment by an impatience that wants to change the world" (belabour it as an image) "without having to interpret it while so far it has been chapter and verse that philosophers have *merely* interpreted – such hostility becomes praxis's weakness."¹⁸⁰ Put differently, if – as we have argued – the images of dialectical materialism are in fact static reflections of immutable matter, then surely their elevation to a philosophical principle grants the status quo absolute authority. If, by contrast, the image ban forbids the 'uncritical reproduction of existing relationships in consciousness', then Adorno's iconoclasm designates a clearing-away: forging a space in which the subject-object relation can be recast, albeit negatively. Like Benjamin's destructive character, then, Adorno "sees no image hovering before him"; he "knows only one watchword: make room", "not for the sake of the rubble but for that of the way leading through it".¹⁸¹ On Adorno's model, to determinately negate the images of self-identical reality produced by Leninist reflection

¹⁷⁸ For a discussion of Hegel's treatment of the image ban, see pp. 141-146 of the present study.

¹⁷⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3

¹⁸⁰ Adorno, "Marginalia on Theory and Praxis", 265

¹⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Destructive Character", in *Selected Writings 2.2, 1931-1934*, eds. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings & Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 541-542

theory means to underscore their inadequacy to the lived experience of un-freedom. The ‘right’ of the image – the rightfulness of the promise it holds – is thus ‘rescued’ in the unswerving criticism of the present, a criticism that is carried out for the sake of the possibility that things might yet be otherwise. It is against this backdrop that Adorno’s reference to the Old Testament ban on making images of God serves to frame his meta-critique of materialism – a materialism whose central concern is not the prioritisation of matter, but the abolition of bodily suffering. Let us explore this point in more detail.

ii.) *Adorno’s Concept of Materialism:*

As we have seen, an ‘imageless’ mode of materialist cognition initially depends on the sense in which Adorno subverts the images of Leninist reflection theory. In this respect, we have argued, Adorno’s polemical invocation of the ‘theological ban on images’ serves to bolster his alternative conception of a Marxian materialism, which departs from Soviet orthodoxy by foregrounding neither ‘matter’ nor ‘praxis’ but rather the elimination of bodily suffering. We will return to the question as to what kind of ‘theology’ informs Adorno’s phrasing in Chapter Two of the present study. In the meantime, it will be recalled, ‘Materialism Imageless’ concludes with the estimation that materialism’s ‘great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute spirit.’ In this regard Adorno contends that ‘the perspective vanishing point of historic materialism would be its self-sublimation, the spirit’s liberation from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfilment. Only if the physical urge were quenched’, we are told, ‘would the spirit be reconciled and would become that which it only promises while the spell of material conditions will not let it satisfy material needs’. For Adorno, then, materialism is neither a method nor a goal but rather “an impulse”, a drive, as Simon Jarvis observes: “the utopian wish for undeluded happiness, including bodily pleasure, the wish for an end to suffering.”¹⁸² Nonetheless, this passage marks a crossroads at which the various strands of Adorno’s project coincide. That is, on the one hand, ‘materialism’ emerges from the immanent critique of idealism – the dictate of ‘identity thinking’: “the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived”.¹⁸³ On the other hand, this ostensibly epistemological concern is supposed to have a material correlate in the history of domination outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: whatever

¹⁸² Jarvis, “Adorno, Marx, Materialism”, 80

¹⁸³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5

falls outside given societal parameters is brutally expunged. With regards to the former, this means that thinking objectivity is in fact a contradiction in terms: “[t]o think is to identify”.¹⁸⁴ Accordingly, Adorno’s ‘Utopia of cognition’ means paradoxically thinking thought against itself so as to throw into relief a materiality beyond thought’s bounds, albeit not for the purposes of attaining a renewed sense of ontological certainty, but rather to recast the way in which subject and object relate to each other: “to use concepts to unseal the nonconceptual with concepts without making it their equal.”¹⁸⁵ With regards to the latter, this means that idealism and materialism are not binary opposites. Idealism entails a corporeal subject just as much as materialism entails a reflecting consciousness. The terms are dialectically mediated. Adorno’s claim appears to be that heeding this dialectic is akin to protesting the identitarian strictures of the status quo. This is the sense in which he argues that whilst ‘the spell of material conditions’ obstructs the transformation of society, the burden of critical theory lies in the much-maligned ‘interpretation’ of the world: critique. (As he chides, the premature ‘Marxist’ pronouncement of having dispensed with theory in favour of praxis “miscarried”).¹⁸⁶ But how are we to conceive of a materialism that eschews the traditional primacy of matter, a primacy which is – in turn – supposed to guarantee the immediate prevalence of transformative praxis, in favour of a mode of thinking that seeks to grasp objectivity without doing violence to it? What are we to make of the claim that such an intellectual modality, which – for its part – cannot be positively pictured lest it fall prey to the very limits it seeks to overcome, has a material correlate in the overcoming of socio-historical antagonisms? Is Adorno suggesting that once the ‘spell’ blocking the transformation of society is broken – as a consequence of rigorous critique, presumably – then the ban on picturing Utopia will also be lifted? Is the image ban, then, primarily a cipher for holding open the possibility of historical change? In order to respond to these questions, the final pages of the present chapter must counterpose the two seemingly divergent moments of Adorno’s ‘imageless’ materialism: a.) His insistence on a formal preponderance of objectivity; b.) His emphasis on the somatic moment of thought.

a.) In his late essay ‘On Subject and Object’ (1969), Adorno seeks to challenge the predominance of an always-already ill-constituted subjectivity – a point that harks back to his writings from the

¹⁸⁴ Ibid

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 10

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 3

1940s. In quasi-epistemological terms, Adorno highlights an asymmetry in the relationship between the subject and object of cognition by citing certain markers from the history of philosophy. (Above all, he cross reads Kant and Marx in terms that are familiar from the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel.)¹⁸⁷ Contrary to certain unspecified epistemological models – Husserl perhaps? – Adorno argues that the relation of objects to subjects is qualitatively different from that of subjects to objects. This signals not only the reciprocal dependence and mutual production of subjects by objects and objects by subjects but also the fact that “[a]n object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains something other than the subject, whereas a subject by its very nature is from the outset an object as well.”¹⁸⁸ Subjects, in short, are special kinds of objects. However, their objective character has become obscured and distorted over the course of history. This affects both the subject’s self-relation in its capacity as a special kind of object *and* its relation to the material world. But in what terms does Adorno narrate the story of the subject’s (self) alienation?

As Adorno argues, the terms ‘subject’ and ‘object’ are exceedingly equivocal. “[S]ubject’ can refer to the particular individual as well as to universal attributes of ‘consciousness in general’, in the language of Kant’s *Prolegomena*.”¹⁸⁹ Whilst the element of “individual humanity” cannot be subtracted from the concept of the subject, the very conceptual articulation of subjectivity transforms it into a “universal”.¹⁹⁰ By the same token, ‘object’ does not merely mean mind-independent matter: “object cannot be known except through consciousness”.¹⁹¹ In other words, “[o]bjectivity can be made out solely by reflecting, at every historical and cognitive stage, both upon what at that time is presented as subject and object as well as upon their mediations.”¹⁹² The mutual constitution of these terms, however, is historically produced. This point is borne out

¹⁸⁷ Adorno and Sohn-Rethel engaged in a lively correspondence from the mid-1930s onwards. In particular, they discuss Sohn-Rethel’s view of a structural correspondence between Kant’s transcendental subject and the money form of value. We will return to this point below. Cf. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (London: Macmillan, 1978); Theodor W. Adorno & Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Briefwechsel, 1936-1969*, ed. Christoph Gödde (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 1991)

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 183

¹⁸⁹ Adorno, “On Subject and Object”, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, ed. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 245

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. To be sure, Adorno’s emphasis on the autonomy of individual subjects brings his project into the orbit of liberalism. This raises the following question: can Adorno conceive of a political collectivity beyond bourgeois subjectivity? How far does the concept of individual freedom have to be pushed in order to transcend this limit? For a useful discussion of these questions, see: Espen Hammer, *Adorno and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2006)

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 249

¹⁹² Ibid, 253

in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,¹⁹³ where Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the emergence of individuated consciousness from the enchanted union with ‘nature’¹⁹⁴ marks the process of enlightenment as a splitting asunder of ‘subject’ (mind) and ‘object’ (matter). Accordingly, enlightenment must be seen, on the one hand, as the dual process of rationalising deadly forces from without (both physically and intellectually) and, on the other, as the self-imposed bondage necessary to persist under such conditions – a point that is memorably illustrated by Adorno and Horkheimer with reference to Homer’s *Odyssey*. This immemorial rift, which – for its part – is read as a “prehistoric” division between mental and manual labour, inaugurates a historical dynamic that is characterised from the outset by the subjective domination of objects, including the subject’s unwitting (and hence all the more calamitous) *self*-domination.¹⁹⁵ We will return to this point in subsequent chapters; for now it suffices to note that the predominance of the subject in the philosophies of e.g. Bacon, Descartes or Kant is the expression of a historically fraught relation between man and matter. Man has had to renounce his material being in order to dominate the external world. He thus becomes estranged from his own objectivity, which – in turn – leads to a disastrous form of blind self-instrumentalisation. The epistemological categories ‘subject’ and ‘object’ thus lend “expression to the real separation, the rivenness of the human condition”, which is – in fact – “the result of a coercive historical process” of which the mind-body dualism is only the most prominent expression.¹⁹⁶ The subject’s relationship to objectivity is thus portrayed as the undergirding of an instrumental rationality, whose path Adorno wagers leads directly into the great cataclysms of the 20th century.

Nonetheless, such a relation between subject and object is not set in stone. In ‘On Subject and Object’ Adorno seeks to criticise this intellectual configuration by intimating a “second reflection” of Kant’s Copernican turn i.e. an immanent critique of idealism.¹⁹⁷ If, as we have seen, the Kantian revolution is supposed to demonstrate the subjective constitution of objectivity, then

¹⁹³ For a fuller account of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see pp. 72-74 of the present study.

¹⁹⁴ Adorno relies here on Lukács’ concept of ‘second nature’, which designates a world of capitalistic convention that masquerades as God-given and law-like. For Adorno, as for Lukács, the notion of an authentic ‘first nature’ is an ideological projection made from the standpoint of ‘second nature’. As Lukács puts it, “[t]his second nature is not dumb, sensuous and yet senseless like the first: it is a complex of senses – meanings – which has become rigid and strange, and which no longer awakens interiority; it is a charnel-house of long-dead interiorities; this second nature could only be brought to life – if this were possible – by the metaphysical act of reawakening the souls which, in an early or ideal existence, created or preserved it; it can never be animated by another interiority.” Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1988), 63

¹⁹⁵ Adorno, “Marginalia on Theory and Praxis”, 262

¹⁹⁶ Adorno, “On Subject and Object”, 246

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 254

it follows that the ‘second reflection’ of this turn is supposed to put this picture on its head. As Adorno argues, such an inversion exposes the Kantian view of ‘consciousness in general’ as a *reification* of the subject.¹⁹⁸ The alleged self-sufficiency of constitutive consciousness relies on an objectification of the subject that is not transparent to it. “[M]ind’s claim to independence announces its claim to domination. Once radically separated from the object, subject reduces the object to itself; subject swallows object, forgetting how much it is object itself.”¹⁹⁹ Adorno seeks to redeem this purported failure of Kant’s thought by crediting him with inadvertently registering a historical truth: that the idealist conception of subjectivity is an ill-begotten abstraction. Following Sohn-Rethel’s cue, Adorno thus reads Kant through a Marxian prism. The general abstraction of the transcendental subject is an expression of the real abstraction of capitalist exchange relations. As Sohn-Rethel writes to Adorno in a long letter dated 04-12 November 1936: “the formation of subjectivity is the inextricable correlate of the establishment of the money form of value.”²⁰⁰ In the present context this means that Adorno’s effort to elaborate a materialist mode of cognition aims, not least, to break the ‘spell’ of exchange relations that prevents the subject from recognising its objective entanglements. He does so by dialectically exposing an asymmetry in the configuration of subject and object. That is to say, Adorno attempts to cast into relief the possibility of a non-coercive “communication” between subject and object as truly differentiated entities.²⁰¹ His aim is not so much to reunite subject and object in the sense of forging a self-identical and, hence, Hegelian figure of thought – this would be “romantic”, he objects – but rather to expound the reasons for the subject’s constitutive inability to recognise its own objective ties.²⁰² As he argues, “[i]n its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their Other. *Peace*” – the maxim of Adorno’s ‘Utopia of cognition’ – “is the state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.”²⁰³ This ‘participation’ would be playful and mimetic – a point to which we will return in the final chapter of the present study. It cannot be positively pictured lest it be entered into the

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 83

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 246

²⁰⁰ Adorno & Sohn-Rethel, *Briefwechsel*, 24 [My translation]. The crucial difference between Adorno, Horkheimer and Sohn-Rethel is that for the former the constitution of subjectivity is an aspect of the domination of nature, whereas for the latter it follows from the principle of exchange itself. In both cases, though, these principles are problematically projected back onto a speculative pre-history of subjectivity.

²⁰¹ Adorno, “On Subject and Object”, 247

²⁰² *Ibid*, 246

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 247 [My emphasis]

very economy it seeks to overcome. For now, however, it remains to take note of a considerable obstacle for the persuasiveness of Adorno's claims: to the extent that this theoretical reconfiguration of the subject-object relation is supposed to correlate with the material transformation of society, the stakes of his considerations are extremely high. The question, then, is whether his identification of epistemological questions with social, historical and political ones is ultimately sustainable. Might it not be objected that the lack of differentiation between these registers relinquishes the very particularity that Adorno seeks to rescue?

b.) As we have seen, Adorno purports to deduce a preponderance of objectivity over an ill constituted subjectivity in quasi-epistemological terms by following Sohn-Rethel's example in mapping the structure of Kant's transcendental subject onto Marx's account of the exchange relation. This outwardly theoretical consideration is augmented by the other foremost feature of Adorno's materialism: his emphasis on corporeality. As Adorno argues, "[t]he object, the positive expression of non-identity, is a terminological mask."²⁰⁴ It covers over an elusive excess of matter that cannot be captured by thought. "Once the object becomes an object of cognition", as it does for idealist and materialist epistemologies alike, "its physical side" – its irreducibly *material* moment – "is spiritualised".²⁰⁵ It is "called 'object' only from the viewpoint of a subjectively aimed analysis in which the subject's primacy seems", once again, "beyond question."²⁰⁶ As Adorno contends, leaving this primacy uncontested reduces sensation – "the crux of all epistemology" – to a "fact of consciousness".²⁰⁷ There can be no sensation without a somatic moment. In this sense, epistemology runs the danger of misconstruing the thing that is registered in sensation as simply another link in the chain of cognitive functions. By contrast, Adorno argues, sensation is not spent in consciousness. "Every sensation is a physical feeling also."²⁰⁸ (The echoes of Adorno's critical engagement with Husserlian phenomenology and its afterlife are unmistakable.) It is this 'feeling' that is associated with the aforementioned 'resurrection of the flesh'.²⁰⁹ As we will find in the final chapter, it is to do with what Adorno describes as a "feeling

²⁰⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 192

²⁰⁵ Ibid

²⁰⁶ Ibid

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 193

²⁰⁸ Ibid

²⁰⁹ Adorno vigorously contests the Christological connotations of this formulation. Instead, he cites the "*Wisdom of Solomon*" as his source. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Bd. 2, 187 [My translation]

of resistance.”²¹⁰ But, as above, this ‘resurrection’ is intimated negatively. That is to say, in the first instance ‘physical feeling’ means suffering. Suffering is marked out as the somatic index of the non-identity between subject and object, man and matter, nature and culture. Adorno suggestively illustrates this point in a passage from *Negative Dialectics* titled ‘Suffering Physical’: “[a]ll pain and all negativity, the motor of dialectical thought, is the variously mediated, sometimes unrecognisable form of physical things”.²¹¹ In a characteristic gesture, Adorno identifies the antithetical moment of dialectical thought – ‘negativity’ – with ‘pain’, an enduring feature of his philosophy of history.²¹² Adorno’s ‘Utopia of cognition’ is the mirror image of this negativity. It inversely signals a state of hedonic fulfilment. As it stands, however, the perceived disparity between mind and matter causes one to experience the full weight of the dialectic of reason as somatic torment. For Adorno, this experience is imbued with an ethical imperative:²¹³ the “physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different ‘Woe speaks: Go.’ Hence the convergence of the specifically materialist with the critical, with socially transformative praxis.”²¹⁴ Once again, Adorno’s multifarious concerns converge. As he argues, “[t]he *telos* of such an organisation of society” as would allow for the satisfaction of want “would be to negate the physical suffering of even the least of its members”.²¹⁵ The insistence on a *negation* of ‘physical suffering’ in such a society in turn recalls a formulation from Adorno’s ‘Theses on Need’ (1942): “[t]he question of the immediate satisfaction of needs should not be posed under the aspects ‘social’ and ‘natural’, ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’, ‘true’ and ‘false’. Rather it falls into the same category as the question of the suffering of the vast majority of all the people on earth.”²¹⁶ In a “classless society”, we are told, the relation between “need and satisfaction *will* be transformed” – an unusually confident pronouncement.²¹⁷ This transformation, then, is coextensive with that of the relation between the

²¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, ed. Eberhard Ortland (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 52 [My translation]. See p. 159 of the present study.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 202 [Translation altered]

²¹² For an account of Adorno’s concept of a negative universal history, see pp. 69-71 of the present study.

²¹³ As has been noted by numerous commentators, Adorno was planning a major tome on ethics, which was to follow his *Aesthetic Theory*. Although this final contribution to Adorno’s systematically anti-systematic philosophy never got off the ground, his ethical concerns can nonetheless be gleaned from his lecture series on the *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (1963). Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 203 [Translation altered]

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 203-204

²¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses on Need”, trans. Keston Sutherland, *Quid*, No. 16 (2005): 43

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

subject and object of thought. Its locus is the tortured body. Notwithstanding the question as to what kind of anthropology informs Adorno's slippery conceptions of 'need' and 'satisfaction', this passage – for its part – points forward to the central motivation of Adorno's final unfinished work: *Aesthetic Theory* (1969). The alleviation of bodily suffering, the reconciliation of subject and object, the overcoming of societal antagonisms – in short, Utopia – can only be achieved *via negativa* in rendering conscious the 'spell' that obstructs these transformations: in the self-consciousness of semblance achieved in autonomous works of art.²¹⁸ For the present discussion this means the following: whilst the possibility of societal transformation is mandated by an individual experience of bodily suffering, the 'satisfaction of material needs' hinges on the continued criticism of a philosophical tradition that had been prematurely left for dead. "The power of determinate negation", outlined above, "is the *only* permissible figure" of such fulfilment.²¹⁹ If Adorno argues, then, that 'the spirit' would 'be reconciled and would become that which it only promises while the spell of material conditions will not let it satisfy material needs', then this means – in René Buchholz's words – that "such spirit may only emerge undiminished when the conditions of lack [*Mangel*] and privation [*Not*], which it repressed, will come to an end."²²⁰ This 'end' can only be arrived at critically. The image ban that undergirds Adorno's 'imageless' materialism thus stands in for the refusal to foreclose on the possibility that such an 'end' may yet be realised.²²¹

In a lecture on the concept of materialism, dated 17 January 1963, Adorno argues that, "[o]ne of the substantive misinterpretations of materialism believes that, since it teaches the preponderance of matter or, indeed, of material conditions, this preponderance itself is desired and wanted, that it

²¹⁸ We will return to this point in Chapter Three of the present study.

²¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Towards a portrait of Thomas Mann", in *Notes to Literature, Vol. 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 18 [My emphasis]

²²⁰ René Buchholz, *Zwischen Mythos und Bilderverbot: Adornos Philosophie als Anstoß zu einer kritischen Fundamentaltheologie im Kontext der späten Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991), 144 [My translation]

²²¹ Nevertheless, Adorno is careful to qualify that the strategic efficacy of the image ban must not be hypostatised. In a passage from *Minima Moralia*, titled 'Picture Book Without Pictures', for instance, he notes: "The objective tendency of the Enlightenment, to wipe out the power of images over man, is not matched by any subjective progress on the part of enlightened thinking towards freedom from images. While the assault on images irresistibly demolishes, after metaphysical ideas, those concepts once understood as rational and genuinely attained by thought, the thinking unleashed by the Enlightenment and immunized against thinking is now becoming a second figurativeness, though without images or spontaneity." Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 140

is itself positive.”²²² Rather, Adorno argues that “[t]he telos (...) of Marxist materialism is the abolition of materialism, i.e. the introduction of a state in which the blind coercion of people by material conditions would be broken and in which the question of freedom would become truly meaningful.”²²³ On Adorno’s reading, then, a truly Marxian concept of materialism is ultimately self-effacing. This is the sense in which he argues that ‘the perspective vanishing point of historic materialism would be its self-sublimation, the spirit’s liberation from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfilment’. That is to say, properly speaking, materialism would mean its own undoing, erasing even the trace of itself in the satisfaction of need. As such, it is not simply a counter-position to idealism but rather the outcome of an immanent critique of the latter – an immanent critique that aims at an altogether different relationship between subject and object beyond the coercive strictures of the status quo. Adorno’s self-effacing – *imageless* – mode of materialist cognition, then, points beyond the critique of ‘representational thinking’ to a ‘Utopia of cognition’ whose “weak messianic” promise motivates the unlikely deployment of an ostensibly biblical motif in the critical re-imagining of a Marxian materialism.²²⁴ The question, then, is: how are we to understand the theological resonances of Adorno’s invocation of the image ban?

²²² Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Bd. 2, 198 [My translation]

²²³ Ibid [My translation]

²²⁴ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”, in *Selected Writings 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 390

Chapter 2: *Inverse Theology*

“Ihr sollt euch kein Bild –”¹

Franz Kafka

The previous chapter explored a reference to the Old Testament ban on making images of God in a passage from Theodor W. Adorno’s magnum opus *Negative Dialectics* (1966). It will be recalled that particular attention was paid, herein, to Adorno’s concept of an ‘imageless’ materialism. However, the biblical provenance of Adorno’s terminology invites another question: what – if anything – is the theological weighting of his enigmatic formulation?² Such an inquiry demands considerable qualification for at least two reasons. Firstly, Adorno does not engage at any point in a sustained scholarly inquiry into the nature of God that might be called properly theological in an academic sense. (Certainly, he never received any formal training in such matters.) Secondly, as we have noted at the outset, Adorno explicitly echoes the verdicts of his intellectual progenitors Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, arguing that “positive religion has lost its (...) validity”;³ that “[t]raditional theology is not restorable.”⁴ Accordingly, his invocation of a biblical motif is indeed somewhat surprising, raising the question as to whether it can be seen as anything more than an incidental metaphor.

Once again, our problem can be framed with a view to Adorno’s reflections on Arnold Schoenberg’s unfinished opera *Moses und Aron* (1932). In his essay ‘Sacred Fragment’ (1963) Adorno describes Schoenberg’s Exodus-adaptation as a work of “sacred music”.⁵ As he argues,

¹ “Thou shalt no image –” Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2002), 360 [My translation]

² My exposition hinges on a distinction between religion and theology that is treated at some length below. To begin with, however, it is worth noting the following: ‘religion’, commonly held to stem from the Latin *religare* (to bind), is generally taken to mean submitting to a traditionally imparted authority derived directly from God. By contrast, ‘theology’ – from the Greek *theos* (God) and *logos* (order of knowledge) – is conventionally viewed as a reasoned discourse *about* God. With respect to our present focus on Judaism and Christianity (the coordinates of Adorno’s presentation) this means, above all, a reasoned discourse about scripture, the ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Testaments, respectively. Theology is thus treated as the ‘science of religion’.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses Upon Art and Religion Today”, in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 647

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “Theologie, Aufklärung und die Zukunft der Illusion”, in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VIII*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 2003), 235 [My translation]

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “Sacred Fragment: Schoenberg’s ‘Moses und Aron’”, in *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), 229. Giorgio Agamben’s recent characterisation of the term ‘sacred’ is useful in this context. Following a definition by the Roman jurist Trebatius, Agamben argues

“[s]acred works of art – and the fact that *Moses und Aron* was written as an opera does not disqualify it from being one – claim that their substance is valid.”⁶ That is to say, Schoenberg’s opera insists on the continuing actuality and the binding validity of its biblical ‘substance’, its biblical subject matter. But, Adorno argues, “a secular world can scarcely tolerate (...) sacred art”.⁷ This estimation designates a two-pronged difficulty for Schoenberg’s piece. On the one hand, this impasse is conditioned by historical factors, “[t]he impossibility (...) of sacred art today”.⁸ On the other hand, there is a contradiction “intrinsic to the work”:⁹ “God, the absolute, eludes finite beings. Where they desire to name him, because they must, they betray him. But if they keep silent about him, they acquiesce in their own impotence and sin against the other, no less binding, commandment *to* name him.”¹⁰ Finite beings “lose heart”, Adorno continues, “because they are not up to the task” of naming the infinite.¹¹ (They are not up to this task because after the expulsion from paradise the Adamitic language of names becomes mere chatter, *Geschwätz*.) As Adorno argues, Schoenberg is aware of these difficulties. He has “an intuition of the link between the possibility of sacred works and the actual historical situation”, which is “uncongenial” to religious sentiments.¹² His opera thus stages a kind of necessary failure: on the one hand, the piece “must extend a hand to the sacred if it is not entirely to fail its own intention”;¹³ on the other hand, this extending-of-a-hand must over-reach itself.

In light of this short gloss, Adorno’s challenge to the Viennese composer comes into focus. Adorno asks: “how is cultic music possible in the absence of cult?”¹⁴ In other words, how does Schoenberg’s opera resist a lapse into wanton anachronism? Leaving in suspense Adorno’s solution to this quandary (he describes Schoenberg’s opera in terms of “negative theology”),¹⁵ I propose to reformulate his question and direct it back at him. Accordingly, we must ask: how is it

as follows: “[s]acred or religious were things that in some way belonged to the gods. As such, they were removed from the free use and commerce of men; they could be neither sold nor held in lien, neither given for usufruct nor burdened by servitude”. By contrast, “if ‘to consecrate’ (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, ‘to profane’ meant, conversely, to return them to the free use of men.” We will return to this point in due course. Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation”, in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 73

⁶ Adorno, “Sacred Fragment”, 228

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid, 226-227 [My emphasis]

⁹ Ibid, 226

¹⁰ Ibid [My emphasis] Adorno’s point, in turn, will be that the success of Schoenberg’s piece lies, precisely, in distancing itself from any kind of *personal* expression. The work itself speaks.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid, 227

¹³ Ibid, 228

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid, 236

possible for Adorno to invoke the language of theology given that he explicitly rejects its validity? My wager is that Adorno turns to theology in spite of itself, thus assigning figures such as the image ban a curious afterlife. As we will find, the modern dislocation of traditional theology thus serves as the condition of possibility for the deployment of its terms in the immanent critique of reality under the rule of a capitalist cult religion.¹⁶

Before elaborating on this point, however, we must clarify some underlying issues. Accordingly, the first part of the present chapter asks the following questions: i.) What roles do religion and theology play in Adorno's life and work, more generally? ii.) How does Adorno distinguish between theology, religion and metaphysics? Moreover, can his thought be adequately grasped as a form of 'negative theology'? iii.) What is meant by the notion of a capitalist cult religion and how does it bear on our reading of Adorno? iv.) And finally: to what extent can Adorno be said to 'secularise' figures like the image ban?

With these questions in mind, the second part of the present chapter aims to develop Adorno's concept of an 'inverse theology'. This formulation occurs in a letter from Adorno to Walter Benjamin, dated 17 December 1934, wherein he responds to his friend's essay, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death'.¹⁷ Adorno writes:

Do not take it for immodesty if I begin by confessing that our agreement in philosophical fundamentals has never impressed itself upon my mind more perfectly than it does here. Let me only mention my own earliest attempt to interpret Kafka, nine years ago – I claimed he is a photograph of earthly life taken from the perspective of the redeemed, of which nothing appears but the edge of a black cloth, whereas the terrifyingly displaced optic of the photographic image is none other than that of the obliquely angled camera itself – no further words seem necessary to demonstrate our agreement, however much your analyses also point beyond this conception. And this also, and indeed in quite a principled sense, concerns the position of 'theology'. Since I always insisted on such a position, before entering your Arcades, it seems to me doubly important that the image of theology, into which I would gladly see our thoughts dissolve, is none other than the very

¹⁶ Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion", in *Selected Writings 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 288-291

¹⁷ Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death", in *Selected Writings 2.2, 1931-1934*, eds. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings & Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 794-818

one which sustains your thoughts here – it could indeed be called ‘*inverse*’ theology.¹⁸

The first part of this passage contains an early articulation of a notable figure from Adorno’s post-war writings. The ‘photograph of earthly life taken from the perspective of the redeemed’ occurs both in ‘Finale’ – the closing aphorism from *Minima Moralia* (1951) – and in ‘Notes on Kafka’ (1953). This formulation is treated, below, with a view to exploring what it might mean to speak of such a ‘perspective’ (or – indeed – *from* it). After all, Adorno’s self-professed abidance by the image ban prohibits him from furnishing the “standpoint of redemption” with any positive determinations.¹⁹ This question is explored with an eye to some of the criticisms that this phrasing has provoked in recent years, specifically from Jacob Taubes and Giorgio Agamben, who charge that the ostensibly ‘messianic’,²⁰ ‘theological’ current in Adorno’s work amounts to little more than hollow aestheticism written in the mode of the ‘*as if*’.

In turn, the second part of this passage concerns Adorno’s self-avowed agreement with an ‘image of theology’ that he attributes to Benjamin. To be sure, this enthusiastic declaration of allegiance must be taken with a pinch of salt. Adorno’s assertion is complicated by at least two factors: firstly, the role of theology in Benjamin’s writings is notoriously unstable, displaying a great range of facets between early works, such as ‘Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present’ (1912), and later texts, such as the piece on Kafka, not to mention the theses ‘On the Concept of History’ (1940). In this regard, speaking of Benjamin’s ‘image of theology’ in the singular is in fact untenably reductive. In any case, it will not be our aim to survey the many guises of theology in Benjamin’s thought (from the blotting pad to the wizened dwarf) as if to suggest that they form

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno & Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 66-67. [Translation altered / my emphasis]

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 247

²⁰ As will become clear, the effort to respond to this charge resonates with ongoing debates concerning the remarkable intersection of Jewish Messianism with revolutionary politics, which was characteristic for certain German-Jewish thinkers in the early part of the 20th century. As Michael Löwy demonstrates, during this period a particular constellation of social and historical factors inspired a generation of largely assimilated German Jews to turn to their ancestral religion as it appeared to them through a Romantic prism. Accordingly, authors like Gustav Landauer, Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin and Franz Kafka are all said to have oriented their work, in various ways, around the kabbalistic idea of *Tikkun*. According to Löwy, *Tikkun* – Hebrew for ‘restoration’ – refers to two tendencies “that are at once intimately linked and contradictory: a *restorative* current focusing on the re-establishment of a (...) shattered Edenic harmony; and a *utopian* current which aspired to a radically new future, to a state of things that has never existed before.” Certainly, Adorno’s proximity to the romantic/anarchistic tendencies ascribed to these authors by Löwy must not be overstated. However, insofar as his main interlocutors in the formulation of an ‘inverse theology’ are Benjamin and Kafka, I take it that a certain affinity with this tradition should not be wholly discounted. Cf. Michael Löwy, *Redemption & Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe*, trans. Hope Heaney (London: Athlone Press, 1992), 16

some self-sufficient framework in which Adorno figures as a mere afterthought. Rather, inasmuch as Adorno's reading of Benjamin contains an element of projection – the as-yet nascent 'image' of a 'theology' into which he 'would gladly' see their 'thoughts dissolve' – I take it that his views possess a degree of independence that is often underestimated.

Secondly, it is worth noting that little over a year after writing the letter cited above, Adorno famously criticises one of Benjamin's *Arcades* exposés, arguing for a radicalisation of his friend's dialectic "right into the theological glowing core".²¹ However, instead of recounting the catalogue of familiar grievances concerning the rift between Adorno and Benjamin, contained *in nuce* in their 1935 exchange,²² the present chapter aims to trace an (admittedly) speculative thread, leading from Adorno's singular over-identification with Benjamin's 'image of theology' to his use of theological terms in an ostensibly secular critique of capitalist modernity. As I will aim to prove, Adorno views the 'image' of an 'inverse theology' as suggesting a shift of the topography on which traditional theological inquiry rests: the supposedly stable orders of the 'sacred' and the 'profane'. On the one hand, this means a standard enlightenment narrative, which teaches that the authority of a religious worldview is displaced by the advancement of the natural sciences; on the other hand, it means that the seemingly secular-scientific phenomenon of capitalism is itself imbued with religious characteristics. We might ask then: what happens to theology under the sway of a capitalist cult religion? Moreover: in what sense can its displaced terms be put to work by a critical theory, such as Adorno's, without nostalgically reasserting an irretrievably lost authority? As I argue, reflecting on Adorno's notion of an 'inverse theology' can shed some light on these matters.

I: Adorno & Theology

i.) Life & Work:

We have asserted, then, that Adorno is neither a religious nor a theological thinker in any straightforward sense. This is reflected, in part, by his biography. Adorno's father – the German wine merchant Oskar Wiesengrund – converted from Judaism to Protestantism before his son's

²¹ Adorno & Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 143

²² For an influential account of the disagreement over dialectics in Adorno and Benjamin's 1935 correspondence, see: Susan Buck-Morss, "The Adorno-Benjamin Debate, Part 1: The Issues", in *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 136-150

birth, whereas Adorno's mother – the Corsican singer Maria Calvelli-Adorno – was Catholic.²³ Adorno was nominally raised as a Lutheran but organised religion appears to have played no particular role in his upbringing.²⁴ Nevertheless, it is worth noting a few points about Adorno's relation to his Jewish and Christian heritage, if only to give an indication of his sources.

As Detlev Claussen argues, Adorno was strongly influenced by his upbringing amongst the luminaries of Frankfurt's Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum*.²⁵ This is clear, not least, from his relationship with the close family friend Siegfried Kracauer.²⁶ In addition to studying key philosophical texts by Kant and Hegel, Kracauer and the young Adorno read seminal works of inter-war Judaism, such as Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* (1921). However, Adorno is said to have been quite unmoved by Rosenzweig's book, referring to it in a letter to Leo Löwenthal as "linguistic philosophemes, which I wouldn't understand even if I understood them".²⁷ This dismissive attitude is echoed decades later in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964), which contains a biting critique of Rosenzweig's colleague, the Jewish existentialist philosopher Martin Buber. (Adorno famously argues that Buber's account of the 'I-Thou' relation, removes the "thorn" from "theology, without which redemption is unthinkable".)²⁸ Though it is not our present task to explore Adorno's objections to Buber, his grievance indicates – amongst other things – that Adorno's early view of Judaism in general, and the circle around the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus*²⁹ in particular, appears to have been broadly unsympathetic – an attitude that shifts somewhat in later years through his acquaintance with Benjamin.

Adorno's engagement with Christianity, by contrast, appears to have been more substantial. This is discernible from his *Habilitationsschrift, Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1933), which was written under the supervision of the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich.

²³ Cf. Evelyn Wilcock, "Negative Identity: Mixed German Jewish Descent as a Factor in the Reception of Theodor Adorno", *New German Critique*, No. 81 (Autumn 2000): 169-187

²⁴ Cf. Stefan Müller-Doohm, "Family Inheritance: a Picture of Contrasts", in *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 3-66. The fact that Adorno toyed with the idea of a conversion to Catholicism in his youth – as documented in his correspondence with Ernst Krenek – is of little consequence here as he quickly dismissed his plans as impossibly romantic. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno & Ernst Krenek, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Wolfgang Rogge (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974)

²⁵ Cf. Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010)

²⁶ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno & Siegfried Kracauer, *Briefwechsel: 1923-1966* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008)

²⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Brief an Leo Löwenthal, 22.08.1923", in *Das Utopische soll Funken schlagen – zum 100. Geburtstag von Leo Löwenthal*, ed. Peter-Erwin Jansen (Frankfurt am Main: Gesellschaft der Freunde der Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek, Frankfurt am Main, 2000), 45 [My translation]

²⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski & Fredric Will (London: Routledge, 1973), 16 [Translation altered]

²⁹ Cf. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Intellektuellendämmerung: Zur Lage der Frankfurter Intelligenz in den zwanziger Jahren* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985)

Ostensibly this work contains Adorno's most sustained engagement with the work of any one 'theologian'. However, as Hermann Deuser points out, Adorno sides with a resolutely *philosophical* Kierkegaard. That is to say, his reading contrasts "a critical and aesthetic Kierkegaard, on the one hand" with "a theologian of sacrifice, suspected of existential ontology, on the other."³⁰ Without wishing to focus on Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard as such, it suffices to note the following: in light of the above, any claim to a theological current in Adorno's thinking must take into account not only that he was generally suspicious of religion and theology, but – more importantly – that his sources were resolutely second hand. His understanding of Judaism owes more to Benjamin than it owes to the Talmud;³¹ his knowledge of Christianity owes more to Kierkegaard than it does to a concerted study of the Gospels. The point is that Adorno is not concerned with a return to God, despite his explicit declaration of "theological intentions"³² vis-à-vis Max Horkheimer. Accordingly, we are better served by asking not how accurately Adorno's particular reception of theology maps onto its traditional variants, but rather how he critically repurposes theological terms, however limited his awareness of their original context might be. But how does this critical appropriation of a seemingly defunct theological vernacular play out in practice?

ii.) *Negative Universal History: Religion – Theology – Metaphysics*

As suggested above, the first step in substantiating our opening wager is to situate the terms of our investigation in the context of Adorno's philosophy of history. The point, I argue, is that Adorno conceives of religion, theology and metaphysics as particular formations within a larger philosophical-historical edifice. As such, these 'formations' lie embedded in a highly speculative civilisational meta-narrative (characterised by an "unmissable logic and rhetoric of exaggeration,

³⁰ Hermann Deuser, *Dialektische Theologie: Studien zu Adornos Metaphysik und zum Spätwerk Kierkegaards* (Munich & Mainz: Kaiser Verlag, 1980), 284 [My translation]

³¹ It is noteworthy that Benjamin, in turn, appears to owe his knowledge of Judaism in good measure to the relationship with his lifelong friend, the renowned Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem. Scholem, for his part, recounts a meeting with Adorno in the following terms: "[t]he good spirit that prevailed in the meetings between Adorno and me was due not so much to the cordiality of the reception as to my considerable surprise at Adorno's appreciation of the continuing theological element in Benjamin." Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), 15

³² Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel, Band 1: 1927-1937*, eds. Christoph Gödde & Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 52 [My translation]

hyperbole, and excess”),³³ which traces the vacillations of rational thought from pre-history to the present.³⁴ In order to grasp the problematic coherence of this narrative, however, we must consider two of Adorno’s core ideas: a.) Negative universal history; b.) The dialectic of reason.

a.) Negative universal history is understood as an immanent recasting of Hegel’s concept of universal history. In order for there to be history at all, Adorno suggests, universal history has to be – at once – “constructed and denied.”³⁵ How so? In Adorno’s view, the basic movement of Hegel’s concept of universal history can already be discerned in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806). Herein, it will be recalled, Hegel charts a series of dialectical stages through which consciousness moves purposefully forward towards freedom. Universal history, at least as Adorno sees it, means the totality of this movement conceived of as “the continuous history of mankind”.³⁶ Inasmuch as Adorno is concerned with constructing a *concept* of history, he must affirm the totality of this movement. After all, concepts always aim at universality and since, for Adorno, philosophy necessarily deals in concepts, it follows that the concept of history must be *a priori* universal. However, although Adorno deems the structure of Hegel’s reflections to be necessary for constructing a concept of history, he is nonetheless careful to emphasise its Achilles heel: that universal history is apparently unable to account for contingency. (On Adorno’s account, Hegel himself overstates his case when he suggests that history turns contingent events into necessary ones according to their providential *telos*. To be fair to Hegel, though, it is debatable whether he *is*, in fact, suggesting this.) Without presuming to settle this issue here, it suffices to note that Adorno turns to an unlikely ally: the positivist critique of universal history. As he argues, the minutiae of contingent historical events cause breaks and fissures in Hegel’s supposedly seamless narrative of historical progress. “As long as you do not have too great a knowledge of historical detail”, he claims, “you not only have the benefit of (...) distance which

³³ Hent De Vries, *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*, trans. Geoffrey Hale, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), xvii

³⁴ Adorno first outlines the broad contours of this narrative in his early lectures, ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’ (1931) and ‘The Idea of Natural History’ (1932). It is, then, elaborated in his *Habilitationsschrift* on Kierkegaard from whence it is taken up into *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). The piecemeal theses contained in these texts finally receive their full philosophical articulation in a section of *Negative Dialectics* titled ‘World Spirit and Natural History: an Excursion on Hegel’. Herein Adorno proposes two divergent approaches: on the one hand, he outlines an idea of ‘natural-history’, which is largely derived from a cross reading of Benjamin and Lukács; on the other hand, he presents a concept of ‘negative universal history’ to which we will turn momentarily. (As we will find, these sit uneasily beside each other.)

³⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 320

³⁶ Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 80

enables you to gain a better overview, but, by the same token, you are blinder to facts that make things awkward for philosophical theory.”³⁷ That is to say, universal history falsifies those events that do not conform to its narrative thrust. Its guiding ethos is: “so much the worse for the facts”.³⁸ To this extent, universal history has to be negated, ‘denied’.

Negative universal history, then, is a problematic sort of counter-narrative that seeks to tell the history of domination and defeat rather than progress. Adorno cites Benjamin on this point, arguing that universal history is always written from the standpoint of the victor of historical struggle.³⁹

[B]y pointing out that the element of consent, of apologia, that is to say the element that justifies history from the standpoint of the victor and defends everything that has happened on the grounds of its necessity – this element of consent is connected with the construction of a theory of universal history because the assumption of such a continuous *unity* in history seems to point to the idea that history has meaning.⁴⁰

We will return to the point about the breakdown of meaning in history in our discussion of Adorno’s ‘Mediations on Metaphysics’. For now let us note that if, for Hegel, universal history is supposed to tell the story of an inevitable unfolding of consciousness towards freedom, then *negative* universal history must mean the story of man’s (self) domination and the ensuing state of *un*-freedom. This, of course, is the theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, to which we will turn momentarily. First, however, we must account for a serious criticism that Adorno opens himself up to on this point.

One might object that if Adorno aims to expose the fraudulent ideology that is supposed to nourish a providential history leading “from savagery to humanitarianism” by reversing its course to go “from the slingshot to the megaton bomb”,⁴¹ as the famous formulation from *Negative Dialectics* goes, then he is – in fact – simply reproducing it as ‘bad’ universality. Adorno seeks to pre-empt this charge by unfolding a somewhat unconvincing dialectic of continuity/discontinuity.

³⁷ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 82

³⁸ Ibid, 83. See p. 27 of the present study.

³⁹ Cf. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”, in *Selected Writings 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 389-400

⁴⁰ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 87

⁴¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320

As he argues, “discontinuity and universal history must be conceived together.”⁴² That is to say, on the one hand, history is “*discontinuous* in the sense that it represents life perennially disrupted” and, on the other hand, it is *continuous* in the sense that this ‘disruption’ is itself deemed to be permanent.⁴³ Accordingly, Adorno’s materialist rebuttal of Hegel is that historical events do not take place *in* a predetermined flow of history, but rather that the events themselves contain a historical “nucleus” – a *Zeitkern* – “that can be decoded by interpretation.”⁴⁴ It is not presently our task to retread these matters. Let us note instead that the uneasy tension in Adorno’s reasoning speaks to a larger problem with his philosophy of history, namely: that the excursus on ‘World Spirit and Natural History’ contains two divergent models. On the one hand, it describes an idea of natural-history which is fragmented, melancholic and committed to the particularity of historical suffering; on the other hand, it proffers an account of negative universal history which is linear, albeit not progressive. But if Adorno insists that the incongruity between these models can be surmounted dialectically, then it is not clear how he envisages their mutual mediation. His conceit, in any case, appears to be that “the trace of possible developments, of something hopeful”,⁴⁵ can be thrown into relief by interpreting the fragments of ‘bad’ universality as containing the “mirror writing” of their opposite.⁴⁶ This broadly messianic view will require further qualification in due course. In the meantime we must ask: how does Adorno’s concept of negative universal history factor in his account of a dialectic of reason?

b.) Having thus reconstructed the contours of Adorno’s negative universal history, we can take another step towards determining how his concepts of religion, theology and metaphysics sit therein. For this purpose we turn to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a work co-authored by Adorno and Horkheimer during their American exile in the 1940s. By way of introduction, it is worth highlighting the following: Adorno and Horkheimer’s central thesis – “[m]yth is already enlightenment, and all enlightenment reverts to mythology”⁴⁷ – already anticipates the grandiose historical meta-narrative outlined above. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the markers of this arc are different historical guises of what is always already seen by the authors as ‘rational’ thought – a

⁴² Ibid, 319

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid, 91

⁴⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247 [Translation altered]. See pp. 46-50 of the present study.

⁴⁷ Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xviii

development that stretches from pre-history to the present and encompasses religion, theology and metaphysics. Before attempting to differentiate between these terms, however, the motto cited above requires further elucidation.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, myth designates two divergent tendencies that Adorno and Horkheimer extract from their reading of Homer's *Odyssey*.⁴⁸ On the one hand, the authors loosely characterise myth as a particular narrative form, which is "derived from popular tradition".⁴⁹ With explicit reference to Ulrich Moellendorff and Jacob Burckhardt (and an implicit nod to Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*, 1916), they assure us that the overarching characteristic of myth is that man is ruled over by perennial forces of murky provenance, which they describe as 'fate' or 'destiny' (*Schicksal*). Accordingly, Adorno and Horkheimer present the world of myth as emphatically pre-historic inasmuch as past, present and future appear undifferentiated therein. In myth, they argue, "nothing can be defined as lasting, and yet everything remains one and the same".⁵⁰ In this regard, they assert that myth operates according to the timeless law of cyclical recurrence (as in the myth of Sisyphus, for instance). On the other hand, however, the authors characterise myth as an early product of emphatically *rational* thought. That is to say, in Adorno and Horkheimer's view, 'myth is already enlightenment' to the extent that it serves as an explanatory device designed to dispel man's elementary terror before the death-bringing forces of nature – a form of rationalisation. Hence the famous estimation that "[e]nlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters",⁵¹ both physically and intellectually. In turn, the concept of 'enlightenment' extends far beyond a particular historical period, such as the 18th century.⁵²

⁴⁸ As Adorno and Horkheimer argue, "the *Odyssey* as a whole bears witness to the dialectic of enlightenment. In its oldest stratum, especially, the epic shows clear links to myth: the adventures are drawn from popular tradition. But as the Homeric spirit takes over and 'organises' the myths, it comes into contradictions with them. The familiar equation of epic and myth, which in any case has been undermined by recent classical philology, proves wholly misleading when subjected to philosophical critique. The two concepts diverge. They mark two phases of an historical process, which are still visible at the joints where editors have stitched the epic together." Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 35

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid, 205

⁵¹ Ibid, 3 [My emphasis]

⁵² To be sure, Adorno and Horkheimer's entire exposition must be taken *cum grano salis*. Their account of animism, for example, is certainly not concerned with anthropological research *per se*. Rather, these excursions serve to illustrate a broadly psychoanalytic point about the formation of subjectivity. This is not to suggest, of course, that Adorno and Horkheimer's glaring Euro-centrism is immune to criticism; only that this is not our current focus. Certainly, recent scholarship challenging a monolithic view of 'the' enlightenment – such as the work of Jonathan Israel – seriously calls into question some of Adorno and Horkheimer's precepts. Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in these terms, however, exceeds the remit of the present chapter. Cf. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Rather, it is taken to mean a much more general comportment by which human beings assert their place in the world through the mastery of nature. Without rehearsing the specifics of this point, we note that Adorno and Horkheimer's account is tied to a wider, quasi-ontogenetic reflection on the emergence of (bourgeois) subjectivity. As they argue, man's individual consciousness is wrested from the realm of brute physical actuality. At the same time, there remains an irreducibly 'natural' dimension to man's bodily being – though 'nature', here, always means *second* nature.⁵³ Accordingly, the struggle against nature must also be seen as a struggle against oneself. That is to say, for man to safeguard himself against the fearful world from which he emerges, but which he fears may at any point reclaim him, he must deny his own ties to nature. Through various twists and turns, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, this internalised sense of domination returns as the calamitous revenge of repressed nature: the domination of human beings over each other. In this sense the book tells a story about the fateful cycle of self-preservation and its cost. The “mythical sacrifice of reason” is endlessly replayed in ever more terrible scenarios that extend right into the present age.⁵⁴

Adorno and Horkheimer illustrate this point with reference to Odysseus's cunning efforts to outsmart the powers of mythical nature (Circe, the Cyclops, the Lotus-Eaters, etc.) As they argue, Odysseus becomes a slave to his self-preservational drive and thus relapses to a fateful state of un-freedom that is akin to mythical nature. In Adorno and Horkheimer's view, this is particularly evident in book XII of the *Odyssey*, the tale of Odysseus and the Sirens.⁵⁵ Herein, it will be recalled, Odysseus orders his oarsmen to stuff their ears with wax and tie him to the mast of their ship as they pass by the Sirens' island. This way the crew remain impervious to the Sirens' irresistible call whilst Odysseus may experience it from a position of relative safety. In the present context, this episode is significant because it serves as an analogy for the self-abnegation of reason that Adorno and Horkheimer purport to diagnose. As they argue, Odysseus – the prototype of the bourgeois subject – resists the Sirens' mythical call only by having himself restrained. The cost of his self-preservation, however, is nothing less than his precarious autonomy. The point is that Adorno and Horkheimer derive a general historical paradigm from this image. As they suggest, a “history of civilisation” conceived along the lines of the *Odyssey*

⁵³ See p. 56, n. 194 of the present study.

⁵⁴ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 119

⁵⁵ For an illuminating feminist reading of these passages from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see: Rebecca Comay, “Adorno's Siren Song”, *New German Critique*, No. 81 (Autumn, 2000): 21-48

(being bound in order to persist) appears as a “history of the introversion of sacrifice”:⁵⁶ a sacrifice of the self to itself, so to speak. How, then, do the three ‘guises’ of rational thought that we set out to situate – religion, theology and metaphysics – factor in this larger construct?

- *Religion:*

Having established the general outline of Adorno’s historical framework, we can finally turn to the first of the three guises of rational thought that we set out to differentiate, namely: religion. Although Adorno makes free use of religious motifs throughout his writings, his explicit references to religion *as* religion are scant. (They typically occur indirectly in works like *The Jargon of Authenticity*, where he argues that certain unacknowledged religious sentiments live on in the ostensibly secular thought patterns of thinkers such as Jaspers and Heidegger.) Where Adorno does speak of religion as such, however, he is generally concerned with various forms of Judaism and Christianity. He appears to rely on the etymological derivation of ‘religion’ from the Latin *religare* (to bind), for instance, when he speaks of the “renaissance of revealed religion” in terms of “bonds” (*Bindungen*).⁵⁷ We might infer, then, that for Adorno religion means being bound *to* and, indeed, *by* a tradition that claims to derive its authority directly from divine revelation, e.g. Moses’ reception of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. The operative terms here are ‘revelation’, meaning God’s direct communication with man (God *reveals* certain injunctions to the prophet Moses), and ‘tradition’ (the term “comes from *tradere*, to hand down”),⁵⁸ which designates the mode of transmission by which God’s injunctions arrive in the present. That is to say, Adorno seems to perceive the defining trait of religion as a submission to the traditional authority of revelation. The problem with religious thinking in the present, then, is that Adorno figures modernity precisely as a *crisis* of tradition, following a broadly Marxian account of the capitalist dissolution of bonds paired with a more thoroughgoing Nietzscheanism. Leaving in suspense the resonance of this point with Benjamin’s Kafka essay, which treats the modern crisis of tradition at some length, we note the following: on the one hand, religion has a socially normative function inasmuch as it binds individuals to each other through a shared

⁵⁶ Ibid, 43

⁵⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “Reason and Revelation”, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 138

⁵⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Über Tradition”, in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 310 [My translation]

observance of the divine injunctions received from tradition (e.g. the ban on images); on the other hand, it has an explanatory function inasmuch as it designates a “system of thought”,⁵⁹ which – like myth – provides an account of the origins of the universe, the meaning of life, etc. In its capacity as a ‘system of thought’, to borrow Freud’s idiom, religion must thus be grasped as a form of rational thought that is proper to a specific historical moment. As we have noted in our Introduction, Adorno and Horkheimer cite Judaism as the paradigmatic example hereof.

As *the* monotheistic religion par excellence, Judaism is presented as a rationalisation of polytheistic paganism; a more advanced ‘stage’ in the dialectic of enlightenment. Its central feature, we are told, is that it “outlaw[s] the principle of magic.”⁶⁰ Accordingly, Adorno and Horkheimer assure us that, in Judaism, spells give way to concepts, and taboos give way to laws – above all, the law against idol worship. In this regard, it follows that Judaism is repeatedly equated with reason itself in a curious echo of Hermann Cohen’s famous characterisation.⁶¹ That is why, unlike Christianity, Judaism makes no appeal to faith. In any case, Adorno and Horkheimer present the Jewish idea of God as annihilating the spirited cosmos of animism: “as its creator and ruler”, they claim, the Jewish God “*subjugates* nature”.⁶² This admittedly tendentious interpretation allows the authors to discern the dialectic of reason in Judaism, inasmuch as the effort to vanquish myth through a seamless domination of nature only ensnares it deeper in its fateful cycle. As Adorno and Horkheimer argue:

God as spirit is the principle *opposed* to nature; it not only stands for nature’s blind cycle as do all the mythical gods, but offers liberation from it. But in its remotest abstractness, the incommensurable has at the same time become more terrible, and the pitiless statement: ‘I am who I am’, which tolerates nothing beside itself, surpasses in its inescapable power the blinder and therefore more ambiguous judgement of anonymous fate.⁶³

The passage clearly illustrates the historical dynamic we have outlined above: whilst ‘God as spirit’ is said to ‘offer liberation’ from the ‘blind cycle’ of ‘nature’, His ‘remote abstractness’

⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem & Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1966), 77

⁶⁰ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 13

⁶¹ See pp. 161-162 of the present study. *NB* – Scholem proffers a damning critique of the identification of Judaism with reason. The problem with such a conflation, he argues, is that it ignores the mystical, ‘irrational’ strands of Judaism contained in the Zohar, the Lurianic Cabbala and elsewhere. Cf. Gershom Scholem, “The Science of Judaism – Then and Now”, in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 304-313

⁶² Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 145 [My emphasis]

⁶³ *Ibid* [My emphasis]

ultimately turns out to be even more ‘terrible’ than what preceded it. As such, Judaism is seen as containing an enlightening moment that, in turn, reverts to myth. Redeeming this moment would require nothing less than an immanent critique of Judaism itself – an effort that exceeds not only the confines of the present chapter but also the remit of Adorno and Horkheimer’s book. Instead of attempting to fill out this lacuna, it remains to ask how Adorno envisages the difference between ‘religion’ and ‘theology’.

- *Theology:*

As will be recalled, it was asserted at the outset that Adorno views theology as the intellectual superstructure of religion: a reasoned discourse *about* God. It remains to show, then, that the historical dynamic we have outlined above is, in fact, operational in this context too. I propose to approach this matter with a view to two guiding questions: a.) How does the dialectic of reason play out in Adorno’s paradigmatic essay ‘Reason and Revelation’ (1958)? b.) Can Adorno’s thought be adequately grasped as a form of ‘negative theology’?

a.) In a short essay titled ‘Reason and Revelation’ Adorno reflects on a series of interrelated questions.⁶⁴ Firstly, he is concerned with a tension between two ostensibly divergent tendencies that span the history of Christian thought from Augustine to Karl Barth. On the one hand, this means ‘faith in revelation’ (*Offenbarungsglaube*); on the other hand, it means ‘autonomous reason’ (*autonome Vernunft*). As we will find, Adorno explores a number of different historical efforts to negotiate this relationship. To begin with, the investigation is prompted by what he perceives as a disconcerting “turn toward positive religion” in post-war West Germany.⁶⁵ Although Adorno cites only anecdotal evidence for this alleged development, he assures us that this ‘turn’ expresses an altogether spurious sense – pervasive in the *Bundesrepublik* – that one could simply “breathe back that meaning into the disenchanting world under whose absence we

⁶⁴ The text was first presented at a roundtable discussion between Adorno and the historian Eugen Kogon, held in Münster in 1957, and broadcast by the *Westdeutscher Rundfunk*. Transcripts of both Adorno’s and Kogon’s presentations (as well as their ensuing discussion) were published in two parts in 1958 under the heading “Offenbarung oder autonome Vernunft” in a literary journal co-edited by Kogon, titled *Frankfurter Hefte*. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno & Eugen Kogon, “Offenbarung oder autonome Vernunft (i)”, *Frankfurter Hefte: Zeitschrift für Kultur und Politik*, Vol. 13, No. 6 (Jun 1958): 392-402; “Offenbarung oder autonome Vernunft (ii)”, *Frankfurter Hefte: Zeitschrift für Kultur und Politik*, Vol. 13, No. 7 (Jun 1958): 484-498

⁶⁵ Adorno, “Reason and Revelation”, 136

have been suffering for so long”.⁶⁶ As he suggests, the danger of this tendency is that it legitimates a wanton obscurantism: “today”, he claims, “the turn toward faith in revelation” is a “desperate reaction” to the perceived failings of “*ratio*”, an estimation that recalls the argumentative pattern familiar from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁶⁷ Adorno’s general point appears to be that, at best, the “new religious attitude”⁶⁸ offers a false sense of consolation about the ills of capitalist modernity; at worst, its irrationalism serves to reinforce existing injustices (wishing away socio-historically conditioned problems, rather than facing them). Secondly, as in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno’s exposition is underpinned by an indictment of certain strands of contemporary philosophy that he perceives as forms of crypto-religious irrationalism. (As above, his main target here is Heidegger.)⁶⁹ Adorno writes that “the endeavours of ontology today” are little more than a desperate attempt to “leap without mediation” from an “ongoing nominalistic situation” into “realism, the world of ideas in themselves” – a tendency that is, in turn, “closely related” to the “renaissance of revealed religion”.⁷⁰ Without wishing to assay the feasibility of these charges, it will prove telling that the *topos* of a Kierkegaardian ‘leap’ from a ‘nominalistic situation’ into ‘realism’ recurs throughout Adorno’s text.⁷¹ Before we consider what this can tell us about Adorno’s attitude towards theology, however, it remains to pre-empt one possible misunderstanding: under no circumstances should the text be read simply as an atheistic diatribe against religious sentiments or theological reasoning *per se*. After all, Adorno notes that, “vis-à-vis the hardening of the world in late Antiquity”, for instance, “Christianity had an infinitely liberating and humane effect”.⁷² To say that Christianity “has never been anything more than

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid [My emphasis]

⁶⁸ Ibid, 137

⁶⁹ Although Adorno does not mention Heidegger in ‘Reason and Revelation’, he is on record as saying the following in the discussion with Kogon that followed his initial presentation of the text: “I believe (...) that the blame” or, we might add, the *cause* for the developments described in ‘Reason and Revelation’, “does not lie primarily in *intellectual* – but rather in *societal* developments. Or rather, inasmuch as it is to do with intellectual forces, philosophy today is more to blame than positive religion. And I am indeed of the opinion that Mr. Heidegger’s name should be stressed at this point as one of the main culprits.” Adorno & Kogon, “Offenbarung oder autonome Vernunft [ii]”, 497 [My translation and emphasis]

⁷⁰ Adorno, “Reason and Revelation”, 138

⁷¹ For two very different readings of Adorno’s own relationship to nominalism – a term that plays a significant role in *Aesthetic Theory* – see: Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Title Essay: Baroque Allegory and ‘The Essay as Form’”, in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 125-135; Fredric Jameson, “Nominalism”, in *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), 157-164

⁷² Adorno & Kogon, “Offenbarung oder autonome Vernunft (ii)”, 496 [My translation]

ideology would really be the most narrow-minded sociology.”⁷³ However, “*today*” Christianity runs the “infinite danger” of becoming a surrogate for “authoritarian” tendencies.⁷⁴

Leaving aside some of the glaring gaps in Adorno’s piece, we note that ‘Reason and Revelation’ is of interest in the present context less because of its concern with contemporary religious trends and more because, between the lines, it contains an admittedly schematic (not to say tendentious) account of how Christian *thought* sits in the larger philosophical meta-narrative that we have sought to trace. That is to say, as far as we are concerned, ‘Reason and Revelation’ clearly indicates two things: firstly, Adorno’s account of the historical tensions between ‘reason’ and ‘revelation’ (cited to illustrate his plaint against the alleged ‘renaissance of revealed religion’) constitutes – however scantily – a history of Christian *theology*. After all, Adorno surveys a number of divergent efforts to treat God intellectually and discursively. Secondly, as above, Adorno frames the history of these efforts in terms of the dialectic of enlightenment itself. Under this aspect, it is worth briefly considering some of his examples.

Having begun with the premise that the supposed ‘turn to positive religion’ in 1950s West Germany is a reaction to the mounting dissatisfaction with reason as such, Adorno suggests that in 18th century Europe the situation was the other way around. Here, he assures us, the Scholastic concept of faith, “which was inherited from the tradition”, began to come under attack from “an autonomous *ratio* that refuses to accept anything other than what stands up to examination in its own terms.”⁷⁵ Without specifying who launched these attacks (the *Philosophes* perhaps?), Adorno asserts that any “defence” of theology “against *ratio* had to be carried out with rational means”.⁷⁶ That is to say, the “defence already assumed the principle that belonged to its adversary.”⁷⁷ In this regard, theology’s efforts to reasonably ground faith turned out to be self-undermining. The question thus becomes by what other means theology might negotiate the tension between faith in revelation and the modern demands of reason if the thinkers of the so-called high Enlightenment failed to provide satisfactory answers? Certainly one possible response is to resolve the tension between ‘reason’ and ‘revelation’ by leaping into the latter, as Kierkegaard is often said to have done.⁷⁸ (Adorno briefly discusses this possibility.) Alternatively, one might want to overcome the

⁷³ Ibid [My translation]

⁷⁴ Ibid [My translation and emphasis]

⁷⁵ Adorno, “Reason and Revelation”, 136

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Adorno is careful to set apart Kierkegaard (and Pascal) from the facile anti-intellectualism that he associates with the German return to religion in the 1950s. As he argues: “[t]he sacrifice of the intellect that once, in Pascal or

polarity between these terms in a more nuanced fashion. For example, Adorno suggests, “[h]igh Scholasticism, and especially the *Summa* of St. Thomas, have their force and dignity in the fact that, without absolutising the concept of reason, they never condemned it: theology went so far only in the age of nominalism, particularly with Luther.”⁷⁹ Indeed, in his *Summa Theologica* (c. 1274), St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that if there were no mediation between faith and reason, then faith would be empty and reason would be blind. That is to say, within certain bounds, the philosophical tools that Scholasticism derives principally from Aristotle can be used to verify the contents of revealed religion. At the same time, however, such a theological effort can never directly grasp that with which it is chiefly concerned, namely: God. In short, although theology can provide *some* reasoned insights into matters concerning the Divine, in metaphysical terms God remains beyond the grasp of reason: an incomprehensible *esse*. In Adorno’s view, then, Aquinas maintains a “productive tension”⁸⁰ between faith and rationality, inasmuch as he posits a transcendent realm that cannot be reduced to either the terms of reason or those of faith alone.⁸¹

By contrast, Adorno charges that ‘in the age of nominalism, particularly with Luther’, theology renders reason absolute and thus ‘condemns’ it. He does not elaborate on the historical connection between Luther and nominalism,⁸² nor does he indicate why this association should be seen as either ‘absolutising’ or ‘condemning’ reason. (Fleshing out this provocative claim in due detail would require nothing less than a comprehensive inquiry into the intellectual pre-history of the Reformation, which Adorno does not attempt to provide.) Without wishing to overextend the reach of his claim, then, it remains to carefully infer a number of points from this passage: for one thing, Adorno implies that nominalism – the view that universals do not possess any objective reality, adopted by certain late medieval theologians to distance themselves from Aristotelian

Kierkegaard, was made by the most progressive consciousness and at no less a cost than one’s entire life has since become socialised, and whoever makes this sacrifice no longer feels any burden of fear and trembling; no one would have reacted to it with more indignation than Kierkegaard himself. Because too much thinking, an unwavering autonomy, hinders the conformity to the administered world and causes suffering, countless people project this suffering imposed on them by society onto reason as such. According to them it is reason that has brought suffering and disaster into the world.” Adorno, “Reason and Revelation”, 137

⁷⁹ Ibid, 139-140

⁸⁰ Ibid, 140

⁸¹ It is curious that, throughout the text, Adorno is conspicuously silent about Kant’s reflections on *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793).

⁸² It has been widely acknowledged that Luther was, indeed, lastingly influenced by his study of a form of logical nominalism that was widespread amongst a generation of older Catholic thinkers, including Gabriel Biel and William of Ockham. Cf. Graham White, *Luther as Nominalist: A Study of the Logical Methods Used in Martin Luther’s Disputations in the Light of their Medieval Background* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 1994); Heiko A. Oberman, *Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Oberman convincingly argues that Luther became well acquainted with the works of Biel and Occam during his studies at Erfurt. According to Oberman, Luther remains indebted to their logical frameworks even where he seems to denounce them.

realism – breaks with the Thomist conception of God as an incomprehensible *esse*. It implies that God has to denote a discrete entity (an *ens*), however much this entity may differ from all other things. Accordingly, Adorno claims that in order to avoid foregoing God’s transcendence, Luther has to qualify his reliance on nominalism by distinguishing between “two types of truth”:⁸³ one (inferior) expressed in terms of logic, confirming certain things about the natural world *hic e nunc*; the other (superior) attainable by means of faith alone – the Lutheran *sola fide*. That is, for Luther, only faith can reconcile the paradoxes of revealed religion: Christ as man *and* God, historical *and* eternal, etc. Reason is thus ‘absolutised’ to the extent that it is pronounced sufficient for the attainment of *worldly* knowledge, which is – in turn – associated with “progress” and hence “the increasing domination of nature”.⁸⁴ At the same time, though, it is ‘condemned’ to the extent that it is subordinated to the primacy of faith.

To be sure, Adorno’s speculations hinge on a conflation of numerous historically disparate phenomena. For instance, it is not clear how the ‘current religious mood’, which is supposed to respond to ‘the prevailing positivism’ of capitalist modernity, is mirrored by ‘the endeavours of ontology today’. Nor, for that matter, is it explained how this form of ‘positivism’ is supposed to be rooted in Luther’s particular take on ‘nominalism’.⁸⁵ That is to say, Adorno’s diagnosis of the present as a ‘nominalistic’ or ‘positivistic’ *situation*, from which the likes of Heidegger and Barth are seen to ‘leap’ (however unsuccessfully) into the world of ‘realism’, is framed far too generally to be persuasive. In this regard, it is surprising that Adorno does not draw on Max Weber’s far more nuanced account of how capitalist modernity emerges from the teachings of the Reformation. After all, Adorno knew Weber’s work well. Whatever may have inspired Adorno’s sweeping claims, for the purposes of the present chapter ‘Reason and Revelation’ contains – at the very least – a timely demand. Set against the backdrop of Christian theology, Adorno argues that “reason” itself must be immanently criticised, “not as an absolute, regardless of whether it is then posited or negated, but rather as a moment within the totality”.⁸⁶ It is “precisely this theme” – apparently “familiar to the great religions” – which “requires ‘secularisation’ today” if the dialectic of reason is “not to further the very darkening of the world”.⁸⁷ As Adorno writes, “nothing” of the “theological content” skimmed in ‘Reason and Revelation’ will survive this

⁸³ Adorno, “Reason and Revelation”, 139

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 137

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 136

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 138

⁸⁷ *Ibid*

process of critique (which he demands but does not carry out) “without being transformed; every content will have to put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane” – a point to which we will return below.⁸⁸ But before proceeding to outline Adorno’s concept of metaphysics – the final ‘guise’ of rational thought in his historical meta-narrative – it remains to ask: can Adorno’s groping for transcendence be seen as a form of negative theology, as has been suggested by Jürgen Habermas and others?

b.) In its simplest form, ‘negative theology’, or – more properly – *apophatic* theology (from the Greek *apophasis*, to *deny* or *negate*) means that God is utterly transcendent, wholly ineffable and does not admit of positive description.⁸⁹ In this regard, negative theology designates a philosophical device that addresses itself to problems arising from the convergence of broadly Old Testament views regarding the transcendence of God and ontological questions about His *being* – an effort to gain determinate knowledge of God through negation. On this model, since one cannot say that ‘God is great’, the statement ‘God is not *not* great’ is taken to provide more adequate knowledge of God’s greatness according to the arithmetic principle that two negatives make a positive. In its more mystical guise, this *via negativa* is said to produce an extra-rational spiritual encounter between man and God: “[t]he Divine, experienced as *mysterium tremendum*, shatters the presuppositions of mere human beings and reveals the incomplete, if not erroneous, nature of existing beliefs or actions. Divine transcendence interrupts as ‘wholly other’, completely beyond the range of human experience.”⁹⁰

The most enduring identification of Adorno with negative theology occurs in an influential essay by Jürgen Habermas, titled ‘The Primal History of Subjectivity’ (1981). Herein, Habermas characterises Adorno’s thought as a negative theology in the sense that his “critique of totality and ‘identity thinking’” appears to him as “sharing in negative theology’s aversion to asserting positive claims about the absolute, while continuing to posit the usefulness of the category of ultimate truth” as a kind of regulative ideal.⁹¹ Habermas thus characterises Adorno in the following terms: “[d]espairing of the barbaric course of human history, and refusing to identify

⁸⁸ Ibid, 136

⁸⁹ In the Christian tradition, apophatic theology is associated with figures including: Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite and Meister Eckhart. In the Jewish tradition, notable exponents include Philo of Alexandria and Moses Maimonides. Cf. Ilse N. Bulhof & Laurens ten Kate, “Echoes of an Embarrassment – Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology”, in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, eds. Ilse N. Bulhof & Laurens ten Kate (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2000), 1-57

⁹⁰ Christopher Craig Brittain, *Adorno and Theology* (London: Continuum, 2010), 92

⁹¹ Ibid, 91

any solid foundation for hope or consolation, Adorno is (...) left with nothing but a vague longing” for an amorphous “‘wholly other’.”⁹² Accordingly, Habermas claims that Adorno’s abidance by the image ban is akin to a negative theology inasmuch as this “‘wholly other may only be indicated by indeterminate negation, not known.”⁹³ It seems probable that Habermas’ objections are directed at a passage from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which declares the following: “the right of the image” – the ‘image of theology’ perhaps? – “is rescued in the faithful observance of its prohibition”, an “observance” that is in turn equated with “‘determinate negation’”.⁹⁴ As we saw in the previous chapter, the ‘images’ to which Adorno and Horkheimer allude are not pictures so much as they are figures of thought. They insist on their ‘right’ only in the determinate negation of the ‘false’, never directly. Accordingly, since for Adorno and Horkheimer there can be no positive expression of ‘the absolutely good’, these ‘images’ are subject to a ban. Against this backdrop, Habermas’ critique of Adorno qua negative theology comes into focus. James Gordon Finlayson aptly summarises this in four steps: firstly, we are told, Habermas argues that Adorno’s position is *irrational*. He “accuses Adorno of abandoning reason in favour of some other mode of apprehension of Utopia”;⁹⁵ secondly, he charges Adorno with *mysticism*: “Habermas appears to make two claims: first, that apophaticism is *eo ipso* mysticism since it posits a divine, wholly transcendent being that is consequently ineffable and unknowable; and second, that apophaticism is mysticism since it holds out the prospect of an extra-conceptual experience of the divine presence, won through the dialectical self-subversion of discursive reason”;⁹⁶ thirdly, he maintains that Adorno’s position is *incoherent*, i.e. that it is in the thrall of a “performative contradiction”;⁹⁷ and, finally, he contends that “negative dialectics, like negative theology, is theoretically *empty* (...)”, i.e. that it is “unproductive or pointless” inasmuch as it lacks any “viable political dimension”.⁹⁸

⁹² Ibid, 89-90

⁹³ Jürgen Habermas, “The Primal History of Subjectivity”, in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 170. Max Horkheimer comments on the meaning of the ‘wholly other’: “Both Adorno and I (...) no longer spoke of God but of the ‘yearning for the wholly other’. In the bible it says ‘You shall not make yourself an image of God’. You cannot represent what is absolutely good. The pious Jew avoids the word ‘God’ where possible (...). By the same token, Critical Theory too carefully calls the absolute ‘the other.’” Cf. Max Horkheimer, “Was wir Sinn nennen wird verschwinden – Spiegel Gespräch mit dem Philosophen Max Horkheimer”, in *Der Spiegel*, (05 January 1970), 81 [My translation]

⁹⁴ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 18

⁹⁵ James Gordon Finlayson, “On not Being Silent in the Darkness: Adorno’s Singular Apophaticism”, *The Harvard Theological Review* 105, No. 1 (January 2012), 2

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Habermas, “The Primal History of Subjectivity”, 185-186 [My emphasis]

⁹⁸ Finlayson, “On not Being Silent in the Dark”, 4 [My emphasis]

There is no need to address these criticisms individually. Let us note only the following: Habermas' self-professed effort to complete the enlightenment project – his effort to delineate an inter-subjective concept of communicative reason – is at odds with Adorno's premise that such reason has an unacknowledged mythical core which must be exorcised through immanent critique. That is to say, the divergence between Adorno and Habermas stems in no small measure from their opposing attitudes towards *language* ('communication'). In short, Habermas deems that the insistence on a 'wholly other' is 'irrational', 'mystical', 'incoherent' and 'empty' because he does not accept the extent to which, for Adorno, *all* aspects of human life (including its linguistic, communicative regimes) are complicit with a universal state of un-freedom. In this regard, the estimation that Adorno "stubbornly refuses" to positively delineate "the structure of a life together in communication (...) free from coercion"⁹⁹ is telling: it indicates that Habermas views 'the structure' of this 'life' as being available to us in a fairly uncomplicated sense. The theory of communicative action thus amounts to voluntarism. In order to grasp more fully why Habermas' analogy between Adorno and negative theology does not hold, however, we must turn to a third guise of rational thought, which – like religion and theology – is concerned with 'the wholly other', "the constitutive structures of being",¹⁰⁰ namely: metaphysics.

- *Metaphysics:*

We have seen, then, where religion and theology qua 'guises' of rational thought sit in Adorno's historical meta-narrative. Before concluding this section, however, it remains to consider the final part of *Negative Dialectics*: the 12 'Meditations on Metaphysics'. If, as Adorno argues, 'positive religion has lost its validity' and 'traditional theology is not restorable'; if "the whole" has indeed become "the untrue" and an affirmative concept of metaphysics is no longer sustainable, then we must ask:¹⁰¹ a.) What is the cause of Adorno's diagnosis? b.) What – if anything – does he propose to remedy this condition? In order to begin answering these questions, however, we must first tie them to the discussion so far. Accordingly, we note that Adorno distinguishes between theology and metaphysics in the following terms:

⁹⁹ Habermas, "The Primal History of Subjectivity", 106-107

¹⁰⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 7

¹⁰¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 50 [translation altered]

It is quite certain that metaphysics and theology cannot simply be distinguished from each other as historical stages (...) since they have constantly crossed over historically: one appeared at the same time as the other; one was forgotten only to re-emerge in the foreground. They form an extraordinarily complex structure which cannot be reduced to a simple conceptual formula. Nevertheless, there is an element of truth in the theory of stages (...) in that metaphysics in the traditional sense (...) is an attempt to determine the absolute, or the constitutive structures of being, on the basis of thought alone. That is, it does not derive the absolute dogmatically from revelation, or as something positive which is simply given to me, as something directly existing, through revelation or recorded revelation, but (...) it determines the absolute through concepts.¹⁰²

In Adorno's view, then, the difference between theology and metaphysics is as follows: theology means the attempt 'to determine the absolute, or the constitutive structures of being' dogmatically, i.e. through reliance on the truth of revelation over and above what can be verified discursively or conceptually. That is to say, theology relies on (and constantly reasserts) the validity of an external *given* – God – knowledge of whom is passed down through tradition. By contrast, metaphysics means the attempt to determine these constitutive structures out of thought alone. That is to say, for Aristotle – Adorno's main point of reference – metaphysics means "the form of philosophy which takes concepts as its objects":¹⁰³ purely conceptual thinking. All the same, he continues, "it is certainly true that metaphysics has something in common with theology in its manner of seeking to elevate itself above immanence, above the empirical world."¹⁰⁴ (We are reminded of Adorno's characterisation of capitalist modernity as a positivistic or otherwise nominalistic 'situation'.) In other words, metaphysics, theology and – we might add – religion share a concern with transcendence which, according to Adorno, has become historically insubstantial. Nevertheless, he declares his solidarity with this impulse "at the time of its fall",¹⁰⁵ as the famous final line of *Negative Dialectics* solemnly declares. After all, the utopian dimension of Adorno's thought aims precisely at breaking out of the closed system of immanence that he

¹⁰² Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 7 [Translation altered]. This formulation is echoed in *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno writes: "Vis-à-vis theology, metaphysics is not just a historically later stage, as it is according to positivistic doctrine. It is not only theology secularised into a concept. It preserves theology in its critique, by uncovering the possibility of what theology may force upon men and thus desecrate." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 397

¹⁰³ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 4

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 7

¹⁰⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 408

associates with the positivistic “cult (...) of facts”¹⁰⁶ that characterises the disenchanted world of capitalist modernity. We have already noted some of the reasons as to why this ‘beyond’ cannot be positively pictured; however, another pressing question arises at this juncture: how does Adorno explain this historical unavailability in the first place?

a.) In a postscript to the second edition of his Kierkegaard study (1966), Adorno describes his opposition to metaphysics as a “doctrine of the unhistorical, unchangeable”:¹⁰⁷ a true and immutable world behind the world of mere appearances, a *Hinterwelt* (to borrow Nietzsche’s term).¹⁰⁸ Indeed, he seems to associate this view of metaphysics with philosophy more generally. After all, Adorno argues that the traditional aim of philosophy is precisely to grasp the totality of the real – the constitutive structures of being – bindingly and lastingly out of thought alone. Accordingly, it will be recalled, Adorno’s philosophical project begins and ends with a resolute disavowal of this undertaking, conceived of as an immanent critique of idealism. (An early articulation of this view appears in Adorno’s inaugural lecture on ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, 1931: “[w]hoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real.”)¹⁰⁹ The historical impasse of philosophy is thus deemed to be co-extensive with that of metaphysics. It is against this backdrop that we must view Adorno’s reformulation of Kant’s epistemological question – “how is metaphysics possible?” – into a historical one: “[i]s it *still* possible to have a metaphysical experience?”, or rather: can it be possible again?¹¹⁰ And if so: how? However, before we explore what it might mean to have a metaphysical experience, we must note another point concerning Adorno’s diagnosis that an affirmative concept of metaphysics has become untenable.

¹⁰⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, “Aberglaube aus zweiter Hand”, in *Soziologische Schriften I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 174 [My translation]

¹⁰⁷ Adorno, *Kierkegaard – Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 261 [My translation] Adorno’s postscript to the second edition of his book is not included in the English translation.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Of the Afterworldsmen”, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 1969), 58-60

¹⁰⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, trans. Benjamin Snow, *Telos*, No. 31 (Spring 1977): 120

¹¹⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 372 [My emphasis]. In one sense, Adorno sees Kant’s effort to scientifically ground metaphysics as resigning him to rigid and immutable forms of cognition and experience. Indeed, Adorno argues that Kant “equates the subjective side of Newtonian science with cognition, and its objective side with truth. The question how metaphysics is possible as a science must be taken precisely: whether metaphysics satisfies the criteria of a cognition that takes its bearings from the ideal of mathematics and so-called classical physics.” Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 386-387

Certainly, in the early 1930s Adorno's reasoning echoed a wider sense that traditional structures of meaning have deteriorated – a sentiment once memorably captured by Georg Lukács as “transcendental homelessness”.¹¹¹ After WWII, however, his emphasis shifts explicitly. For Adorno, the irrevocable dissolution of a purposeful view of history is expressed in a proper name: *Auschwitz*.¹¹² In response to our question as to what cements Adorno's conviction that an affirmative concept of metaphysics has become impossible we note the following:

In face of the experiences we have had, not only through Auschwitz but through the introduction of torture as a permanent institution and through the atomic bomb – all these things form a kind of coherence, a hellish unity – in face of these experiences the assertion that what *is* has meaning, and the affirmative character which has been attributed to metaphysics almost without exception, becomes a mockery.¹¹³

For Adorno, Auschwitz (though ‘not only’ Auschwitz, but rather the institutionalisation of ‘torture’ for which it stands) becomes the marker of a radical meaninglessness. It belies the purposive forward movement of history and hence the positive claim to grasping a ‘wholly other’ through religion, theology or metaphysics. Certainly, similar claims have been made long before Adorno. (One need only think of Jacobi's reflections on the Lisbon earthquake.) The *differentia specifica* is that Adorno views Auschwitz as the outcome of an intra-historical process, which proceeds through the technological domination of nature. Auschwitz is the apotheosis of the dialectic of enlightenment. But what is Adorno proposing here beyond the diagnosis of a thoroughgoing nihilism as the pervasive condition of modernity?¹¹⁴

b.) As we have noted, Adorno is keen to salvage the transcendent orientation of metaphysics ‘at the moment of its fall’. As he argues, “thinking beyond itself, into *openness* – that, precisely, is

¹¹¹ Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1988), 41

¹¹² For a remarkable account of Adorno's effort to think the particularity of historical suffering in terms of proper names, see: Alexander García Düttmann, *The Memory of Thought: An Essay on Heidegger and Adorno*, trans. Nicholas Walker (London: Continuum, 2002)

¹¹³ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 104 [My emphasis]

¹¹⁴ One of Adorno's 12 meditations is dedicated specifically to the question of nihilism. However, for Adorno nihilism is only a diagnosis of the dominant condition in the world after Auschwitz. It is not a sustainable philosophical standpoint *per se*. Accordingly, he argues, “nihilism implies the contrary of *identification* with nothingness”. Rather, the negation of the “created world (...) is the chance of another world that is not yet”. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 381 [My emphasis]

metaphysics.”¹¹⁵ As we have seen, though, Adorno deems that the metaphysical orientation towards transcendence is only sustainable *negatively* as an experience of unavailability. Pain – visceral, somatic suffering – throws into relief the contours of something beyond the spellbound sphere of existence.¹¹⁶ Such experiences negatively inscribe an opening into the historical process in the form of the imperative that “[w]oe” must “go”.¹¹⁷ In this respect, Adorno ultimately affirms the possibility of metaphysical experience, however qualified or paradoxical the character of this affirmation may be. As Peter Osborne argues, this ‘affirmation’ is best understood as a “*materialist metaphysics of modernity*; rather than (...) a negative theology”, because Adorno does not readmit God through the backdoor, so to speak.¹¹⁸ So much, then, for Habermas’ charge.

Without wishing to retread these matters here, we note only the following: Adorno’s reflections concerning metaphysics operate on three overlapping registers: the first is *epistemological*: it concerns the idea that “the absolute, as it hovers before metaphysics, would be the nonidentical” (see Chapter One).¹¹⁹ The second is *ethical*: it concerns the pervasive sense of “guilt” implied in the question “whether after Auschwitz you can go on living”.¹²⁰ (We will return to this point below.) The third is *aesthetic*: it concerns the displacement of metaphysics into the realm of aesthetics in *Aesthetic Theory*. (This will be the focus of Chapter Three.) As we will see, Adorno’s conflation of these disparate registers poses a problem for his effort to think particularity under the aegis of the image ban.

This crossroads provides an opportunity to recap our argument: so far we have seen how Adorno situates the three ‘guises’ of rational thought that we have sought to differentiate within the bounds of his negative universal history. As we have argued, the red thread connecting religion with theology and metaphysics is a shared concern with transcendence. In Adorno’s view, however, the object of this concern has become historically insubstantial. The cause of this impasse was said to lie in the dialectic of reason itself (not least in its catastrophic culmination in Auschwitz). Accordingly, we asserted that Adorno attempts to salvage the orientation towards a realm beyond the spellbound sphere of being by negatively intimating a sense of metaphysical

¹¹⁵ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 68

¹¹⁶ See pp. 58-60 of the present study.

¹¹⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203

¹¹⁸ Peter Osborne, “Adorno and the Metaphysics of Modernism: The Problem of a ‘Postmodern’ Art”, in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1989), 23

¹¹⁹ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 406

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 363

experience in terms of unavailability. This negative concept of metaphysics, in turn, was said to throw into relief a historical opening: an indeterminate realm of possibility, albeit *not* a ‘negative theology’. Before concluding this section, however, it is worth emphasising one last point: Adorno’s historical verdict concerning the impossibility of positively grasping the absolute in the present can be complemented with a view to a text cited at the outset, namely: Walter Benjamin’s fragment ‘Capitalism as Religion’. To be sure, there is an asymmetry here in cross reading large swathes of Adorno’s mature philosophy with a minor fragment of Benjamin’s, which was – by all accounts – neither finished nor intended for publication. This is all the more troubling since it is not even clear whether Adorno was familiar with this sketch. (However, given that Adorno co-edited the first collection of Benjamin’s works in 1955, this is not improbable.) In any case, there is a striking correspondence between certain precepts of Benjamin’s text and our reconstruction of Adorno’s philosophy of history. Exploring this admittedly speculative correlation will allow us to substantiate the opening assertion that Adorno’s heretical repurposing of theological motifs, “far beyond” what they “once originally meant”,¹²¹ serves the criticism of reality disfigured by a capitalist cult religion. After all, as we have seen in ‘Reason and Revelation’, Adorno argues that in the present, ‘nothing of theological content will persist without being transformed’; ‘every content will have to put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane’: in our sense, into the realm of critical theory. With this in mind, we turn to Benjamin’s text.

iii.) *Capitalism as Religion:*

Walter Benjamin’s unfinished sketch, ‘Capitalism as Religion’ (1921), barely fills three pages. Nevertheless its characteristic density has given rise to much debate since it was first published posthumously in 1985. Indeed, the diagnostic force of this short fragment is arresting. Over its course, Benjamin radicalises Max Weber’s analysis of capitalism’s religious conditioning, famously elaborated in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904). As Benjamin argues, religion is not just the causal precondition of capitalism, its historical antecedent, as Weber claims; capitalism is itself an “*essentially* religious phenomenon”, designed to “allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances” as other “so-called religions”.¹²² However, before

¹²¹ Adorno, “Reason and Revelation”, 142

¹²² Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion”, 288 [My emphasis]. Cf. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992). To be sure, Benjamin’s reading of Weber is, in some respects, unsatisfactory. After all, for Weber, it is the *chance* and not the teleological meeting between the rationality

attempting to weigh up the continuity of this text with our discussion of Adorno, it is worth a.) Briefly situating the piece in the wider context of Benjamin's work; and b.) Summarising the main thrust of his argument.

a.) 'Capitalism as Religion' takes its title – and in some ways its cue – from a section of Ernst Bloch's book *Thomas Münzer as Theologian of the Revolution* (1921). Bloch and Benjamin had become acquainted around 1918 during their time in Switzerland, and Benjamin had reportedly read a typescript of Bloch's book as early as 1920.¹²³ Indeed, Bloch writes that the Reformation "inaugurates (...) not merely the misuse of Christianity", particularly in Calvinism, "but rather its complete desertion and even elements of a new religion: of capitalism as religion and the true church of Mammon."¹²⁴ Despite the explicit echo of Bloch's formulation in Benjamin's text, however, their approaches differ significantly. "Though Bloch identifies capitalism as a religion (...), his judgement is nevertheless a moderate one: for the capitalism in question does not represent for Bloch, as it does for Benjamin, the metamorphosis of Christianity into its true form, but rather the 'complete desertion' from it."¹²⁵ Benjamin fleshes out this view over the course of three interlocking sections: a relatively polished opening passage followed by some shorthand notes and – finally – a literature review.

As Uwe Steiner demonstrates with a view to the texts cited in the latter part (including works by Erich Unger, Georges Sorel and Gustav Landauer), 'Capitalism as Religion' belongs to a largely unrealised cycle on politics that Benjamin was planning around 1921, a period during which he displayed markedly anarchistic leanings.¹²⁶ Indeed, Benjamin's letters suggest that the series was supposed to comprise at least three parts: firstly, an essay entitled 'Der Wahre Politiker' ('The True Politician'); secondly, a piece titled 'Die Wahre Politik' ('The True Politics'), which – in turn – was to consist of two sections, respectively called 'Abbau der Gewalt' ('Dismantling of Violence')¹²⁷ and 'Teleologie Ohne Edzweck' ('Teleology Without

of predestination in Calvinism and commercial instrumentality that provides the occasion for capitalism's emergence. Weighing up this matter in due detail, however, exceeds the scope of the present inquiry.

¹²³ Cf. Werner Hamacher, "Guilt History: Benjamin's Sketch 'Capitalism as Religion'", in *Diacritics*, Vol. 32, No. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter, 2002): 81-106

¹²⁴ Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962), 123 [Hamacher's translation]

¹²⁵ Hamacher, "Guilt History", 88

¹²⁶ Cf. Uwe Steiner, "Kapitalismus als Religion", in *Benjamin Handbuch, Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart & Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2011), 167-174

¹²⁷ Steiner speculates that 'Abbau der Gewalt' may be identical with the only finished piece from the projected series, namely: Benjamin's essay, 'Critique of Violence' (1921).

Ends’); and thirdly, a political reading of Paul Scheerbart’s asteroid novel *Lesabéndio* (1913). Curiously, then, the editors of Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften* omitted a section from their transcript of the fragment, titled ‘Geld und Wetter (Zur Lesabéndio-Kritik)’.¹²⁸ It is reproduced elsewhere as part of the supplementary materials for *One Way Street* (1928). Presumably this is because certain formulations in Benjamin’s note are, indeed, reworked and included in this later text. However, the particular point of interest here is Benjamin’s mention of Scheerbart, whose novel he had reviewed some years earlier. As the correspondence with Scholem indicates, Benjamin planned to revisit *Lesabéndio* in a long-form piece set against his reflections on ‘Capitalism as Religion’. Steiner suggests that this unwritten piece on Scheerbart, along with a lost review of Ernst Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* (1918), were intended to delineate the contours of Benjamin’s concept of politics. Without presently wishing to attempt a reconstruction of this concept, we turn to a reading of the text itself.

b.) ‘Capitalism as Religion’ contains four main hypotheses, which Samuel Weber helpfully summarises as follows:

1. Capitalism is a cult-religion, and indeed, perhaps ‘the most extreme that ever existed.’
2. The cult of capitalism is extreme because it never pauses. It is characterized by ‘permanent duration’.
3. The incessant cult of capitalism is *verschuldend*, which, according to the dual meaning of *Schuld* itself, must be translated both as ‘guilt-producing’ or ‘culpabilizing’ and as ‘debt-producing’ or ‘indebting.’ (...)
4. The God of this religion, far from redeeming from guilt, is drawn into it. As a result this God ‘must be kept secret and addressed only at the zenith of its (his) culpability-indebtedness (...).’¹²⁹

With regards to the first point, Benjamin writes that “[i]n capitalism, things have a meaning only in their immediate relationship to the cult; capitalism has no specific body of dogma, no theology.”¹³⁰ As such, it is not concerned with “higher” or “moral” matters.¹³¹ Accordingly,

¹²⁸ To my knowledge this piece has not been translated into English.

¹²⁹ Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s Abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 253

¹³⁰ Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion”, 288 [Translation altered]. Inexplicably the translators of Benjamin’s *Selected Writings* have dropped the term ‘*unmittelbar*’ – immediately – from their translation.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 290

Benjamin describes the cult as “pagan”.¹³² Its cultic rites are performed blindly and endlessly in the accruing of profits. It is telling, then, that Benjamin characterises “banknotes” as the idols of the capitalist cult.¹³³ (In the 1930s he elaborates this idea with a view to Marx. In the notes comprising his unfinished *Arcades Project*, for instance, Benjamin describes the shopping arcades of fin-de-siècle Paris as “temples of commodity capital”.¹³⁴ In this early fragment, however, Benjamin remains critical of Marx, echoing Landauer’s claim that capitalism cannot produce socialism out of itself.) But the tenor of Benjamin’s first hypothesis points in another direction. In his view capitalism does not require any outside impetus. As Weber notes, “this radically transforms its relation to the divine”.¹³⁵ Instead of deriving meaning from theology, or – for that matter – from economics, “the capitalist cult is itself the locus and source of all meaning.”¹³⁶

This leads us to the second characteristic noted above. As Benjamin argues, the duration of the cult is permanent. “Since the cult no longer draws its meaning from something radically separate from it, but only from itself, that self consequently becomes its own measure.”¹³⁷ It becomes, in other words, autonomous. “The measure of a self is its ability to (...) withstand the transformative effects of time.”¹³⁸ That is to say, the capitalist cult withstands the weathering of time because it is figured as *timeless* (in Adorno’s sense: mythical). At this point, Benjamin’s cryptic notion that “[c]apitalism is the celebration of a cult *sans trêve et sans merci*” (without truce or mercy) comes into focus.¹³⁹ In capitalism, he writes, “there are no ‘weekdays.’ There is no day that is not a feast day, in the terrible sense that all its sacred pomp is unfolded before us”.¹⁴⁰ The ‘sacred pomp’ is ‘terrible’ because it appears as “a *war* without pause or end” – without truce or mercy – “a life-consuming exertion”, perpetrated on the living.¹⁴¹

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ Ibid

¹³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 37

¹³⁵ Weber, *Benjamin’s Abilities*, 254

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid

¹³⁹ Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion”, 288 [Translation altered] As Steiner has plausibly argued, Benjamin’s original formulation, ‘*sans rêve et sans merci*’, without dream or mercy, is probably the result of a confusion on his part. The allusion is in all likelihood to Charles Baudelaire’s poem ‘Le Crépuscule du Soir’, which is contained in the *Tableaux Parisiens* (1857), which Benjamin translated.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ Weber, *Benjamin’s Abilities*, 256 [My emphasis]

Without expanding on this notion, Benjamin turns to his third point. As he claims, “the cult makes guilt pervasive. Capitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that creates guilt (*Schuld*) not atonement.”¹⁴² That is to say, guilt is universalised to the extent that God himself becomes embroiled in it. As Benjamin writes, “God’s transcendence is at an end. But he is not dead; he has become involved in human fate”.¹⁴³ Bracketing the fourth point – that an “unmatured” God, a *deus absconditus*, can only be addressed “when his guilt is at its zenith”¹⁴⁴ – we note the appearance of two central terms: on the one hand, this concerns Benjamin’s use of the word *fate*, which recalls the passages on myth discussed above; on the other hand, it concerns his play on the “demonic ambiguity”¹⁴⁵ of the term *Schuld*, which means both ‘guilt/culpability’ and ‘debt’. As Werner Hamacher explains, “it is the ambiguity (...) by which” in capitalism “financial debts (*Schulden*) always serve as an index of legal, moral and affective guilt (*Schuld*) – and by which every guilt manifests itself in debts, and every debt in guilt.”¹⁴⁶ In order to tie Benjamin’s text to our discussion of Adorno, however, the complex network of ideas designated by the terms ‘guilt’ and ‘fate’ requires some elucidation.

- ‘*Guilt History*’

According to Hamacher, the alleged pervasiveness of guilt associated with the capitalist cult religion is linked precisely to the assertion of its permanent duration. It stems from a particular conception of history as ‘guilt history’. As Hamacher argues, for Benjamin guilt is inscribed into the very structure of time, at least as it is figured in its dominant historical guises. (Indeed, many years after writing ‘Capitalism as Religion’ Benjamin will describe the Social Democratic vision of historical progress in terms of “homogeneous” and “empty” time.)¹⁴⁷ Hamacher expands on this point with a view to the Pre-Socratics, particularly Anaximander (c. 610 – c. 546 BC), for whom “the sequence of time orders the rise and fall of all things (...) in accordance with the law of guilt and punishment so that becoming (*génésis*) is a guilt (*adikía*) that must be expiated in

¹⁴² Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion”, 288

¹⁴³ Ibid, 289 [Translation altered]

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

¹⁴⁶ Hamacher, “Guilt History”, 90

¹⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin: “On the Concept of History”, in *Selected Writings 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 395

perishing.”¹⁴⁸ Time, in other words, appears as “an order of guilt and retribution, debt and payback”,¹⁴⁹ a dual movement of coming-into-being and passing away. “It is a time of economy,” indeed, a “time of law”: the lawful movement of *quid pro quo*, which is binding for every being “as a decree, an ordinance.”¹⁵⁰ Whether or not Benjamin was familiar with the Pre-Socratic conception of time-as-guilt is unclear. (Hamacher speculates that its central precepts might have been known to Benjamin through his reading of Cohen, who refers to it in *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, 1918.) Whatever the case, Hamacher acknowledges a number of other sources, which speak to a similar problem. For one thing, Benjamin alludes to the Christian doctrine of original sin. Though he does not unfold his criticism of this teaching here, the general point is clear: “Christianity (...) raised the doctrine of original sin” – in our sense: original guilt/debt – “to the status of a dogma and extended this logic into the furthest reaches of its systems of faith, thought and behaviour.”¹⁵¹ More pointedly, Benjamin invokes “the Freudian theorem of originary repression (...), the ethno-psychological myth of the murder of the primal father”, which locates the source of universal guilt in a speculative pre-history of civilisation.¹⁵² Indeed, Freud features prominently in Benjamin’s fragment, albeit not without a hint of scathing. (Benjamin names Freud alongside Nietzsche and Marx as one of the “priests” of the capitalist cult religion.)¹⁵³ It is telling, too, that Benjamin intimates Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), particularly the section on “‘Guilt’, ‘Bad Conscience’ and related Matters”. After all, Nietzsche speaks of a “stroke of genius on the part of Christianity”, which stems from the fact that “God himself sacrifices himself for the guilt of mankind.”¹⁵⁴ That is, “God himself makes payment to himself (...) as the only being who can redeem man from what has become unredeemable for man himself – the creditor sacrifices himself for his debtor, out of *love* (can one credit that?), out of love for his debtor!”¹⁵⁵ Finally, Benjamin points to Max Weber’s essay on ‘The Work-Ethic of Ascetic Protestantism’ (1904), where it is argued that guilt is universalised in

¹⁴⁸ Hamacher, “Guilt History”, 81

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 85

¹⁵² Ibid, 98

¹⁵³ Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion”, 289

¹⁵⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 92

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. I consciously bracket Benjamin’s discussion of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, which opens up a strand of his fragment that need not concern us at present.

the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, wherein every means of atonement – “whether by the devout, through sacraments, through the church” or “by God himself”¹⁵⁶ – is withdrawn.

Focussing on universal guilt as the red thread connecting Benjamin’s sources, we turn to an untitled fragment from the vicinity of ‘Capitalism as Religion’, where it is argued that “guilt is the highest category of world history”.¹⁵⁷ Benjamin observes that every present is guilty in the sense that it produces a deficient relation to both past and future. “History, in short, is the process by which guilt is incurred – since in its every production the no-longer-being of something else is effected.”¹⁵⁸ In yet another text, titled ‘Fate and Character’ (1920), Benjamin equates this notion of a ‘world history’, whose ‘highest category’ is ‘guilt’, with a particular conception of *fate*, which he describes in an enigmatic turn of phrase as the “guilt-nexus of the living”.¹⁵⁹ Fate is thus opposed to freedom; within its bounds man is at the mercy of mythical Gods. In the present context this means that fate returns in the guise of capitalist social relations, which present themselves as divinely decreed, law-like and eternally binding. Though we cannot presently expand on this point, it is worth briefly noting the following: Benjamin associates this seemingly fateful immersion in second nature with the ruling system of law and order in the administered world. That is to say, the order of fate is sustained by a violent ““mythical-legal system””, which “imposes identity upon difference, commensurability upon alterity, and universality upon singularity”.¹⁶⁰ Before the law, he argues, man is reduced to his “purely (...) natural dimension”,¹⁶¹ to “bare life”,¹⁶² or ‘mere nature’, as Adorno might call it. As such, man appears bereft of the capacity for ethical action because he is figured as constitutively un-free. In ‘Critique of Violence’ (1921), Benjamin contrasts this conception of law (*Recht*) with a “truly

¹⁵⁶ Hamacher, “Guilt History”, 98

¹⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Fragment 65”, in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 92 [Hamacher’s translation]

¹⁵⁸ Hamacher, “Guilt History”, 84

¹⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Fate and Character”, in *Selected Writings I, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 204 [Translation altered]

¹⁶⁰ Samuel Weber, “Guilt, Debt and the Turn to the Future: Walter Benjamin and Hermann Levin Goldschmidt (A Foray into Economic Theology)”, *Dialogik*, last altered December 2012, accessed 18/07/2014, <http://www.dialogik.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Sam-Weber-Turn-to-the-Future1.pdf>

¹⁶¹ Weber, *Benjamin’s Abilities*, 259

¹⁶² Benjamin, “Fate and Character”, 204 [Translation altered]. In recent years, Giorgio Agamben has adopted the idea of ‘bare life’ in his work on the *homo sacer*. Given our present focus, though, we will not concern ourselves with Agamben’s reading. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)

ethico-political standpoint of justice”¹⁶³ (*Gerechtigkeit*), which is on the side of “singular, living beings”.¹⁶⁴ That is to say, if for Benjamin fate is the operational law in the time of guilt, then justice belongs to a qualitatively distinct order of freedom that would require the complete cessation of the status quo.¹⁶⁵

Setting aside this partial and, admittedly, somewhat schematic reconstruction of Benjamin’s fragment we conclude: the dominant regime of time (understood as a linear succession of cause and effect) is structurally guilt producing. The pervasiveness of guilt reaches its ‘terrible’ climax in the capitalist cult religion, where it is finally universalised to the extent that even God is rendered culpable. In turn, Benjamin identifies the time of guilt with mythic fate, which is seen as the law of a ‘homogeneous’, ‘empty’ history. Before this law, man – and, indeed, the man-God of Christendom – cannot settle his debts and can effect no atonement, because he is radically un-free. Having bracketed how Benjamin proposes to bring about a breaking-open of this ‘guilt history’, we ask: what are the implications of his fragment for our reading of Adorno? After all, the verdict that ‘God’s transcendence is at an end’ because He has become ‘involved in human fate’ resonates strongly with the reading of Adorno proffered above. As we have seen, Adorno argues that – in the present – any claim to transcendence made by ‘positive religion’, ‘traditional theology’ and ‘affirmative metaphysics’ becomes untenable, precisely because (in their capacity as ‘guises’ of rational thought) all three are fatefully ensnared in myth. In this respect, Benjamin’s view that capitalism is the ‘most extreme’ expression of a ‘guilt-nexus of the living’ finds a curious echo in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where Adorno and Horkheimer argue as follows: “[t]he God of Judaism demands what he is owed and settles accounts with the defaulter. He enmeshes his creatures in a tissue of debt and credit, guilt and merit.”¹⁶⁶ To be sure, Benjamin’s claim is more far-reaching than Adorno and Horkheimer’s: it is not just that God ‘enmeshes his creatures’ in an economy of guilt and retribution; rather, God himself numbers amongst the guilty. (That is why in capitalism all that remains is pure cult without ‘dogma’ or ‘theology’.) Moreover, in all likelihood Benjamin would not have endorsed Adorno and Horkheimer’s

¹⁶³ Sami Khatib, “Towards a Politics of ‘Pure Means’: Walter Benjamin and the Question of Violence”, *Anthropological Materialism*, last altered March 2014, accessed 18/07/2014, <http://anthropologicalmaterialism.hypotheses.org/1040>

¹⁶⁴ Samuel Weber, “Guilt, Debt and the Turn to the Future: Walter Benjamin and Hermann Levin Goldschmidt (A Foray into Economic Theology)”

¹⁶⁵ For an in-depth exploration of Benjamin’s concept of historical time see: Werner Hamacher, “Now: Walter Benjamin and Historical Time”, in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), 38-68

¹⁶⁶ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 145

characterisation of Judaism. (His target is very explicitly Christianity.) Nevertheless, the reasoning that nourishes these verdicts is analogous. In the dialectic of enlightenment, the oldest returns in the guise of the new: myth as capitalism, capitalism as myth. The point is that if the earliest cultic practices are already a form of enlightenment – an exercise in the mastery of nature – and, conversely, the most sophisticated modern phenomena bear the mark of these ancient rites, then it follows that the boundaries between our historical bookends are blurred. As such, the rationalisation of cultic practices in capitalism speaks of an irrationality that is older than the cult itself, a view that – finally – vindicates our opening wager. In turn, it will be our task to weigh up what solutions Adorno’s ‘inverse theology’ holds. Before we do so, however, we must turn to one final question: whether Adorno’s deployment of theological motifs, such as the image ban, amounts to their secularisation.

iv.) *Secularisation:*

The following section returns us to a question posed at the outset, namely: whether Adorno’s use of theological motifs, ‘far beyond’ what they ‘once originally meant’, can be grasped *sensu stricto* as a form of secularisation? (After all, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Adorno argues that materialism brings the Old Testament ban on making images of God, “into *secular* form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured”.)¹⁶⁷ Accordingly, it has been claimed by some commentators that Adorno’s approach might be characterised as a form of “secular theology”.¹⁶⁸ However, as I argue, Adorno’s intentions are far from self-evident and upon closer inspection complications arise from this face value reading. Accordingly, I propose to explore this matter with a view to three authors whose findings are instructive in this context: a.) Hans Blumenberg’s critical reflections on the concept of ‘secularisation’, laid out in his momentous study on *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966);¹⁶⁹ b.) Giorgio Agamben’s subsequent

¹⁶⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 207. [My emphasis]

¹⁶⁸ M.F. Connell, “Through the Eyes of an Artificial Angel: Secular Theology in Theodor W. Adorno’s Freud-Marxist Reading of Kafka and Walter Benjamin”, in *Trajectories of Mysticism in Theory and Literature*, ed. P. Leonard (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 198

¹⁶⁹ For an illuminating account of the relationship between Adorno and Blumenberg see: Christian Voller, “Kommunikation verweigert. Schwierige Beziehungen zwischen Blumenberg und Adorno”, *Zeitschrift für Kulturphilosophie*, No. 2 (2013): 381-405. Voller discusses the brief correspondence between Adorno and Blumenberg in light of their respective contributions to the 7th German Philosophers’ Congress in Münster (1962). The focus of this event was the concept of progress in the philosophy of history. (Blumenberg’s presentation, entitled ‘Secularisation’, formed the basis for the first part of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, whereas Adorno’s presentation was reworked into an essay titled ‘Progress’. Both papers were first published in a volume containing

deliberations on the concept of ‘profanation’, laid out in his essay ‘In Praise of Profanation’ (2005); c.) Sami Khatib’s Benjaminian re-imagining of Freud’s concept of ‘dislocation’, laid out in his book *Teleologie ohne Endzweck* (2013). Although none of these texts address Adorno’s work directly, all three offer helpful models for understanding the complex interplay between religious motifs and non-religious sentiments that we set out to explore.

a.) In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Hans Blumenberg highlights that the word ‘secular’ derives from the Latin *saeculum* (‘age’). In its common usage it can be taken to mean “‘the present age’, ‘this world’ (as opposed to the next), and ultimately ‘the world’ as opposed to the transcendent.”¹⁷⁰ As such, ‘secularisation’ generally designates a long-term historical process “by which a disappearance of religious ties, attitudes to transcendence, expectations of an afterlife, ritual performances, and firmly established turns of speech is driven onward in both private and daily public life.”¹⁷¹ As Blumenberg reminds us, the term was first used in the 17th century to denote the expropriation of ecclesiastic goods by state authorities, for instance in the period leading up to the Westphalia peace treaty of 1648. Broadly speaking, we are told, this process has a correlate in the history of ideas: like the signatories of the aforementioned treaty, figureheads of the European Enlightenment (e.g. Voltaire) are commonly seen as having “secularise[d] knowledge in order to free man from the (...) illegitimate control of the Church.”¹⁷² However, as Blumenberg emphasises, this view is prey to a number of criticisms. For instance, one might object that if purportedly ‘modern’ ideas are, in fact, ‘secularised’ religious teachings, then their emphatic claim to modernity is undermined. As Blumenberg points out, this un-interrogated assumption more or less explicitly underlies the work of many eminent thinkers from the first half of the 20th century, including (but not limited to) Max Weber, Carl Schmitt and Karl Löwith. In the case of Weber this concerns the view that the modern work ethic is a secularisation of Christian asceticism. (As we have alluded to, this claim runs through *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, where Weber argues that capitalism first usurps and then effaces the

the work presented at the conference.) Reconstructing Voller’s detailed cross reading exceeds the scope of the present chapter. Suffice it to note that Blumenberg’s critique of the concept of secularisation allows a different view of Adorno’s intentions.

¹⁷⁰ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 92

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 3

¹⁷² Stephen A. McKnight, “The Legitimacy of the Modern Age: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate in Light of Recent Scholarship”, *The Political Science Reviewer*, accessed 26/08/2014, http://www.mmsi.org/pr/19_01/mcknight.pdf [My emphasis]

religious sources from which it emerges.)¹⁷³ In the case of Schmitt, this concerns the controversial estimation that “[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts”.¹⁷⁴ (As Blumenberg points out, Schmitt’s wholesale identification of political sovereignty with divine sovereignty is axiomatic for his book *Political Theology*, 1922.)¹⁷⁵ Finally, in the case of Löwith, this concerns the premise of his work *Meaning in History* (1949),¹⁷⁶ where it is argued that “the modern idea of progress is a transformation into worldly form of Christian eschatology”, i.e. “of the Christian preoccupation with the future as the dimension of the ‘last things’, the end of the world, the Last Judgement, salvation, damnation, etc.”¹⁷⁷ Despite the far-reaching differences between these thinkers, Blumenberg’s objection in each case is the same. In his view, the idea that modern phenomena should appear primarily as secularised versions of religious teachings obfuscates their independence and particularity. In other words, “the secularisation theorem obstructs the view of the *de facto* structure of an epochal threshold” – an epochal *break* between the modern and the pre-modern period – “because the idea of a ‘historical constant’ lies, unquestioned, at its basis”.¹⁷⁸ Blumenberg rejects this notion of historical constancy in the opening chapter of his book, ‘Secularisation: Critique of a Category of Historical Wrong’. As he argues, such an “unhistorical interpretation displaces the authenticity of the modern age, making it a remainder, a pagan substratum”.¹⁷⁹ In short: Blumenberg objects to the view that the modern age is an illegitimate derivative of religion, because such a view presumes a trans-historical religious original at its basis. It goes beyond our remit to explore how Blumenberg attempts to salvage the legitimacy of the modern age through charting its history in terms of the supposed self-assertion of reason. Rather, we must ask: how do his objections bear on our reading of Adorno?

To be sure, Adorno’s notion of a negative universal history – ‘from the slingshot to the megaton bomb’ – presumes precisely the kind of constancy that Blumenberg is keen to disavow.

¹⁷³ Cf. Fredric Jameson, “The Vanishing Mediator: Narrative Structure in Max Weber”, *New German Critique*, No.1 (Winter 1973), 52-89

¹⁷⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. Georg Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 36

¹⁷⁵ I consciously bracket here both Blumenberg’s and Benjamin’s (not to mention Taubes’ and Agamben’s) relationship to Schmitt. Including even a cursory account of these relationships would far exceed the scope of the present chapter.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949)

¹⁷⁷ Robert M. Wallace, “Secularisation and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate”, *New German Critique*, No. 22 (Winter 1981): 64

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁹ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 9

As we have seen, the entire meta-historical narrative outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* might be read in this way. (Myth as the *incognito* of reason; reason as the *incognito* of myth.) Nevertheless, we might ask: what if the historical ‘constants’ assumed by secularisation theory were themselves displaced in the historical process? In other words, what if the very grounds on which we map the putative polarity of the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ were to shift? Certainly, this would alter the stakes of the question as to whether Adorno’s use of theological terms ‘far beyond’ what they ‘once originally meant’ can be adequately grasped as a form of secularisation – the illegitimate carrying over of a religious ‘original’ into a ‘secular’ arena. After all, these terms would be uprooted from their traditional terrain. In order to grasp how this is supposed to be the case, however, we must look to the second text intimated above: Agamben’s essay, ‘In Praise of Profanation’.

b.) Having broadly reconstructed Blumenberg’s premise, we must call to mind that at its core the concept of ‘secularisation’ designates a particular relationship between the religious and the non-religious spheres: the passage from the former to the latter. An alternative account of this movement underlies Agamben’s concept of ‘profanation’.¹⁸⁰ Agamben distinguishes between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ in the following terms: on the one hand, he cites the Roman jurist Trebatius, arguing that the term ‘sacred’ means ‘belonging to the gods’. Such things are ‘removed from the free use and commerce of men’; they can be ‘neither sold nor held in lien, neither given for usufruct nor burdened by servitude’. On the other hand, ‘if ‘to consecrate’ (*sacrare*) means to remove things ‘from the sphere of human law’, then ‘to profane’ (*profanare*) means ‘to return them to the free use of men.’ In Agamben’s view, religion can thus be defined as the operation that “removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere”.¹⁸¹ Religious rituals sanction “the passage of something from the profane to the sacred, from the human sphere to the divine.”¹⁸² Conversely, we are told, ‘profanation’ – *sacrilege* – designates a movement in the opposite direction: the passage of a given thing from the sacred to the profane, from the ownership of the gods to the ‘free use of men’. Accordingly, profanation points in the same direction as secularisation. Unlike secularisation, however, Agamben suggests that profanation does not proceed through an illegitimate process of

¹⁸⁰ See p. 62, n. 5 of the present study.

¹⁸¹ Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation”, 74

¹⁸² Ibid

expropriation. Rather, it effects this passage “by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely, *play*.”¹⁸³ He continues: “play frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it.”¹⁸⁴ Accordingly, he sees great promise in the profanation of a “*religio* that is played with but no longer observed”.¹⁸⁵ Against this backdrop, Agamben distinguishes between ‘secularisation’ and ‘profanation’ in the following terms:

Secularisation is a form of repression. It leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another. Thus the political secularisation of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact. Profanation, however, neutralises what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Both are political operations: the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatus of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized.¹⁸⁶

Agamben does not develop this point here.¹⁸⁷ Whatever his stated intentions, one might object that the account proffered in *Profanations* tends to reproduce the problems discussed above under a different name. After all, it seems as though Agamben too assumes the ‘constancy’ of a religious ‘original’ that can be playfully reclaimed, rather than violently expropriated.¹⁸⁸ Read in this way, it is unclear why profanation should be any more legitimate than secularisation in designating the passage from the sacred to the profane. Both ultimately share the same problematic presupposition: a “belief in (...) continuity and concealment”.¹⁸⁹ Agamben’s identification of ‘secularisation’ with ‘repression’, in fact, proceeds in much the same vein. It implies that religion continues to determine the character of the present in ways that are not

¹⁸³ Ibid, 75 [My emphasis]

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 76

¹⁸⁵ Ibid

¹⁸⁶ Ibid

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa & Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004)

¹⁸⁸ As Alberto Toscano observes, “[t]hrough Agamben does not straightforwardly embody the apologetic Christian purposes that Hans Blumenberg identifies in the discourse on secularisation (...) he does manifest one key aspect of that discourse, the idea of a substantial continuity”. Alberto Toscano, “Divine Management: Critical Remarks on Giorgio Agamben’s *The Kingdom and the Glory*”, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 3, No. 16 (Nov 2011): 128

¹⁸⁹ Toscano, “Divine Management”, 129

transparent to it. Agamben is playing on the fact that a central tenet of Freudian psychoanalysis teaches that repression leads to a return of the repressed in a distorted form: secularisation as defacement. But if we follow Agamben in arguing that secularisation is akin to a repression of religion, then it follows that the modern age appears as a series of psycho-pathological symptoms. And indeed, on this reading the specifically religious character of these symptoms is only obliquely manifest. It requires an archaeological inquiry to unearth the biblical substrate of modernity.

Without wishing to situate this claim in the wider context of Agamben's work, I take it that there is another way to read his passage. After all, Freud describes repression as a dual operation of defacement and displacement. (His *terminus technicus* for this process is 'dislocation', *Entstellung*, which connotes both disfigurement and spatial dislodging.)¹⁹⁰ As Freud specifies, dislocation means not only "to change the appearance" of something – to deface, distort or disfigure it – "but also 'to wrench [it] apart', 'to put [it] in another place'."¹⁹¹ In this regard, the putative repression of religion cannot simply mean its unconscious persistence beneath the surface of capitalist modernity. If this were the case, then the modern age would, indeed, have to appear as the mere *incognito* of a religious original. However, if 'repression' does not just mean the distortion of religion, but also the uprooting from its traditional locale – *displacement* – then it follows that religion cannot simply persist as a defaced substratum of the present: an original that has merely been covered over, but never substantially altered. Rather, the stakes of the secularisation theorem shift – its historical topography is destabilised. On such a reading, it is hard to imagine how religion might be seen as a firmly rooted historical invariable, even in the context of a civilisational meta-narrative like *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Against this backdrop our opening question is refocused: where is religion displaced *to* if it is, indeed, removed from its traditional locality and thus from the undergrowth of the modern age?¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ The term 'dislocation' – also less opportunely rendered as 'distortion', which obfuscates the dynamic and topographical connotations of the German *Entstellung* – initially appears in the first part of Freud's famous work on *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Cf. Sigmund Freud, "Distortion in Dreams", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. IV: The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, eds. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alex Strachey & Alan Tyson, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 134-163.

¹⁹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 52

¹⁹² NB – This verdict is shared by Jean-Luc Nancy who observes that "the modern world does not transpose, in a secularised fashion, a theological structure" in the way that Schmitt intends. In reality, "the supposed transposition displaces all the terms of the problem, as well as the structure itself." Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Ré-fa-mi-ré-do-si-do-ré-si-sol-sol (le peuple souverain s'avance)", in *La démocratie à venir*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 2004), 348 [My translation]

c.) Using this diagnosis as a point of departure, Sami Khatib argues that the wider precepts of Freud's reasoning can be productively applied to explain the critical function of theological terms in the context of Benjamin's 'secular' critique of capitalist modernity. Insofar as we have sought to establish a link between Benjamin and Adorno on this point, the brief discussions of Blumenberg, Agamben and Freud come to bear on our discussion. As Khatib emphasises, the concept of dislocation, which, as we have seen, is "linked to questions of repressed conflict in Freud's writing",¹⁹³ designates a far-reaching topological shift that lastingly displaces theology from its ancestral site. That is to say, the shift that we have sought to describe transposes the entire ground on which the putative polarity of the religious and the secular has historically been charted. Siding with Blumenberg's critique of Schmitt *et al*, Khatib argues that for Benjamin the present cannot appear as the covering over of a religious foundation because this foundation has itself been lastingly undermined. In the present context, the point is that the radical epochal break invoked in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (and figured by Khatib as a seismic shift) effects, both, a prospective and a retrospective change in the meaning we ascribe to the historical markers of 'religion' and 'modernity'. To this end, Khatib cites Benjamin's fragment, 'Capitalism as Religion', arguing that "with the emergence of capitalism as a new religious edifice (...) the positions of the old (...) world-religions shift".¹⁹⁴ That is to say, the 'old world-religions' are no longer anchored to a stable, unchanging location from whence they cannot be dislodged, even if they are distorted beyond recognition. As Khatib continues, in its capacity as a "remainder-less cult-context" capitalism advances both the absolute "sacralisation" of "profane life"¹⁹⁵ (i.e. the rendering-religious of ostensibly non-religious terrain) and the "totalising secularisation of a realm that was hitherto sacred."¹⁹⁶ In other words, Benjamin's fragment captures the Freudian double movement in the following terms: on the one hand, it describes the "dislocation of the field of religion through the emergence of capitalism" as a new religion; and, on the other hand, it designates "a shift of (monotheistic) theology" – the intellectual superstructure of religion – "whose traditional place within the neo-pagan religious system of capitalism has become

¹⁹³ Samuel Weber, *Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan's Dislocation of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Michael Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xvii

¹⁹⁴ Sami Khatib, *Teleologie Ohne Endzweck': Walter Benjamins Ent-Stellung des Messianischen* (Marburg: Tectum, 2013), 37 [My translation]

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 39 [My translation]

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid* [My translation]

superfluous.”¹⁹⁷ However, far from consigning theology to the scrap heap of history, Khatib wagers that its becoming-superfluous serves as the condition of possibility for its deployment in an immanent critique of the capitalist cult religion: the critical afterlife of theology without a *theos*. As will become apparent, the significance of this shift has far-reaching consequences for our reading of Adorno. But before we explore this point, let us recap.

In light of this protracted digression, it appears that Adorno’s use of terms that are ostensibly derived from traditional theology cannot be grasped as a form of secularisation in any uncomplicated sense, despite his repeated and seemingly uncritical use of the term. If, as we have argued, capitalist modernity short-circuits the traditional polarity of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’, then it follows that the concept of ‘secularisation’ (and, indeed, the concept of theology) takes on a different meaning ‘far beyond’ what it ‘originally meant’. This verdict, finally, brings us to the central question raised at the beginning of this chapter: in what sense can displaced theological terms (such as the image ban) be put to work by a critical theory like Adorno’s without nostalgically reasserting an irretrievably lost authority? In other words: what perspectives are offered by Adorno’s enigmatic notion of an ‘inverse theology’?

II: Adorno’s Inverse Theology

Having thus clarified some of the wider issues raised by Adorno’s use of theological terms, we can finally turn to the letter cited above wherein the notion of an ‘inverse theology’ is first articulated. (As will be recalled, Adorno writes to Benjamin on 17 December 1934 to express his whole-hearted ‘agreement’ with an ‘image of theology’ that he attributes to his friend’s essay, ‘Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death’.) In addition to the stipulations made at the outset, it is worth highlighting two further provisos. Firstly, it is not our aim to comprehensively reconstruct Benjamin’s essay or, for that matter, Adorno’s reading of it. This is in part because I take it that the notion of an ‘inverse theology’ points beyond Adorno’s interpretation of this

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 41. Admittedly, this very literal reading is open to certain criticisms. As Samuel Weber argues, there is no original ‘location’ that precedes the ‘dis-location’ of the unconscious. With a view to Lacan, Weber gives the problem a linguistic framing by characterising the “language of the unconscious” in terms of the “unconscious *as* language”. He continues: “[w]hat distinguishes this particular linguistic form is that it never simply speaks directly (...) but rather misspeaks itself [*verspricht sich*], concealing, denying, disavowing.” As Weber explains, “[i]n this way the unconscious forms a language of representation that is not constituted by what it designates (...), a translation without an original or, as Freud would say, another scene.” Weber, *Return to Freud*, 1-2

particular text.¹⁹⁸ As noted above, my conceit is that insofar as Adorno's letter in fact *projects* an 'image of theology' onto Benjamin's thought (an 'image' into which he 'would gladly' see their 'thoughts dissolve', but which is not yet fully formed), the enthusiastic response to his friend's essay cannot be seen in solely exegetical terms. Accordingly, I avoid discussing central themes from Benjamin's essay, such as tradition and remembrance. It has, in any case, been suggested that it would be untenably reductive to distil a single, stable 'concept' of theology from Benjamin's essay to which Adorno's thought would pose a mere addendum. Rather, the as-yet unformed character of the 'theology' in question – expressed in Adorno's projective use of the modal verb 'would' – attests not only to Benjamin's elusive stance, from which no single 'concept' can be derived, but also to the open-endedness of Adorno's position. To be sure, the notion of an 'inverse theology' takes its cue from Benjamin's reading of Kafka, but it is by no means exhausted therein. Accordingly, gaining a better understanding of this term is not a question of cross examining Adorno's letter with Benjamin's essay; rather it is a case of tracing the development of certain figures from Adorno's letter to their permutations elsewhere in his work: to enter them into a conversation (however speculative) with elements taken from Benjamin and Kafka alike.

By the same token, we will not try to situate either Adorno or Benjamin in the wider context of early Kafka-reception. The wealth and breadth of research in this field far exceeds the confines of the present chapter.¹⁹⁹ In terms of historical context it suffices to note that both authors are resolutely critical of two interpretative strands that they describe as "natural" and "supernatural", respectively.²⁰⁰ Whilst the former refers to authors such as Hellmuth Kaiser, whose book *Kafka's Inferno* (1931) attempts a psychological account of Kafka's texts,²⁰¹ the latter means – above all – Kafka's editor Max Brod, who emphasises the religious weighting of his friend's work.²⁰² As Brod insists, Kafka's concern with guilt, grace, judgement and redemption indicates a positive commitment to God in the face of existential despair. In this respect, he asserts that Kafka's Judaism is equally decisive as his affinity for heterodox Christian

¹⁹⁸ For a critical account of Adorno's reading of Benjamin's piece, see: Sigrid Weigel, "Zu Franz Kafka", in *Benjamin Handbuch, Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart & Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2011), 539-542

¹⁹⁹ For a useful overview of the history of early Kafka-reception, see: Waldemar Fromm, "Kafka Rezeption", in *Kafka Handbuch*, eds. Bettina von Jagow & Oliver Jahraus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 250-272

²⁰⁰ Adorno & Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence*, 67

²⁰¹ Cf. Hellmuth Kaiser, *Kafkas Inferno: Eine psychologische Deutung seiner Straffantasie* (Vienna: Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1931)

²⁰² Cf. Max Brod, *Franz Kafkas Glauben und Lehre* (Düsseldorf: Onomato, 2011)

thinkers like Kierkegaard.²⁰³ This view is taken up by Brod's erstwhile collaborator Hans-Joachim Schoeps, who goes one step further by arguing that Kafka must be read in light of Karl Barth's dialectical theology.²⁰⁴ As Schoeps suggests, both Barth and Kafka honour Kierkegaard's verdict about the infinite qualitative distinction between man and God:²⁰⁵ only the inward turn to faith – away from the corrupt establishment of the church – can bring about man's redemption.²⁰⁶ Since it is not our aim to discuss Kafka in terms of his and his readers' divergent approaches to Kierkegaard, however, we must limit ourselves to the following question: if Adorno follows Benjamin in rejecting the characterisation of Kafka in terms of a positive religious teaching – whatever its constitutive elements may be – then what is the object of his 'inverse theology'?

I propose to approach this question in two steps: i.) By exploring Adorno's formulation *literally*, i.e. as a dynamic metaphor (after all, 'inversion' is nothing if not a movement);²⁰⁷ ii.) By considering some of the criticisms that Adorno's phrasing has provoked. (As we will find, this concerns, above all, the posthumously published transcripts of Jacob Taubes' late seminars on *The Political Theology of Paul*, 1993, which are in turn echoed in Giorgio Agamben's commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, *The Time that Remains*, 2000.)²⁰⁸

i.) Let us begin by stressing that Adorno describes the inverted 'image of theology' which he assigns to Benjamin by use of a topographical term: as he argues, it concerns – 'in quite a principled sense' – its '*position*', i.e. its placement or orientation. This peculiar description

²⁰³ Adorno changes his mind about Kafka's relationship to Kierkegaard. Early on he describes Kafka as Kierkegaard's "student". Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 25. Later on he describes him as his "critic". Adorno, "Notes on Kafka", in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel & Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 267

²⁰⁴ Cf. Max Brod & Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Im Streit um Kafka und das Judentum* (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1985)

²⁰⁵ I consciously bypass Adorno's critique of Barth as it does not bear directly on our investigation. Suffice to note that Adorno does not share Barth's positive conception of revelation over and against the failings of institutional religion. For an interesting cross reading of Adorno and Barth, see: Hent de Vries, "Inverse Versus Dialectical Theology: The two Faces of Negativity and the Miracle of Faith", *Cornellcast Video*, last altered September 2012, accessed 26/08/2014: <http://www.cornell.edu/video/inverse-versus-dialectical-theology>. See also: Margarete Kohlenbach, "Kafka, Critical Theory, Dialectical Theology: Adorno's Case against Hans-Joachim Schoeps", *German Life and Letters*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (April 2010): 146-165

²⁰⁶ Incidentally, Brod sharply criticises Schoeps' reading as an illegitimate Christianisation. This charge is echoed in Gershom Scholem's "Open Letter" to Schoeps (1932). Cf. David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 130

²⁰⁷ For the sake of brevity, we must bypass the broader philosophical resonance of the concept of inversion. Cf. Manfred Frank & Gerhard Kurz: "Ordo Inversus. Zu einer Reflexionsfigur bei Novalis, Hölderlin, Kleist und Kafka", in *Geist und Zeichen: Festschrift für Arthur Henkel*, ed. Herbert Anton (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1977), 75-97

²⁰⁸ Taubes' lectures – first held at the University of Heidelberg in 1987 and later published as *Die politische Theologie des Paulus* (1993) – are a milestone in the recent philosophical revival of Paul by authors ranging from Alain Badiou to Slavoj Žižek. However, our reading of Taubes' remarkable book will focus only on his short discussion of Adorno.

resonates with Adorno's own 'earliest attempt to interpret Kafka' in 1925,²⁰⁹ which he paraphrases in the previous line: 'I claimed he' – Kafka – 'is a photograph of earthly life taken from the perspective of the redeemed, of which nothing appears but the edge of a black cloth, whereas the terrifyingly displaced optic of the photographic image is none other than that of the obliquely angled camera itself'. Bracketing for a moment Adorno's prominent use of photographic imagery, it is worth highlighting that – as with the 'position' of theology – the 'perspective' of the redeemed ostensibly marks a determinate place. This calls to mind two critical junctures in Adorno's post-war writing at which the topographical language of his letter reappears: firstly, 'Finale' – the closing aphorism from *Minima Moralia* – and secondly, his essay 'Notes on Kafka'.²¹⁰ The former in particular is worth citing in full, as it is central to the criticisms of Adorno that we will treat below. Adorno writes:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else exhausts itself in reconstruction and remains mere technique. Perspectives would have to be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and dislocated as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without capriciousness or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, shoots together into the mirror writing of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only first be wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same dislocated-ness and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. Vis-à-vis the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.²¹¹

The echo of Adorno's 1934 letter is unmistakable in this passage: a philosophy that contemplates 'all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption' recalls almost

²⁰⁹ This text is thought to have been lost.

²¹⁰ For a useful account of Adorno's reading of Kafka see: Sonja Dierks, "Kafka-Lektüre" in *Adorno Handbuch, Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, eds. Richard Klein, Johann Kreuzer, Stefan Müller-Doohm (Stuttgart & Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2011), 210-213. Although Adorno frequently refers to Kafka, his 1953 essay is the only sustained engagement with the author.

²¹¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247 [Translation altered]

verbatim Adorno's 'earliest attempt to interpret Kafka', referred to in his letter. As we are told, such a philosophy aims to fashion 'perspectives' from whence the world appears as though it were illuminated by a 'messianic light'. The figure of a 'messianic light' is in all likelihood an allusion to the Lurrianic Kabbalah. Adorno had a passing familiarity with this source through his reading of Scholem's influential book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941) – a fact that is documented in their recently published correspondence.²¹² In this regard, the title of Adorno's piece may be seen as deliberately evoking an eschatological 'end' to the existing order. After all, the German title, 'Zum Ende', would be better translated as 'occasioned by-', 'accompanying-' or 'towards the end', rather than as 'Finale'. In any case, we might infer that these 'perspectives' coincide with the vantage point from whence "the land-surveyor" Kafka "photographs the earth's surface", as Adorno puts it in his 1953 essay.²¹³ The 'messianic light' could thus be seen as the flash bulb of Kafka's camera – a striking association when one calls to mind the prevalence of photographic imagery in Kafka's prose. Whatever we make of this, the origin of this light-source is presented as determinate. It appears to shine from a distinct outside source, indeed, an "optimal" place or locality.²¹⁴ Leaving in suspense, for a moment, Adorno's view that this light reveals the world "as it would be for the *intellectus archetypus*" ("absurd", "lacerated", "indigent", "dislocated"),²¹⁵ we note that the topography of 'Finale' gives rise to a serious problem which has not eluded a number of commentators: "how can Kafka look down on earthly life from a transcendent position if he is human," we might ask; "if man is placed on earth and God cannot even be known as an object?"²¹⁶ In other words, what might it mean to speak of such localities, or – indeed – *from* them, given (as we have noted) that Adorno's self-avowed commitment to the ban on images forbids him from furnishing either God's presence on earth or the 'standpoint of redemption' with any positive determinations?

ii.) At first glance the answer to this question appears to lie in Adorno's repeated use of the conditional form: Kafka "feigns" a standpoint that portrays the world as it would appear "from

²¹² Cf. Theodor W. Adorno & Gershom Scholem, *Der Liebe Gott wohnt im Detail: Briefwechsel, 1939-1969*, ed. Asaf Angermann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2015), 60-61. See also, Gershom Scholem *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1941)

²¹³ Adorno, "Notes on Kafka", 268

²¹⁴ Ibid

²¹⁵ Ibid. Here Adorno alludes to §77 of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Herein, the 'intellectus archetypus' denotes a quasi-divine form of knowledge, which is not limited by the strictures of the human mind. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer & Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 277

²¹⁶ Kohlenbach, "Kafka, Critical Theory, Dialectical Theology", 159-160

the perspective of salvation” (hellish, mutilated, etc.)²¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, this view has given rise to some damning invectives against Adorno’s text. Jacob Taubes, for instance, argues that Adorno’s aphorism reduces the ‘standpoint of redemption’ to a “beautiful”, albeit “empty” fiction.²¹⁸ “Think of *Minima Moralia*, the last part”, he writes.²¹⁹ “There you can tell (...) how the whole messianic thing becomes a *comme si* affair”:²²⁰ a castle in the sky. This point is echoed some years later by Giorgio Agamben, who charges that ‘Finale’ amounts to little more than an “aestheticisation of the messianic in the form of the *as if*”:²²¹ a fantastical, indeed, artistic rendering – a projection that can be pondered and enjoyed but never realised. In other words, for Agamben (following Taubes), Adorno’s remark means that philosophy is condemned to “indefinitely contemplate the *appearance* of redemption”,²²² which is to say that negative dialectics is emphatically quietistic: a melancholic reverie. Agamben generalises Taubes’ complaint, arguing that “[t]he whole of Adorno’s philosophy is written” in this form – the “*as if*” – conceived of as an “intimate modality” at the heart of his thought.²²³ Alluding to one of the opening lines from *Negative Dialectics*, Agamben drives the final nail into Adorno’s coffin: “[p]hilosophy had been realising itself, but the moment of its realisation was missed. The omission is at one and the same time absolutely contingent and absolutely irreparable, thus impotential. Redemption is consequently only a ‘point of view’”,²²⁴ a ‘standpoint’. Agamben is referring to the opening passage from *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno claims that “[p]hilosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed.”²²⁵ As is well known, Adorno plays here on Marx’s view of communism as the becoming-socially-actual of philosophical universality in practice. Pending this actualisation, however, Adorno views philosophy as having a suspended life. He accepts Marx’s materialist critique of philosophy, albeit with the proviso that history has cast serious doubt on the possibility of its practical overcoming in the present. As we have noted in the previous chapter, *Negative*

²¹⁷ Ibid [My emphasis]

²¹⁸ Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 74. Curiously, this objection is anticipated in Taubes’ earlier critique of Alexandre Kojève: Cf. Jacob Taubes, “Ästhetisierung der Wahrheit im Posthistoire”, in *Alexandre Kojève: Überlebensformen*, ed. Andreas Hiepki (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 2007), 39-57

²¹⁹ Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 74

²²⁰ Ibid

²²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Times That Remain: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 35

²²² Ibid, 38 [My emphasis]

²²³ Ibid

²²⁴ Ibid

²²⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3

Dialectics thus continues with the philosophical critique of philosophy because it deems that these efforts have not been sufficient. For Agamben, however, Adorno's arrest in the moment of critique means that he defects to a realm of semblance – “[a]esthetic beauty” as *schöner Schein* – conceived of as a “chastisement” for “philosophy’s having missed its moment”.²²⁶

It is of little consequence, here, that Taubes and Agamben's shared criticism of Adorno stems from their respective accounts of St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Accordingly, we need not reconstruct the sense in which their view of Paul's “*as not*” philosophy influences their take on Benjamin.²²⁷ By the same token, it is not in our purview to recount how Taubes and Agamben assign a putative political theology to Paul, which takes its cue (if not its consequence) from Schmitt.²²⁸ In any case, both Taubes and Agamben's criticisms of Adorno appear somewhat extraneous to their overall arguments. Adorno appears to only be intended as a negative foil for framing Benjamin's allegedly more substantial Messianism. (“No shmontses (...), *the Messiah*”).²²⁹ Without wishing to speculate further on their possible motivations for discussing Adorno, it remains to note two points about Taubes' and Agamben's critique. Firstly, the use of the terms ‘*as if*’/‘*comme si*’ is no accident. It is a play on Kant's notion of ‘*Als ob*’, a maxim of regulative judgement. More to the point, it is a figure that is taken up by the Neo-Kantian philosopher Hans Vaihinger in a book titled *The Philosophy of ‘As If’* (1911). Agamben quotes the following passage from Vaihinger's book:

The kingdom of truth will almost certainly never come, and in the final aim set before itself by the republic of scholars will, in all likelihood, never be attained. Nevertheless, the unquenchable interest in truth that burns in the breast of every thinking man will demand, for all eternity, that he should combat error with all his power and spread truth in every direction, i.e. behave exactly *as if* error must some day be completely extirpated and we might look forward to a time when truth will reign undisputed sovereignty. This indeed is characteristic of a nature like that of man, designed to

²²⁶ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 37

²²⁷ Ibid, 30-31. Hamacher for his part argues emphatically that the comparison between Benjamin and Paul is not tenable. For Benjamin, “the possibility of speaking of a historical hope for the Messianic Kingdom, of a Pauline waiting for its arrival (...) falls away.” Cf. Werner Hamacher, “Das Theologisch-Politische Fragment”, in *Benjamin Handbuch, Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart & Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2011), 178 [My translation]

²²⁸ Cf. Samuel Weber, “Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt”, in *Benjamin's Abilities*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 176-194

²²⁹ Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 70 [My emphasis]

be forever approximating to unattainable ideals (...). It is true that in all this you cannot scientifically demonstrate that it must be so. Enough that your heart bids you act *as if* it were so.²³⁰

According to Agamben, then, Adorno follows Vaihinger's directive to act "*as if* God, the kingdom, truth, and so on existed", even if these ideals are deemed to be unattainable.²³¹ In this regard, the charge that Adorno illegitimately conjures up an aesthetic image of a divine 'standpoint' suggests that he is committed to a continual striving towards an (ethical) ideal conceived of as a beautiful fiction, a gradual approximation of conditions that are – in the end – unreachable. The likening of Adorno and Vaihinger thus has a distinctly polemical thrust. After all, "the social democratic theory of the ideal as infinite progress" (so vehemently criticised by both Benjamin and Adorno) was inspired precisely by Neo-Kantians like Vaihinger.²³² To associate Adorno with the *philosophy* of 'as if' is, thus, to align him with a *political* persuasion whose progressive orientation he did not share. Adorno heeded "Kafka's statement that progress has not yet begun."²³³ But this does not yet answer the question of how Adorno is able to invoke what appears to be a fully furnished 'standpoint of redemption' in the first place. The answer to this question can be framed with reference to Kafka's novel fragment *The Castle* (first published posthumously in 1926). This allows us to reprise the thematic arc that took us from Adorno's 'Sacred Fragment', in the beginning, to his letter concerning Benjamin's Kafka essay and, finally, to the question of whether an 'inverse theology' entails a reversal of the respective standpoints of man and God. As we have already implied, theologically inclined readers of Kafka – chiefly Max Brod and Hans Joachim Schoeps – view *The Castle* in the following terms: the castle represents the seat of divine grace, whereas the village at its foot represents the corrupt world of man. On this reading, castle and village are separated by an infinite qualitative distinction. (Indeed, Kafka's protagonist, the land-surveyor K, is never admitted to the castle.) By contrast, for Adorno this distinction is collapsed: "[p]recisely that 'infinite qualitative distinction' taught by Kierkegaard and Barth is levelled off", he argues; "there is no real distinction (...) between town and castle."²³⁴ That is to say, there is no transcendent seat of divine grace, no 'standpoint of redemption'; there is only "[I]ife as it is lived in the village at the foot of the hill on which the

²³⁰ Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If'*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, Tench, Trubner & Co., 1935), 322, cited in: Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 36-37

²³¹ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 37

²³² Ibid, 36

²³³ Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry's Deviations", in *Notes to Literature, Vol. 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 157

²³⁴ Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 258

castle is built”, as Benjamin puts it in a famous letter to Scholem.²³⁵ This maps onto the terms of our discussion thus far. The topological, indeed, *tectonic* shifts discussed above in terms of a dislocation of theology mean that the question as to how Adorno can legitimately reverse the standpoints of man and God is rendered moot. If the putative polarity of village and castle is short-circuited, then so is the supposed distinction between the ‘standpoints’ of redemption and damnation. If ‘perspectives’ must, indeed, ‘be fashioned that displace and estrange the world’, then the ‘messianic light’ in which the world will ‘one day’ appear need not shine from an outside source at all. It does not require a ‘standpoint removed ... from the ... sphere of existence’ by however little. Accordingly, Adorno cannot be seen as proposing to inhabit the ‘standpoint of redemption’ as a fictive u-topos located in “another world”,²³⁶ as Agamben and Taubes suggest. The ‘messianic light’ shines from *within* the world, through the ‘rifts and crevices’ of damaged life, or – as Adorno puts it in his Kafka essay – through the “cracks and deformations of the modern age”.²³⁷ It is a negative light – a *Gegenlicht*, to borrow Paul Celan’s term – which does not illuminate the appearance of redeemed creation, but rather ‘wrenches it apart’ to reveal its hellish inner workings: its lacerated, mutilated *intérieur*. The abject *Kehricht* (“refuse”), which Adorno recognises as the building blocks of Kafka’s world, becomes a *Kehrlight*, a reverse light, or – put another way – the light of an ‘inverse theology’.²³⁸

To the extent that the preceding pages have succeeded in clarifying Adorno’s singular adaptation of a theological vernacular for the purposes of bolstering his profane critique of capitalist modernity, it finally remains to tie this point to our discussion of the image ban. Both Benjamin and Adorno explicitly associate Kafka with this figure: “[n]o other writer has obeyed the commandment ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image’ so faithfully”;²³⁹ the figure of Odradek “is the sole promise of immortality which the rationalist Kafka permits to survive the ban on images.”²⁴⁰ Kafka himself alludes to this connection when he writes: “[t]hou shalt no

²³⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, eds. Theodor W. Adorno & Gershom Scholem, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson & Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 453

²³⁶ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 30-31

²³⁷ Adorno, *Prisms*, 259 [Translation altered]

²³⁸ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 250

²³⁹ Benjamin: “Franz Kafka”, 808

²⁴⁰ Adorno, “Notes on Kafka”, 270

image –”,²⁴¹ the motto of the present chapter. The conspicuous absence of the verb in Kafka’s micro-parable signals his keen sense of the irreducibly self-transgressive character of the interdiction against image making.²⁴² “The prohibition that the sentence is about to express intervenes into this very sentence and makes it into the fragment of a language that would correspond to the prohibition. By adhering to the prohibition, however, the only sentence in which it could present itself as law is interrupted.”²⁴³ For Adorno, then, the auto-interruption of the ban on picturing the absolute designates a certain circularity: a “gesture that opens up this law and lets it remain open”.²⁴⁴ However, this openness – Adorno’s negative metaphysics, his ‘inverse theology’ – does not designate an *opening* onto another world; rather, it signals a tear in the fabric of ‘the village at the foot of the hill’ on which Kafka’s castle is built – the possibility of a radical transformation from within, effected without blueprints or guarantees.

²⁴¹ Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, 360 [My translation]

²⁴² See pp. 9-10 of the present study.

²⁴³ Werner Hamacher, “The Gesture in the Name: On Benjamin and Kafka”, in *Premises*, trans. Peter Fenves (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 336

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*

Chapter 3: *Negative Aesthetics*

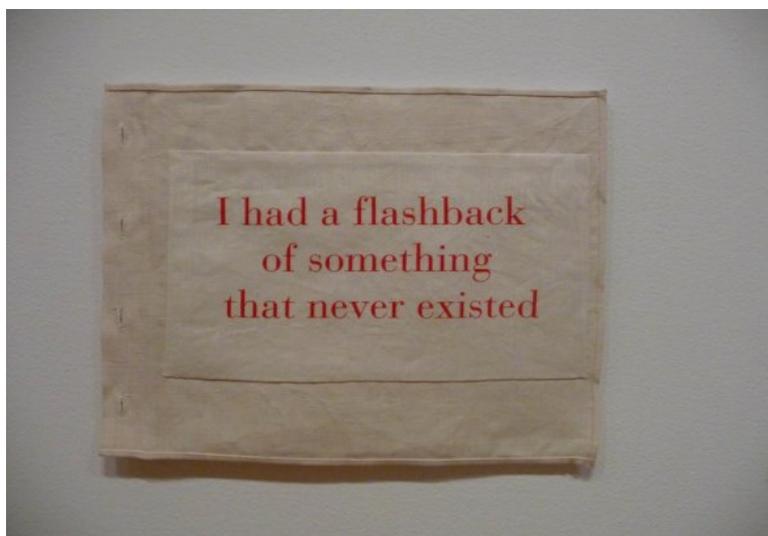


Fig. 1: Louise Bourgeois, "I Had a Flashback of Something that Never Existed", 2002

As will be recalled, the previous chapters have explored two interlocking questions. Firstly, we asked: in what sense is Adorno able to enlist the ostensibly biblical figure of the image ban in aid of articulating his enigmatic concept of an 'imageless' materialism? Herein, it was argued, lies a rebuttal of certain tendencies within materialist thought (particularly in its Soviet guise), which obfuscate the central demand of Adorno's heterodox Marxism: the abolition of bodily suffering. This in turn raised questions about the theological weighting of Adorno's lexicon. Accordingly we asked in what sense Adorno's invocation of terms that have been originally derived from scripture could be reconciled with his explicit rejection of their actuality without relegating them to the status of mere metaphors. Having concluded that Adorno's recourse to biblical terminology must be seen against the backdrop of his 'inverse theology' – a notion articulated with explicit reference to Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin – we now turn to a third facet of his interest in the ban on images: his writings on art and aesthetics.¹

¹ As is well known, the term *Ästhetik* enters the German philosophical tradition as a coinage of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762). It is derived from the Greek word *aisthesis*, meaning 'pertaining to the senses'. Baumgarten's interest in aesthetics is rooted in older, not strictly art-theoretical debates that took place throughout parts of the English-speaking world during the first half of the 18th century. He developed his ideas on aesthetics chiefly in two texts: *Reflections on Poetry* (1735) and subsequently *Aesthetica* (1750). Both tracts were written in response to certain perceived shortcomings in the work of the German rationalist philosopher Christian Wolff (1679-1754). On Wolff's reading, sensibility produces disorderly perceptions of rational perfection. Baumgarten by contrast argues that sensibility – the aesthetic – has a particular kind of dignity, which augments rational knowledge (particularly in the case of art). Accordingly, he claims that art amounts to a 'sensible image of perfection' and that judgements of taste locate beauty in a given object as an objective

We have already seen some evidence to support the claim that Adorno's aesthetic works – his texts on music, literature and the visual arts – abound with references to the *Bilderverbot*. Mahler and Schoenberg,² Hölderlin and Baudelaire,³ Eichendorff and Corot:⁴ all of these figures are discussed in terms of their abidance by the image ban. However, the fullest articulation of Adorno's views concerning the aesthetic implications of this figure appears in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). This is of the utmost significance because by the late 1960s Adorno comes to view art as the last vestige of metaphysics in the administered world: “art (...), under the impress of its semblance” – *Schein* – is “what metaphysics, which is without semblance, always wanted to be.”⁵ Aesthetics, then, means the privileged site upon which resistance to the disenchanting world of capitalist exchange relations remains conceivable. Before proceeding to explore this matter further, though, it is worth calling to mind that Adorno's magnum opus remains emphatically unfinished. That is to say, the published version of the text is comprised of extensive notes and manuscripts left by the author and edited posthumously by his wife Gretel Adorno, and his assistant Rolf Tiedemann. In the absence of a critical edition, however, it should be noted that *Aesthetic Theory* bears the mark of its editors almost as much as that of its author. Any attempt to interpret the work – including the one tendered below – must necessarily remain inconclusive. With this in mind, a central passage from a chapter dedicated to the concept of natural beauty serves to frame our investigation. Herein Adorno writes:

The Old Testament ban on images has an aesthetic as well as a theological dimension. That one should make no image, which means no image *of* anything whatsoever, expresses at the same time that it is impossible to make such an image. Through its duplication in art, what appears in nature is robbed of its being-in-itself, in which the experience of nature is fulfilled. Art holds true to appearing nature only where it makes landscape present in the expression of its own negativity. Borchardt's ‘Verse bei Betrachtung von Landschaft-Zeichnungen geschrieben’ (...) expressed this inimitably and shockingly. Where painting and nature seem happily reconciled –

quality. Although Kant, for his part, remains indebted to many of Baumgarten's insights (particularly in the *Critique of Pure Reason*), the aesthetic theory outlined in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* marks a significant departure from Baumgarten's views. For an insightful account of the history of modern aesthetics, from Shaftesbury to Du Bos, see: Paul Guyer, “The Origin of Modern Aesthetics: 1711-35”, in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 15-44

² Theodor W. Adorno, “Mahler”, in *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), 110; Theodor W. Adorno, “Sacred Fragment: Schoenberg's ‘Moses und Aron’”, in *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), 243

³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Parataxis”, in *Notes to Literature, Vol. 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 142; Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann & Gretel Adorno, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 21

⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 67

⁵ *Ibid.*, 344

as in Corot – this reconciliation is keyed to the momentary: An everlasting fragrance is a paradox.⁶

In what follows I propose to approach this passage under two separate aspects. Firstly, having discussed the way in which Adorno treats the ‘theological dimension’ of the ban on images, above, it now remains to ask: *how are we to understand its alleged aesthetic element?* I take it that any effort to respond to this question will require some contextual groundwork. Accordingly, the first part of the present chapter will ask: in what sense can Adorno be situated in a lineage of modern German thinkers – ranging from Kant to Schiller, Hegel and beyond – all of whom cite the image ban in their aesthetic writings (albeit with divergent emphases)? After all, as we have seen Adorno was far better acquainted with this tradition than with any properly religious sources. My wager is that reading Adorno in these terms will provide a firmly non-theological – indeed *aesthetic* – account of how the image ban finds entry into his work, which supplements both the inversely theological derivation from Kafka/Benjamin and the critique of reflection theory outlined in the previous chapters.

Having thus charted the basic parameters of our inquiry, the second part of this chapter will ask: *what does the supposed aesthetic dimension of the image ban say about the relationship between art, nature and beauty in capitalist modernity?* In order to gain a clearer sense of what is at stake in the estimation that ‘art holds true to appearing nature only where it makes landscape present in the expression of its own negativity’, we must ask: what is the polemical thrust of Adorno’s decision to cite the image ban specifically in a chapter on natural beauty? After all, as we will find, Kant for his part associates the image ban with the sublime rather than the beautiful in nature,⁷ whereas Hegel – amongst others – subordinates natural beauty to artistic beauty; the merely real to *Geist*. Some questions raised by the literary theorist Rodolphe Gasché in an article on the concept of natural beauty appear instructive in this context. As Gasché asks: why is “natural beauty the prime paradigm of the beautiful in Kant’s aesthetics” to begin with?⁸ Moreover, “what is at stake for Hegel” – writing in the wake of Kant – “in relegating the beautiful of nature to a secondary role in his aesthetics”?⁹ And finally: “what does Adorno hope to achieve by playing Kant and Hegel off

⁶ Ibid, 67

⁷ By way of contrast with Adorno, a discussion of the way in which Jean-François Lyotard adapts Kant’s notion of the sublime during the 1980s will follow an initial treatment of the relevant passages in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*.

⁸ Rodolphe Gasché, “The Theory of Natural Beauty and its Evil Star: Kant, Hegel, Adorno”, *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 32, No.1 (2002): 104

⁹ Ibid

against one another” by trying, we must add, to re-think natural beauty specifically under the aegis of the image ban?¹⁰

Perhaps one preliminary answer to this question could be phrased as follows: building on the accounts of image and imagelessness proffered in the opening chapter, Adorno’s efforts are closely connected to his estimation that “[n]ature, as something beautiful, cannot be copied. For natural beauty as something that appears is itself image.”¹¹ That is to say the “portrayal” of natural beauty “is a tautology that, by objectifying what appears, eliminates it.”¹² And yet – Adorno seems to suggest – art ‘holds true to appearing nature’ precisely through the “remembrance” of a reconciled condition, which “probably never existed”.¹³ Quite what is at stake in this paradoxical formulation will be explored over the course of the following pages.

I: Aesthetics & Bilderverbot

Let us begin by turning our attention to the contextual question raised at the outset: in what sense can Adorno be situated in a lineage of modern German thinkers – including Kant, Hegel and others – who cite the image ban in their aesthetic writings? In attempting to answer this question we will take two distinct approaches. On the one hand, we will consider two historical sources which were well known to Adorno and which feature prominently throughout *Aesthetic Theory*, namely:¹⁴ Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790) and G.W.F. Hegel’s lectures on *Aesthetics* (1835/1842).¹⁵ On the other hand, we will take stock of a particular episode in the recent reception of Kant’s aesthetics during the 1980s,

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 67

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid, 65-66

¹⁴ It should be noted that the title of *Aesthetic Theory* plays on the fact that Adorno views the possibility of theorising the aesthetic as a contradiction in terms. This estimation draws on one of the central insights from Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, namely: that one cannot theorise judgement. All one can do is delimit its sphere (its conditions of possibility and the limits of its legitimacy) in order to account for the meaning of individual judgements. That is to say, for Kant, aesthetics is – in fact – a radically *non*-theoretical enterprise. The specificity of the aesthetic object exceeds the possibility of its full conceptualisation. Building on this insight, the contradiction expressed by the title of Adorno’s book serves to articulate his position: on the one hand, there can be no *aesthetics* without theory; on the other hand, an aesthetic *theory* is not – in any obvious sense – a theory at all. For Adorno this means that neither aesthetics nor theory turn out to be adequate for an understanding of art. What he proposes instead is a reflection on the inadequacies of these approaches, particularly where they are thought together. In a duly negative-dialectical fashion, Adorno abstains from resolving these contradictions into a positive third term – a new, supposedly more suitable discourse about art. In short: for Adorno the significance of art lies precisely in the fact that it eludes theorisation whilst, at the same time, demanding it.

¹⁵ It is only for reasons of presentational economy that we avoid a discussion of figures such as Schiller, whose *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) pose another significant marker in Adorno’s encounter with the German aesthetic tradition.

i.e. some years after Adorno's death in 1969, namely: the work of Jean François Lyotard. Whereas the former serves to ground the subsequent discussion of Adorno's singular recovery of the seemingly antiquated concept of natural beauty under the banner of the *Bilderverbot*, the latter serves – essentially – as a point of contrast. Although both Adorno and Lyotard aim to derive an orientation for art 'after Auschwitz' from the figure of the image ban, it will become apparent that their approaches differ markedly.

i.) *Kant:*

Our first example stems from Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, specifically from the closing section of the 'Analytic of the Sublime': the 'General Remark on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgements'. Herein Kant makes the following evocative claim: "Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth etc."¹⁶ But what exactly does Kant mean when he aligns the image ban with the sublime? Although it goes beyond the remit of the present chapter to locate these issues in the overall architecture of Kant's philosophy – a system that defies easy summary – we must nonetheless recall at least *some* of the precepts that inform these lines, if only to clarify our terms. This will entail: a.) A cursory positioning of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* vis-à-vis the two preceding volumes of Kant's critical trilogy; b.) A distinction between Kant's notions of beauty and sublimity.

a.) The *Critique of the Power Judgement* is often viewed as Kant's attempt to bridge the realms of theoretical necessity and practical freedom (respectively associated with the faculties of understanding and reason), explored in the previous volumes of his major trilogy: the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Accordingly, Kant emphasises that "the power of judgement" – *Urteilkraft* – "provides the mediating concept between the concept of nature", treated in the first *Critique*, "and the concept of freedom", treated in the second.¹⁷ In this respect, Kant's third *Critique* rounds off his undertaking with a discussion of judgement as a fully-fledged faculty in its own right.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer & Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 156. It seems probable that Kant's reference to the image ban follows on from an earlier controversy with the pre-eminent philosopher of the Jewish Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn. Cf. Ingrid Lohmann, "Das Motiv des Bilderverbots bei Moses Mendelssohn", *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert – Zeitschrift der Deutschen Gesellschaft für die Erforschung des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2012): 33-42

¹⁷ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 81-82

Without presuming to accurately survey the many roles that judgement plays throughout Kant's work, it is nonetheless worth noting that, in the most general sense, it means the capacity "to subsume the particular under the general",¹⁸ to distinguish between 'a' and 'b', 'this' and 'that'. However, Kant differentiates between numerous different kinds of judgement. For instance, a 'determinate' judgement "possesses" a concept which it then applies to "a multiplicity of spatio-temporal appearances".¹⁹ By contrast, an 'indeterminate' judgement creates a concept at the same time as it determines whether a given thing is – in fact – 'a' or 'b', 'this' or 'that', etc. Throughout the first two volumes of his trilogy, Kant considers the various operations of judgement in great detail. His accounts range from seemingly simple functions, such as the ones cited above, to complex questions about the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. Hereby, Kant aims to delimit the sphere within which the judgements of philosophy can operate legitimately. Thus, he views himself as laying the ground on which to subsequently build his philosophical system.²⁰ The *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, then, "addresses what was taken for granted in the previous two critiques", namely "that it was *possible*", without qualification, "to make theoretical and practical judgements, and set about justifying the conditions for" their "possibility" in the first place.²¹ That is to say, the third *Critique* "inquires into the conditions of the possibility not of discrete theoretical or practical judgements" – what we can *know* and what we ought to *do* – "but" rather "of judgement itself."²² Specifically, "[i]t does so by means of an analysis of two particularly problematic", liminal "forms of judgement", i.e.: "the aesthetic judgement of taste", on the one hand, and the so-called "teleological judgement",²³ on the other. These judgements have a common peculiarity: they neither possess nor create a determining concept for a given thing. They are, in Kant's phrasing, "*reflective*".²⁴ One of the reasons that 'reflective' judgements are significant for Kant is that they throw the judging subject back onto its own resources, i.e. they operate without reference to externally given concepts. In this

¹⁸ Ibid, 9

¹⁹ Ibid, 54

²⁰ Kant has often been charged with failing to realise this ambition. Hegel, for instance, famously criticises Kant's effort to lay a comprehensive groundwork for any future philosophy by likening it to learning to swim before getting into the water. Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol. III*, ed. Robert F. Brown, trans. Robert F. Brown, J.M. Stewart & H.S. Harris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 263

²¹ Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 140 [My emphasis]

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 43 [My emphasis]. As Caygill highlights, it is far from self-evident what exactly Kant means by a 'reflective' judgement. "[T]he principle of reflective judgement remains undetermined, although it clearly involves pleasure, the enhancement of life, communication through common sense and tradition, and hints of a supersensible harmony." Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*, 55. See also: Howard Caygill, *The Art of Judgement* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1989)

regard, both aesthetic and teleological judgements say much about the judging subject's feelings of pleasure and displeasure, which Kant wagers harbour the *a priori* legislating principle of judgement in general.

b.) Leaving in suspense some of the wider implications of Kant's argument (particularly the significance of teleological judgement), we turn to the second point announced above: an account – however brief – of Kant's notion of the aesthetic judgement of taste. To this end, we must distinguish between two particular kinds of aesthetic judgement outlined in the first half of the book, namely: the judgements of the beautiful and the sublime, respectively.

- *'Analytic of the Beautiful':*

Kant's main account of beauty is contained in the 22 sections that comprise 'Book One' of the 'Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement', the 'Analytic of the Beautiful'. These sections are – in turn – grouped into four 'moments' ('quality', 'quantity', 'relation' and 'modality'), a division that echoes the table of categories from the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant assigns succinctly phrased formulae to each of these moments: the beautiful is that which pleases "without any interest" (quality);²⁵ it is that which "pleases universally without a concept" (quantity);²⁶ it is the "form of the purposiveness of an object (...) without representation of an end" (relation);²⁷ and, finally, it is "the object of a necessary satisfaction" that is "cognised without a concept" (modality).²⁸ Let us attempt to flesh out these highly condensed vignettes with a view to our focus on natural beauty. As we will find, Kant's examples are overwhelmingly drawn from the realm of nature.²⁹

In the paragraphs dedicated to the first 'moment' – 'quality', §§ 1-5 – Kant argues that judgements of taste are "*disinterested*".³⁰ That is to say, they arise without any regard for "purposes that can be fulfilled or interests that can be served by their existence".³¹ In other words, if something is deemed to be beautiful, then – properly speaking – the object in question must be pleasing without appealing to any sensible, practical or intellectual

²⁵ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 96

²⁶ *Ibid*, 104

²⁷ *Ibid*, 120

²⁸ *Ibid*, 124

²⁹ It is only later in the book – specifically in the passages on 'Fine Art' and 'Genius', §§ 43-53 – that Kant discusses the possibility of an artificial beauty.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 89 [My emphasis]

³¹ Paul Guyer, "Editor's Introduction", in *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer & Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xxviii

‘interests’. The disinterestedness of aesthetic judgement is clarified by way of contrast with two other types of judgement: the “agreeable” and the “good”.³² As Kant argues, the former merely pleases the senses and is thus no more than the expression of lowly physiological ‘interests’. Accordingly, such pleasures cannot legislate for an *a priori* and hence universal principle of judgement. With regards to judgements of the ‘good’, by contrast, Kant cites a political example: “in true Rousseauesque style”, he argues, “I might vilify the vanity of the great who waste the sweat of the people” on building “superfluous things”, such as lavish palaces at Versailles.³³ Indeed, I might expect that everyone should share in my disdain. However, as Kant contends, such judgements remain too closely tied to contingent, worldly concerns – however commendable they may be – to count as pure and thus disinterested.

In the second ‘moment’ – ‘quantity’, §§ 6-9 – Kant insists on the “subjective universality” of aesthetic judgements.³⁴ Paul Guyer aptly summarises some of the salient issues running through this section. As he argues, Kant’s central thought is “that in a judgement of taste a person can claim inter-subjective” – indeed, *universal* – “validity for the feeling of pleasure” that is experienced in response to a beautiful object.³⁵ This is because such feelings are “produced, in an attitude of *disinterested contemplation*”; not “by a practical concern for utility or advantage in the possession of an object” – interest – “but by the free and harmonious play of the cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding that the beautiful object induces”.³⁶ We can rightly claim the universal validity of our aesthetic judgements because, since we all share the same cognitive faculties, “everyone (...) who experiences an object that we find beautiful should” – at least in principle – “experience the same pleasure in it that we do.”³⁷

In the sections devoted to the third moment – ‘relation’, §§ 10-17 – Kant makes two claims. Firstly, he asserts that judgements of taste occur strictly in the absence of a concept of an object (in this case, the concept of an object’s utility or function). Truly beautiful objects are independent of use, i.e. their beauty is “free” rather than “merely adherent”.³⁸ Secondly, he

³² Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 91-92

³³ Ibid, 90. For an interesting account of Kant’s views on the French Revolution, see: Dieter Henrich, “The French Revolution and Classical German Philosophy: Toward a Determination of Their Relation”, in *Aesthetic Judgement and the Moral Image of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 85-99

³⁴ Ibid, 97

³⁵ Guyer, “Editor’s Introduction”, xvii

³⁶ Ibid [My emphasis] We will return to Kant’s point about the ‘free play of the faculties’ in due course.

³⁷ Ibid, xxix

³⁸ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 114. Kant discusses both ‘perfect’ and ‘ideal’ kinds of beauty as exceptions to this rule. The details of his account need not concern us here. Suffice it to note that Kant postulates an ideal of beauty as something that is adequate to the idea of the moral law, which – in turn – governs man’s highest and final purpose. We will return to the association of beauty and morality under a more general aspect, below.

claims that despite the absence of such an “objective purposiveness”,³⁹ a beautiful object nonetheless appears to us as being somehow purposive. Hence, Kant famously describes beauty as evoking the paradoxical feeling of “purposiveness without an end” – pure purposiveness, so to speak.⁴⁰ How so? As Kant argues, we take pleasure in the *form* of an object, not in its content⁴¹ – for instance, the play of shapes in a crystalline structure, but not its colour.⁴² As Kant will later argue, the formal beauty of an object is testament to its pure purposiveness insofar as it satisfies “*our* subjective purpose in cognition” – which is connected with our moral vocation – but “without serving any other, more concrete purpose.”⁴³ Kant cites an evocative example, characteristically taken from the natural world, to illustrate this point: “[f]lowers are free natural beauties. Hardly anyone other than the botanist knows what sort of thing a flower is supposed to be; and even the botanist, who recognizes in it the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end if he judges the flower by means of taste.”⁴⁴

In the fourth and final moment of the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’ – ‘modality’, §§ 18-22 – Kant attempts to substantiate his earlier claim that aesthetic judgements ought, in principle, to be agreed upon by all. To demonstrate this point he introduces the notion of “common sense” (*Gemeinsinn*).⁴⁵ However, as it turns out, the putative necessity of common sense is – in fact – of a highly qualified sort, which Kant describes as “exemplary” or “conditioned”.⁴⁶ Without wishing to unpack the wider ramifications of this point, it remains to note only that in the case of aesthetic judgements (rather than determinate ones), “we do not have rules that we can mechanically follow, but at most examples that can, especially in the case of art, provide us with models not for imitation but for inspiration.”⁴⁷ That is to say, although genuine aesthetic judgements are necessary, they neither rest upon nor produce a *concept* of the

³⁹ Ibid, 111

⁴⁰ Ibid, 112

⁴¹ Cf. Rodolphe Gasché, “On Mere Form”, in *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 60-88

⁴² It is not immediately plain to see how Kant distinguishes between the legitimate pleasure derived from the *form* of an object, and the illegitimate gratification derived from its sensory aspect. In fact, this difficulty has repeatedly earned Kant the charge of formalism. As Caygill summarises: “By distinguishing beauty from any content, whether rational or sensible”, Kant is sometimes seen as having “severely limited” the “scope” of beauty. “If sensible content were to play any part, then the object would not be beautiful but only agreeable; if a concept were involved, then the beautiful would be too easily convertible with the rational. If they could exist, such beauties would be ‘dependent’ and contrasted with the ‘free’ beauties which ‘represent nothing’ and cannot strictly speaking even be artefacts. Consequently, Kant appeared to many critics as unduly privileging the beauty of nature over the beauty of art, even on those occasions when he attempts to rescue the beauty of art by insisting that it appear as if it were natural.” Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*, 92

⁴³ Guyer, “Editor’s Introduction”, xxix [My emphasis]

⁴⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 114

⁴⁵ Ibid, 122

⁴⁶ Ibid, 123

⁴⁷ Guyer, “Editor’s Introduction”, xxx

beautiful, but rather stem from what Kant calls ‘common sense’: the universally communicable aspect of aesthetic feeling.

Having summarised (however briefly) some of the central themes that run through the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’, we now return to a question cited at the outset, namely: why does Kant seem to privilege the beautiful in nature over the beautiful in art? As Gasché argues, Kant holds that “[t]he beautiful in nature becomes significant in view of the *duty* that man has to himself as a moral being.”⁴⁸ This ‘duty’, we are told, denotes a “disposition (...) to love something (e.g. crystal formations, the indescribable beauty of plants) even apart from any intention to use it.”⁴⁹ As Gasché insists, the Kantian ‘disposition’ to love “something that is of no use to us” (a clear echo of first moment from the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’) denotes a “sensible feeling that is beneficial” – if not definitive – for “the formation of morality” and, hence, conducive to the fulfilment of a “human being’s destiny”: the establishment of a moral world.⁵⁰ This is because for Kant beauty – and particularly *natural* beauty – is, in fact, an analogue (indeed, a “*symbol*”) for morality.⁵¹ Without wishing to detail the particularities of Kant’s claim, it is worth noting four parallels between beauty and morality outlined later in the book: (1) “both please directly and not through consequences or purposes; (2) both are disinterested; (3) both involve the idea of a free conformity to law (...);” and “(4) both are understood to be founded upon a universal principle that does not involve determining concepts of the understanding.”⁵² Sidestepping the finer points of this supposed parallel, Gasché continues his questioning: but “on what *basis* do beautiful things in (...) nature”, rather than art, “foster in us this” supposed “love for things that we have no intention to use”?⁵³ After all, even if we concede Kant’s association of beauty and morality, we might object that it is not clear why a natural phenomenon should be better suited to ‘symbolise’ this parallel than, say, a painting or a sculpture. Gasché describes this ‘basis’ by bringing certain precepts of both Kant’s epistemology and his moral philosophy to bear upon the third *Critique*. As he reminds us, “only such things (...) for which we have no (determinate) concept can be found to be beautiful.”⁵⁴ Such things occur primarily in nature because, even

⁴⁸ Gasché, “The Theory of Natural Beauty and its Evil Star: Kant, Hegel, Adorno”, 108 [My emphasis]

⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 237

⁵⁰ Gasché, “The Theory of Natural Beauty and its Evil Star: Kant, Hegel, Adorno”, 106

⁵¹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 225 [My emphasis]. The question of the symbol will resurface in our discussion of Hegel, below.

⁵² Douglas Burnham, *An Introduction to Kant’s Critique of Judgement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 138

⁵³ Gasché, “The Theory of Natural Beauty and its Evil Star: Kant, Hegel, Adorno”, 107 [My emphasis]

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 108

where ‘Genius’ is able to channel the beautiful into art, these products remain mere echoes of beauty’s proper place in nature. That is to say, for Kant, “[n]atural beauty” – far more than artificial beauty – is “intimately tied to the indeterminacy of cognitively unfamiliar and undomesticated” objects.⁵⁵ Although it is not their “indeterminacy” *per se* “that makes natural things beautiful”, it is their *form* which “raises them to the dignity of a thing and” thus “makes them determinable”, at least in principle.⁵⁶ And, according to Kant, the pleasure associated with the judgement that an ‘undomesticated’ thing is beautiful denotes precisely its conformity to our cognitive faculties. That is, the experience of beautiful things in nature “is testimony to nature’s conformity to reason even when no concepts of the understanding are at hand to determine them.”⁵⁷ Thus, Gasché concludes, “[n]atural beauty is an index of nature’s cognisability”, and – inasmuch as Kant holds that “it is our destiny to make nature knowable” – it thus “becomes a moral issue”.⁵⁸ In other words, Kant privileges natural beauty over artificial beauty because he views the former as affirming the primacy of reason – a primacy from which, he argues, man’s moral ‘duty’, ultimately, stems.

It cannot presently be our task to pursue this central aspect of Kant’s thought any further. Suffice it to note that, although Adorno’s account of natural beauty will turn out to differ from Kant’s in significant respects, his debt to the third *Critique* remains considerable. As we will see, this concerns – above all – the extra-conceptual character of aesthetic judgement. Indeed, natural beauty is related to what Adorno calls the ‘non-identical’, i.e. all that is repressed in the dialectic of enlightenment. At the same time, Adorno will turn out to be critical of the fact that Kant’s account of natural beauty (like much else in his philosophy), ultimately stands to affirm the sovereign reign of reason over nature.⁵⁹ Bracketing the particularities of Adorno’s ambiguous relation to Kant for the moment, we can pre-empt our subsequent discussion by noting the following: Adorno’s particular use of the terms ‘nature’ and ‘beauty’ is, in fact, highly unusual. It points back to his cross reading of Lukács and Benjamin under the aspect of ‘second nature’.⁶⁰ But before we turn to this issue, we must first take stock of another aspect of the third *Critique*, namely: Kant’s ‘Analytic of the Sublime’, where the aforementioned reference to the image ban occurs.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid, 108-109

⁵⁸ Ibid, 109

⁵⁹ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001)

⁶⁰ See p. 56, n. 194 of the present study.

- ‘Analytic of the Sublime’:

In ‘Book Two’ of the ‘Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement’, Kant details his thoughts on judgements of the sublime. Broadly speaking, the sublime means the experience of something awe-inspiring.⁶¹ Specifically, Kant distinguishes between two variants of the sublime: the mathematical (§§ 25-27) and the dynamical (§§ 28-29). Whereas the former means a sense of awe experienced in the face of something “absolutely great” in size,⁶² the latter means a sense of awe experienced before something with great “power”.⁶³ Kant cites two kinds of examples throughout this section: firstly, natural phenomena, including “threatening cliffs, thunder clouds (...), flashes of lightning (...), volcanoes (...), hurricanes (...), the boundless ocean (...) etc.”,⁶⁴ and, secondly, man-made phenomena, such as the Egyptian pyramids and St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.⁶⁵ As we will find, however, Kant’s examples are not in and of themselves sublime, but rather inspire in *us* a feeling of sublimity, which ultimately affirms “the superiority of the rational”, indeed moral “vocation of” man’s “cognitive faculty” over nature.⁶⁶ Before we consider Kant’s distinction in more detail, however, it is worth noting a few general points about this central section of the third *Critique*.

To begin with, Kant names three commonalities between the beautiful and the sublime. Firstly, he argues that both are pleasing in their own right, i.e. aside from any ‘interest’. He cites the example of an awe-inspiring storm to illustrate this point. As Kant suggests, any struggle to save oneself from the “real danger” posed by such a storm precludes this experience from qualifying as sublime.⁶⁷ This is because such an experience stems from a physiological interest in self-preservation, however understandable this impulse may be. As he argues, only if the storm can be experienced from a position of relative “safety” – i.e. free from the constraints of self-interest – will its sublime force truly be felt.⁶⁸ To this extent, the sublime is indeed akin to the beautiful inasmuch as the latter, too, disqualifies judgements made on the basis of sensible, intellectual or (we might add) existential interests. Secondly,

⁶¹ The sublime became a central philosophical concern during the 18th century, particularly in Great Britain, where it was theorised extensively by the likes of Edmund Burke and David Hume – authors with whose work Kant was well acquainted. The term itself dates back to Longinus’ tract *On the Sublime*, thought to have been written between 100-300 AD. For an interesting overview of philosophies of the sublime see: Andrew Ashfield & Peter de Bolla (eds.), *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

⁶² Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 131

⁶³ Ibid, 143

⁶⁴ Ibid, 144

⁶⁵ Ibid, 136

⁶⁶ Ibid, 141

⁶⁷ Ibid, 136

⁶⁸ Ibid, 144

Kant suggests that, as in the case of the beautiful, judgements of the sublime are ‘reflective’ inasmuch as they concern experiences that exceed man’s ability to sensibly determine them. (We will return to this point below.) Thirdly, like judgements of the beautiful, judgements of the sublime are said to demand universal assent. In other words, Kant claims that in principle the feeling of sublimity should be communicable to everyone, given that human beings share the same set of cognitive faculties.

In turn, Kant cites two differences between the beautiful and the sublime. Firstly, he argues that whilst beauty concerns the *form* of an object, the sublime concerns that which is “formless”.⁶⁹ Kant appears to associate two characteristics with this term: on the one hand, he seems to mean phenomena whose appearance is erratic and unstable (such as the storm); on the other hand, he seems to mean phenomena that resist being comprehended in their totality (such as the cosmos). Secondly, Kant claims that whereas judgements of the beautiful produce pleasure in the experience of an object’s pure purposiveness (its determinability), the sublime – in fact – initially produces displeasure by frustrating our ability to make sensible determinations. In other words, Kant claims that judgements of the beautiful stem from a playful and harmonious relationship between the faculties of imagination and understanding, whereas judgements of the sublime initially stem from a frustrated and dissonant relationship between the faculties of imagination and reason. However, the point – in turn – will be to demonstrate how this experience of frustration is recuperated as pleasure.

Having thus charted some of the similarities and differences between the two kinds of aesthetic judgement, we now turn to the distinction between the mathematically and the dynamically sublime. Kant initially defines the mathematically sublime as “that which is absolutely great”, i.e. “great beyond all comparison.”⁷⁰ Such judgements are occasioned by encounters with objects of an overwhelming size. Kant distinguishes between two methods for judging the magnitude of such appearances: aesthetics and mathematics. With regards to the former, he argues that aesthetic judgements of size occur “in mere intuition (measured by eye).”⁷¹ That is, judgements like ‘this man is tall’ do not follow from numerical measurements, but rather from our sense of “the average magnitude of the people known to us.”⁷² By contrast, the mathematical determination of an object’s size requires us to employ a particular unit of measurement, i.e. a calculation made “by means of numerical concepts.”⁷³ Thus, mathematical determinations of size are directed by reason (rather than intuition). As

⁶⁹ Ibid, 128 [My emphasis]

⁷⁰ Ibid, 131-132

⁷¹ Ibid, 134

⁷² Ibid, 133

⁷³ Ibid, 134

Kant argues, “[f]or the mathematical estimation of magnitude” there is no single “*greatest*” figure, because “the power of numbers goes to infinity”.⁷⁴ Even though the vast expanse of the cosmos exceeds our ability to fathom it intuitively, its parameters can nonetheless be expressed in terms of number – even if such sums defy our ability to imagine them. Aesthetic judgements of size, by contrast, are limited. Encountering a monumental structure like St. Peter’s exceeds our ability to picture it as a totality. In Kant’s view, thinking such a totality (in accord with the faculty of reason) would entail nothing less than determining the noumenal ground of its appearance. Thus, he describes experiences of overwhelmingly proportioned objects that make us aware of the inadequacy of our sensible cognition as “absolutely great”, i.e. as “an absolute measure, beyond which no greater is (...) possible” for “the judging subject”.⁷⁵ However (and this is the clincher), the discussion of measure is significant because it demonstrates that the power of reason in fact *exceeds* the capacities of both the imagination and the understanding. As Kant writes, “[t]he very inadequacy of our faculty for estimating the magnitude of the things of the sensible world awakens the feeling of a supersensible faculty in us.”⁷⁶ That is to say, in Kant’s view, mathematically sublime experiences produce a sense of “respect” in us, which is only improperly attributed to natural phenomena. (Kant calls this misattribution “subreption”).⁷⁷ The true object of reverence is our faculty of reason.⁷⁸ As Kant claims, this insight redeems our sense of dissatisfaction with the mathematically sublime and renders it pleasurable.

In the case of the dynamically sublime, Kant observes an irresistible “power” that ostensibly overwhelms our sense of free volition, i.e. our will (specifically: our sense of resistance).⁷⁹ Kant seems to suggest that, just as our experience of the mathematically sublime begins by showing up the limits of our intuition, so the dynamically sublime initially proceeds by overpowering our sense of agency – our will. The point is as follows: as Kant argues, the dynamically sublime has a comparable relationship to the notion of *freedom* as the mathematically sublime has to the notion of *totality*. (To be sure, it points far beyond the confines of the present chapter to account for Kant’s complex view of freedom – *the* central term of his practical philosophy. Suffice it to note that amongst other things freedom

⁷⁴ Ibid, 135

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ibid, 134

⁷⁷ Ibid, 141

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid, 143. As noted above, Kant cites the following examples: “[b]old, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs, thunder clouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, volcanoes with their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set into a rage, a lofty waterfall on a mighty river, etc., make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power.” Ibid, 144

designates an independence from natural determination, signalling instead the rational institution of the moral law.) In any case, Kant claims that what appears to us initially as an experience of overwhelming natural power provokes, in turn, in our minds an idea of freedom to which our will remains inadequate. This is analogous to the impossible demand for sensibly determining totality issued by our faculty of reason in the case of the mathematically sublime (e.g. the Pyramids). As we have seen, in that case the challenge causes us to realise reason's superiority over the merely sensible precisely at the limit of our aesthetic comprehension. Similarly, in the case of the dynamically sublime, the very emergence of the idea of freedom – occasioned by phenomena that impinge on our will – recalls the fact that our faculty of reason is *super-sensible*, i.e. that it is unfettered by natural determinations, however powerful they may be. Hence, Kant writes: “we gladly call” storms, raging oceans, etc. “sublime” – although only improperly so, as we have seen – “because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind”, namely: resistance to the un-freedom of nature through recourse to our faculty of reason.⁸⁰ In this regard, Kant claims that nature's forces in fact have “no dominion over us”.⁸¹ More importantly, however, Kant views the dynamically sublime as the revelation of our moral nature; as that which – through transcending our sensible selves – seeks to become adequate to the idea of freedom. Reason's demand for the self-transcendence of the will thus relates directly to Kant's central philosophical ambition: attaining the freedom *to obey the moral law*.

It hardly bears emphasising that the account of Kant's ‘Analytic of the Sublime’ proffered above is – at best – a schematic (not to say tendentious) gloss. Nevertheless, I take it that it is sufficient to attempt a reading of the passage cited at the outset, wherein Kant makes reference to the Jewish ban on images. As will be recalled, Kant writes: ‘Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth etc.’ In these lines Kant invokes the image ban in order to underwrite his portrayal of the sublime as being unintuitable. As Achim Geisenhanslüke helpfully elucidates, “the true reason for the imagelessness of the sublime” lies in the fact that “through the confrontation with a super-sensible power, the faculty of sensible presentation –

⁸⁰ Ibid, 144-145

⁸¹ Ibid, 143

the imagination – reaches a limit”.⁸² As he continues, “the limit of sensibility, which the sublime shows up by suspending the power of the imagination, becomes the guarantor for the infinite realm of reason” – a realm with which “Kant had associated the ideas of freedom, immortality and God” in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).⁸³ As the experience of a certain limit, the sublime thus confronts man with his own finitude – not only as a “negative pleasure”,⁸⁴ as Kant emphasises – but as a negative form of presentation (*Darstellung*). As Geisenhanslüke explains: “[w]hat appears in the sublime, the ideas of reason – freedom, immortality and God – eludes sensible form and yet, as something *de facto* unrepresentable, it is indirectly revealed as imageless.”⁸⁵

But how does this bear on Adorno? Certainly, if Kant’s reference to the image ban is taken to mean simply an indirect way for presenting that which eludes sensible determination, then it would seem to chime with Adorno’s usage (albeit only on a very general level). After all, as we have seen, Adorno frequently cites the *Bilderverbot* to mean a ban on positively schematising Utopia – a ‘place’ that permits only negative determination. However, even if we concede that there is such a general commonality (and, as will become apparent, things are not so simple), this does not yet explain why Adorno should choose to invoke the image ban *specifically* in his discussion of natural beauty. As we will find, this is in part to do with the way in which he plays off Kant and Hegel against one another in *Aesthetic Theory*. But before we turn to an account of how the beauty of nature is subordinated to the beauty of art in Hegel’s work, it remains to disentangle Adorno’s reliance on the third *Critique* from another prominent episode in the history of 20th century Kant-reception, namely: Jean François Lyotard’s reflections on the sublime.

ii.) *Lyotard:*

As we have noted at the outset, during the 1980s the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard spearheaded a renewed interest in Kant’s notion of the sublime. In the present context this is significant for the following reasons: a.) Lyotard relies specifically on Kant’s citation of the image ban in order to bestow a certain ethical task upon contemporary art – to bear

⁸² Achim Geisenhanslüke, “Bilderverbot: Kant – Lyotard – Kafka”, in *Der Bildhunger der Literatur – Festschrift für Günter E. Grimm*, eds. Dieter Heimböckel & Uwe Werlein (Würzburg: Königshausen + Neumann, 2005), 37 [My translation]

⁸³ Ibid, 37 [My translation]

⁸⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 129

⁸⁵ Geisenhanslüke, “Bilderverbot: Kant – Lyotard – Kafka”, 37-38 [My translation]

witness to the unrepresentable other of thought;⁸⁶ b.) Lyotard draws on Adorno's much maligned dictum, that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric", in order to bolster his position.⁸⁷ He thus seeks to transform the putative "impossibility" of representing particular events – e.g. Auschwitz – into the grounds for "an *art* of the unrepresentable".⁸⁸ (Interestingly, Lyotard's enthusiastic reception of Adorno in his later writings comes off the back of an outright hostility towards his work during the 1970s.)⁸⁹ Whatever the cause of Lyotard's change of heart may be,⁹⁰ his late interest in both Kant and Adorno had an enduring influence on the debate about what *can* and what *cannot*, in fact, be responsibly represented by art.⁹¹ Without wishing to review these questions in their wider context, I take it that there are a number of difficulties associated with Lyotard's attempt to read Kant with Adorno. These difficulties are worth calling to mind before we turn to a discussion of *Aesthetic Theory*, inasmuch as they point to the differences between Lyotard and Adorno's respective efforts to derive an orientation for the arts from the Kantian image ban.

a.) Let us look first at Lyotard's reading of Kant. In his well-known essay 'Newman: The Instant' (1985), Lyotard proffers an interpretation of the passage from the third *Critique*, which we have treated above. As he writes:

[o]ne cannot (...) represent the power of infinite might or absolute magnitude within space and time because they are pure ideas. But one can allude to them, or 'evoke' them by means of what he [Kant] baptises a 'negative presentation'. As an example of this paradox of a representation

⁸⁶ We will aim to clarify this notion in due course. For now it suffices to note that Lyotard is particularly interested in how this plays out in the work of the American painter Barnett Newman. Cf. Jean François Lyotard, "Newman: The Instant", in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 78-88; Jean François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Marian Hobson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1989), 196-211. For an interesting account of the ethical commitments underlying Lyotard's philosophy, see: Martin Jay, "The Ethics of Blindness and the Postmodern Sublime: Levinas and Lyotard", in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 543-586

⁸⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society", in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel & Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 34

⁸⁸ Jacques Rancière, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?", in *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), 110

⁸⁹ Cf. Jean François Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil", *Telos*, No. 19 (Spring 1974): 127-137

⁹⁰ Lyotard's wider interest in Adorno is spelled out in the following texts: Jean François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); "Discussions, or Phrasing 'after Auschwitz'", in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Marian Hobson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1989), 360-392

⁹¹ For a cross-section of the kinds of art-theoretical debates that have been sparked by Lyotard, see: Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992)

which represents nothing, Kant cites the Mosaic law which forbids the making of graven images.⁹²

Indeed, this resonates with our findings so far. However, Lyotard puts a surprising spin on Kant's argument. As he assures us, the Kantian image ban in fact prefigures an *artistic* manoeuvre, namely: "the minimalist and abstractionist solutions" that 20th century avant-garde painters (above all, Barnett Newman) will employ "to try to escape the figurative prison", which they are said to have inherited from tradition.⁹³ Lyotard's verdict follows from his earlier claim that "for the last century, the arts have not had the beautiful as their main concern, but something which has to do with the sublime".⁹⁴ Whether or not this portrayal of the motivations behind 'minimalist and abstractionist' currents in post-war painting is, in fact, art-historically sustainable cannot be decided here. Rather, we must limit ourselves to the following proviso: Lyotard appears to wilfully disregard the fact that for Kant works of art emphatically cannot be considered sublime.⁹⁵ The third *Critique* is clear on this point: even when the sublime is experienced in the face of man-made structures – art – it strictly designates a feeling in *us*, not an objective quality of, say, St Peter's or the Pyramids (to stick with Kant's examples). This is what sets Kant apart from rationalist aestheticians like Wolff. The point is that in the experience of sublimity "we emerge from aesthetics proper and enter the realm of morality; we are led from the feeling of imagination's impotence to the feeling of humankind's destination in the supersensuous Kingdom – the province of Reason and Freedom – that would impose its rule over the power of Nature."⁹⁶ Of course we must presume that Lyotard is aware of all this. Accordingly it might seem "pointless to argue *that*" he "has misread Kant", as Jacques Rancière contends; rather, it warrants asking "*why* he reads Kant the way he does."⁹⁷

Answering this question hinges on the uncertain status of the 'something' at the heart of Lyotard's estimation that 'for the last century, the arts have not had the beautiful as their main concern, but *something* which has to do with the sublime'. Without specifying what 'arts' he has in mind here, besides Newman's paintings, Lyotard begins to fill out this lacuna by

⁹² Lyotard, 'Newman: The Instant', 246

⁹³ *Ibid*

⁹⁴ Jean François Lyotard, "After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics", in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 135

⁹⁵ To be sure, Lyotard is not alone in associating the sublime with art. Following Hegel, Adorno, too, explores this possibility (albeit to different ends). See especially the closing sections in *Aesthetic Theory* entitled 'Truth Content is Historical: The Sublime in Nature and Art' and 'The Sublime and Play'.

⁹⁶ Jacques Rancière, "The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller – Two Readings of Kant and their Political Significance", *Radical Philosophy*, No. 126 (Jul-Aug, 2004): 8

⁹⁷ Rancière, "The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller", 10 [My emphasis]

revisiting Kant's prioritisation of form over sensible content in the rendering of judgements of taste. On Lyotard's reading, Kant's notion of 'form' is to do with the 'forming' of "data" into mental representations – a task performed by the imagination.⁹⁸ This is taken to mean "the most fundamental case of what (...) constitutes the property common to every mind: its capacity (...) to synthesise data, gather up the manifold (...) in general",⁹⁹ i.e. its capacity for judgement. In the specific case of *aesthetic* judgements, this means the universal capacity of 'every mind' to derive pleasure from the recognition that – qua form – a given representation conforms, at least in principle, to our cognitive faculties (even if no concept is at hand to determine it). As Lyotard argues, the particular content of this 'data' is then "presented as what is *par excellence* diverse, unstable and evanescent".¹⁰⁰ This characterisation raises an important question for Lyotard, which shifts his emphasis from the beautiful to the sublime. He asks: "where does matter stand if", in the case of the sublime, "the forms are no longer there to make matter" – which Lyotard foregrounds – "*presentable*?"¹⁰¹ In other words, what is the status (indeed, the 'presentability') of the 'matter' that occasions our experience of the sublime, if it is seen as a mere catalyst for establishing the priority of reason *over* our capacity for sensible presentation? (After all, as we have seen, the Kantian sublime concerns precisely that which is *formless*.) Lyotard's response to this question takes the form of an indictment: the sublime "signifies that the mind is lacking in nature, that nature is lacking for it", i.e. that 'matter' falls by the wayside in the Kantian picture. It signals that Kant's sublime is, in fact, "nothing other than the sacrificial announcement of the ethical in the aesthetic field. Sacrificial in that it requires that (...) nature" – matter – "must be sacrificed in the interests of practical reason".¹⁰² Kant's attempt to affirm the primacy of practical reason in the 'Analytic of the Sublime' is thus portrayed as entailing "some specific problems for the *ethical* evaluation of the sublime sentiment" itself.¹⁰³ Hence, Lyotard's misgivings might be summed up in two ways: on the one hand, he argues that "[n]ature" – matter – "is 'used', 'exploited' by the mind according to a purposiveness that is not nature's";¹⁰⁴ on the other hand, he worries whether this "slippage (...) leaves room for an aesthetic" at all.¹⁰⁵ Given these

⁹⁸ Lyotard, "After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics", 136

⁹⁹ Ibid [My emphasis]

¹⁰⁰ Ibid [translation altered]

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Ibid

¹⁰⁴ This view comes close to the central precept of Critical Theory, namely the notion of instrumental reason. Cf. Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Seabury Press, 1974)

¹⁰⁵ Lyotard, "After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics", 136

reservations, Lyotard sets out to devise an aesthetic *of* the sublime, whose ethical commitment is *to* ‘matter’, albeit in a highly unusual sense. How so?

First of all, Lyotard focuses his efforts on “matter in the arts”, rather than nature.¹⁰⁶ Without elaborating on his reasoning, he states: “the aim for the arts, especially of painting and music, can only be that of approaching matter. Which means approaching presence without recourse to the means of presentation.”¹⁰⁷ This invites two terminological questions: firstly, what does Lyotard mean by ‘presentation’ (the Kantian *Darstellung*), and secondly what does he mean by ‘presence’? With regards to the former, it seems that Lyotard means that which can be submitted to the law of the concept – “the matter of data”.¹⁰⁸ (As he argues, we can determine colours and sounds conceptually, i.e. “in terms of vibrations, by specifying pitch, duration and frequency”).¹⁰⁹ With regards to the latter, by contrast, he appears to mean that which defies conceptual determination, namely: “timbre and nuance”.¹¹⁰ As he explains, “[n]uance and timbre are scarcely perceptible differences between sounds or colours which are otherwise identical in terms of the determination of their physical parameters. This difference can be due (...) to the way they are obtained: for example, the same note coming from a violin, a piano or a flute, the same colour in pastel, oil or watercolour.”¹¹¹ ‘Timbre and nuance’ are thus placed on the side of ‘presence’, rather than ‘presentation’, because we register them as being distinct in spite of their identical ‘physical parameters’. They are ‘present’, not in the sense of a “*here-and-now*”, which could be chronologically (and, hence, conceptually) determined, but rather only to the extent that they proclaim “*that there is*” something.¹¹² Registering this ‘presence’, however, demands that we suspend the “active powers of the mind”.¹¹³ That is to say, ‘presence’ (the sense ‘*that there is*’ something) can only be experienced “if we suspend that activity of comparing and grasping, the aggressivity, the ‘hands-on’ (...) and the negotiation that are the regime of mind”.¹¹⁴ Only through such “*ascesis*” would it be possible “to become open to the invasion of nuances, passible to timbre.”¹¹⁵ Hence, the ‘aim of the arts’ is to ‘become open’ to that aspect of ‘matter’, which defies conceptual presentation: the elusive ‘presence’ associated with nuance and timbre. The “fundamental task” of art, in other words, is “that of bearing (...) witness” to the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 138

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 139

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 136

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Ibid, 140

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid

“inexpressible” ‘presence’ that proclaims ‘*that there is*’ something, namely: “matter in its alterity”.¹¹⁶ The point, finally, is that, according to Lyotard, the experience of this “singular, incomparable” quality of art causes a “passion” in the mind: the sense of an “obscure debt”.¹¹⁷ But whose ‘debt’? And to whom?

Rancière provides a compelling response to this question: “in Lyotard the tone or the nuance seems to play the same role as the pyramid or the stormy ocean in Kant. They induce a (...) break in the mind’s capacity to take hold of its object”.¹¹⁸ However, instead of affirming the *autonomy* of our reason in the face of natural forces, the “aistheton” – ‘matter in its alterity’ – “acts as a shock that induces in the mind the sensation of its radical dependence”: its *heteronomy*.¹¹⁹ This is the locus of the ‘debt’ that Lyotard invokes. It means that “[t]he soul comes into its existence dependent on the sensuous, thus violated, humiliated. The aesthetic condition is enslavement” – obligation – “to the aistheton without which it is anaesthesia.”¹²⁰ There is no aesthetic without a debt to the other. Lyotard thus reverses Kant’s terms. Instead of affirming the primacy and autonomy of the moral law, he emphasises the “enslavement to the law of alterity.”¹²¹ As Rancière puts it: “[t]he law of ethics is here identified rigorously with a ‘debt’ to an other. It is the law of heteronomy, the enslavement to the mere, mute alterity of ‘the Thing’ – the power inside the mind and prior to the mind that the mind ever tries to overcome, and never succeeds.”¹²²

Let us see, then, how this view affects Lyotard’s considerations regarding the role of art in the face of historical calamity.

b.) It is at this juncture that Adorno’s pronouncement regarding poetry after Auschwitz comes to bear on Lyotard’s idiosyncratic reading of Kant. The hypothesis that art’s task is to attend to the call of unrepresentable other – derived from the interpretation of Newman – is applied to the question of how art can ‘bear witness’ to the appalling singularity of Auschwitz. As we are told, this attempt “involves not so much recounting the event” – poetically or otherwise – “as witnessing to a *there was*” that underlies it.¹²³ This ‘there was’ “exceeds thought, not only through its (...) surplus” vis-à-vis the effort to ‘recount’ it (Auschwitz is more than can be contained in survivor testimony); rather, “the peculiarity of the *there was*” exceeds the scope

¹¹⁶ Rancière, “The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller”, 8

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 9

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 10

¹²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, “Anima Minima”, in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 243

¹²¹ Rancière, “The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller”, 10

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Rancière, “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?”, 111

of thought *tout court* – it is, in a word, unrepresentable.¹²⁴ Lyotard thus maps his thoughts on sublime art onto the question of poetry after Auschwitz. After all, as we have seen, his emphasis on ‘nuance and timbre’ serves precisely to articulate a ‘presence’ that eludes the ‘active powers of the mind’ by bearing witness to the obscure sense ‘*that there is*’ something. By the same token, art after Auschwitz bears witness to an undetermined ‘*there was*’. (The shift from present to past tense is striking here.) This view is underpinned by two further presuppositions. Firstly, in his book *Heidegger and ‘the jews’* (1988), Lyotard associates the alleged debt to an unrepresentable other – cited above – with a particular historical figure, namely that of “‘the jews’”.¹²⁵ (As we will find, this resonates closely with Hegel’s association of the sublime with symbolic art and Judaism – a problematic and, by all accounts, unintentional coincidence for the Hegel-critic Lyotard.) Although we cannot presently concern ourselves with the peculiar re-imagining of Jewish history which allows for this tenuous association, it is worth emphasising that Lyotard thus credits ‘the jews’ themselves with bearing witness to the same alleged ‘enslavement to the law of alterity’, which he otherwise locates in art. Rancière aptly summarises this point: for Lyotard, “[s]ublime art is what resists the imperialism of thought forgetful” – anaesthetic – “of the other, just as the Jewish people is the one that remembers the forgetting.”¹²⁶ This analogy is important because – secondly – the *extermination* of the Jewish people is taken to be the “end-point of the process of a dialectical reason concerned to cancel from its core any alterity, to exclude it and, when it is a people, to exterminate it.”¹²⁷ It is thus incumbent upon art to interrupt this process, to testify “not to the naked horror of the camps but to the original terror of the mind which the terror of the camps wishes to erase.”¹²⁸ Accordingly, for Lyotard, art “bears witness not by representing heaps of bodies, but through the orange-coloured flash of lightning that traverses the monochrome of a canvas by Barnett Newman” or, indeed, through “any other procedure whereby painting” (or cinema) “carries out an exploration of its materials when they are diverted from the task of representation.”¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ Lyotard qualifies his use of the lower case as follows: “I write ‘the jews’ this way neither out of prudence nor lack of something better. I use lower case to indicate that I am not thinking of a nation. I make it plural to signify that it is neither a figure nor a political (Zionism), religious (Judaism), or philosophical (Jewish philosophy) subject that I put forward under this name. I use quotation marks to avoid confusing these ‘jews’ with real Jews.” Jean François Lyotard, *Heidegger and ‘the jews’*, trans. Andreas Michel & Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 3. I resist the temptation of asking quite which ‘jews’ Lyotard does mean.

¹²⁶ Rancière, “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?”, 133

¹²⁷ Ibid. To be sure, this reading chimes with the characterisation of Judaism proffered by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. However, as we will see, it ultimately serves a different argument.

¹²⁸ Rancière, “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?”, 134

¹²⁹ Ibid. In *Heidegger and ‘the jews’*, Lyotard devotes some lengthy passages to Claude Lanzmann’s path-breaking documentary film, *Shoah* (1985).

It cannot be our task here to further elaborate Lyotard's far-reaching thought. Suffice it to note that the 'orange-coloured flash of lightning', which traverses Newman's canvas, can hardly be called a 'nuance'. By introducing the metaphor of lightning, Lyotard inadvertently restores representation. Herein lies a wider problem with respect to thinking the sublime artistically: how is one to avoid *representing* the sublime, and hence succumbing to a contradiction? Without pursuing these questions any further, we conclude our digression by citing a weighty objection to this cross reading of Kant and Adorno:

Lyotard's schema does quite the opposite of what it claims to do. It argues for some original unthinkable phenomenon resistant to any dialectical assimilation. But it itself becomes the principle of a complete rationalization. In effect it makes possible to identify the existence of a people with an original determination of thought and to identify the professed unthinkability of the extermination with a tendency constitutive of western reason. Lyotard radicalises Adorno's dialectic of reason by rooting it in the laws of the unconscious and transforming the 'impossibility' of art after Auschwitz into an art of the unrepresentable.¹³⁰

Following the direction of this plaint we can say pre-emptively that the key difference between Lyotard and Adorno appears to be this: whereas Lyotard's concern is essentially *ethical* – to institute art as the custodian of the other, which can only ever say '*there was*' – Adorno's concern is fundamentally *critical* – to uncover the complicity of art and barbarism in the present through a rigorous interrogation, whilst acknowledging that there are no other means for holding fast to the "promise of happiness" contained in art.¹³¹ Accordingly, we will find that Adorno's aesthetics hinge, not least, on his attempt to revive the seemingly outmoded notion of natural beauty (rather than sublimity), whose utopian orientation survives only negatively under the aegis of the image ban. For Adorno, art does not simply say '*there was*'; rather, it attests to the fact that "art must be and wants to be Utopia (...); yet at the same time art may not be Utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation."¹³² But before we can finally grapple with this paradoxical idea, it remains to ask how it is that – after Kant – the category of natural beauty (and its putative utopian promise) falls into such disrepute.

¹³⁰ Ibid

¹³¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 136

¹³² Ibid, 32

iii.) *Hegel:*

Having thus established Lyotard's singular reading of Kant as a foil for our subsequent discussion of Adorno, we now return to the contextual question posed at the start: *in what sense do Hegel's aesthetic writings* (in addition to Kant's) *inform Adorno's effort to rehabilitate the concept of natural beauty under the sign of the image ban?* After all, the Kantian themes of beauty and sublimity – as well as numerous references to the ban on images – re-emerge at prominent junctures in Hegel's works, albeit in marked contrast to their formulation in the third *Critique*. Inasmuch as we have intimated that Adorno plays off Hegel's aesthetics *against* Kant's in the passages on natural beauty – a claim that we have yet to verify – it remains to sketch the contours of the former in order to gain a clearer sense of what is at stake in this polemic.

Principally, the questions of beauty and sublimity are treated by Hegel in two sets of texts: firstly, in a highly condensed statement towards the end of the final part of his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817/1827/1830);¹³³ and secondly, in the collected transcripts of his extensive lecture series on aesthetics, particularly the edition published by his erstwhile student Heinrich Gustav Hotho (1835/1842).¹³⁴ Whilst it exceeds the scope of our investigation to account for the alleged shortcomings of Hotho's edition, it bears emphasising that – for better or worse – Adorno bases his reading largely on this text.¹³⁵ Accordingly, we will limit ourselves to two comparatively modest questions: a.) Why, in contrast to Kant, does Hegel prioritise the beauty of art over the beauty of nature?; b.) What is

¹³³ Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind: Being Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). See especially the passages on 'Art' in the section on 'Absolute Spirit' (§§ 556-63).

¹³⁴ A collection of transcripts from Hegel's numerous lecture-series on aesthetics, held in Heidelberg and Berlin between 1820 and 1829, was edited and published by his student Heinrich Gustav Hotho in 1835 (a second, expanded edition followed in 1842). Hotho's volume is supposed to have been based on a manuscript by Hegel; however, the original text has long since been lost. Although the lectures are generally viewed as the fullest articulation of Hegel's aesthetics, Hotho's edition has increasingly come under fire for its heavy-handed editorial interventions. Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert, for instance, argues that there is evidence to suggest that Hegel's aesthetics are not as systematic as Hotho would have us believe. The wider implications of this claim are only gradually beginning to emerge as more reliable transcripts of Hegel's lectures are becoming available. Cf. Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert, *Einführung in Hegels Ästhetik* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005); Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert, "Phänomen versus System", in *Phänomen versus System: zum Verhältnis von philosophischer Systematik und Kunsturteil in Hegels Berliner Vorlesungen oder Philosophie der Kunst*, ed. A. Gethmann-Siefert (Bonn: Bouvier, 1992), 9-40; G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik. Nach Hegel. Im Sommer 1826. Mitschrift Carl Hermann Victor von Kehler*, eds. A. Gethmann-Siefert & B. Collenberg-Plotnikov (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2004); G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst. Vorlesung von 1826*, eds. A. Gethmann-Siefert, J. I-Kwon & K. Berr (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004); G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesung über Ästhetik. Berlin 1820-21. Eine Nachschrift*, ed. H. Schneider (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995); G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst*, ed. A. Gethmann-Siefert (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2003)

¹³⁵ Cf. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 74

the relationship between sublimity and the image ban in Hegel's *Aesthetics*?

a.) In order to answer the question as to why Hegel prioritises the beauty of art over the beauty of nature we must take a step back and ask how these terms figure in the wider architectonic of his aesthetics. To this end it is worth calling to mind that Hegel's lectures aim to give a dialectical account of beauty's historical development from its earliest instantiation in nature to its most sophisticated expression in art. All the while, the measure of this process is art's supposedly unique ability to give sensory expression to the central theme of Hegel's thought: the 'idea'.¹³⁶

In order to grasp what is at stake here, we must start by accounting for the general dynamic that governs the opening volume of Hegel's lectures. In Part I, Chapter II – on 'The Beauty of Nature' – Hegel gives the following definition: "[t]he beautiful is the idea as the immediate unity of the concept with its reality, the idea, however, only in so far as this its unity is present in sensuous and real appearance."¹³⁷ Hegel thus aligns 'the beautiful' with 'the idea', i.e. with the full actualisation of a particular 'concept' in a 'sensuous and real appearance'. As he argues, "the first existence of the idea is *nature*", that is, "beauty begins as the beauty of nature."¹³⁸ To the extent that Hegel's account '*begins*' with the beauty of nature, however, it is positioned from the outset in view of its sublation into a higher, more thoroughly reflected stage. In other words, natural beauty is figured as part of a larger movement within which the idea becomes aesthetically actualised. Accordingly, "*natural* beauty not only suggests that there is an additional kind of beauty" (art) "but also, since 'first' means abstract, formal, limited, a beauty in which the idea finds a sensible appearance that is more appropriate" to its concept at this "stage of its self-development."¹³⁹

Nevertheless, the concept of natural beauty also undergoes an internal transformation. The beauty of inorganic nature, for instance, is judged to be inferior to the beauty of organic

¹³⁶ Hegel's central notion of 'idea' defies easy recapitulation. Suffice it to note that – amongst other things – it means a fully actualised 'concept'. Concepts, in turn, are at once akin to Platonic universals *and* to Kantian mental representations. Accordingly, they apply to finite entities in the world whilst, at the same time, no such entity is adequate to its concept (at least until the final stage of Hegel's system). Only the world as a whole – the absolute, God – is truly adequate to its concept and hence to the idea. This is important because such a totality depends only on itself for its nature and development. Charting the processual actualisation of this totality as a dialectical development towards perfection, unfettered by external determinations, is the fundamental task of Hegel's metaphysics. In the lectures on aesthetics, this process is chronicled from the standpoint of beauty. However, elsewhere Hegel explores it from a variety of other perspectives – for instance, as the education of individual consciousness towards the standpoint of science (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1806), as the unfolding of legal and societal forms towards their institution in the modern state (*Philosophy of Right*, 1820), as the advancement of religion towards its highest articulation in Christianity (*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 1832), etc.

¹³⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 116

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 111

¹³⁹ *Ibid* [My emphasis]

nature, which – in turn – is seen as lesser than the beauty of animal life, etc. This progression follows the same dialectical logic that governs Hegel’s work throughout: starting with what is immediately at hand, observing consciousness discovers that what it initially deems to be beautiful is – in fact – deficient insofar as it turns out to be incommensurable with a more emphatic concept of beauty. Concept and appearance do not coincide. Instead, they contradict each other. However, by continually mediating between these contradictory terms, consciousness gradually discovers ever-more adequate sensory expressions of the idea (most notably, in the form of classical Greek sculpture).¹⁴⁰ Dialectics, thus understood as the reflexive movement of consciousness through an exhaustive series of partial articulations, procures a series of aesthetic forms whose totality is conceived of as the comprehensive history of beauty – a history that reaches its highest articulation in certain kinds of art, wherein the beauty of nature is finally fulfilled.¹⁴¹

Bearing in mind this cursory account of the general dynamic that leads Hegel from the beauty of nature to the beauty of art, there are two points in need of further elaboration: firstly, in what sense *is* nature in fact beautiful, however momentarily, given that we have pre-empted its eventual supersession? And secondly, in what sense exactly is its beauty deficient? As will become apparent, both questions hinge on Hegel’s discussion of ‘life’ (*Leben*).

- ‘*The Idea as Life*’:

In the opening sections of Part I, Chapter II, ‘life’ is presented as the first instantiation of the idea. Although elsewhere Hegel discusses this term at length,¹⁴² I take it that – in this particular context – life means, above all, a proto-evolutionary account of how biological processes develop towards the fulfilment of their concept. In other words, Hegel views life as a dialectical process of self-actualisation: “the power of life consists (...) in positing contradiction in itself, enduring it, and overcoming it.”¹⁴³ The beauty of life, in turn, depends on how successfully “the harmony and unity” of these moments is “expressed in a sensuous or imaginative form.”¹⁴⁴ What is at stake here is nothing less than the relationship between the

¹⁴⁰ For a characteristically in-depth reading of Hegel’s privileging of Greek sculpture, see: Rebecca Comay, “Defaced Statues: Idealism and Iconoclasm in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*”, *OCTOBER*, No. 149, (Summer 2014): 123-142

¹⁴¹ As we will find, this is the precise point of disagreement between Adorno and Hegel.

¹⁴² Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2010), 677ff

¹⁴³ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 120

¹⁴⁴ Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 231

spiritual and physical dimensions of life. Hegel discusses these in terms of the interplay between body and soul.¹⁴⁵ In Hegel's view, the soul – indeed, “the Concept itself” – strives towards physical articulation *in* the body.¹⁴⁶ Insofar as they are adequate to one another, nature appears beautiful. As Hegel continues, it is “at this point” – the first ‘stage’ of the idea's self-development – that “we have (...) before us as the beauty of nature” an “inherently ensouled harmony within the conceptually appropriate objectivity of natural productions.”¹⁴⁷ Judging how successfully body and soul harmonise within a given life form allows Hegel to distinguish between higher and lower kinds of beauty in nature. The details of these distinctions need not concern us here. Suffice it to note that animal life is presented as superior to vegetation and inorganic matter partly on account of its “animation”,¹⁴⁸ which is associated with self-determination and – hence – freedom. What interests us here is twofold. On the one hand, Hegel appears to view the soul as the agent of the creature's self-determination (the unifying principle of life), whereas – on the other hand – he concludes that “the soul” (and therefore the idea) “as such *cannot* make itself recognizable” in nature.¹⁴⁹ As he argues: “when we look at natural forms that” appear to “accord with the Concept” of life, “such correspondence (...) is” – in fact – merely “*foreshadowed*” but never truly actualised.¹⁵⁰ The beauty of nature thus appears deficient. “The perception of nature as beautiful goes no further than this foreshadowing of the concept” because the immediate “apprehension of nature remains purely indeterminate and abstract.”¹⁵¹ How so?

- ‘*Deficiency of Natural Beauty*’:

In order to grasp why, unlike Kant, Hegel thinks that the immediate apprehension of beauty in nature remains indeterminate and abstract we must consider a specific example. In the article cited above, Gasché points to a revealing passage in the lectures, which succinctly captures Hegel's reservations:

The living thing still lacks freedom, owing to its inability to bring itself into appearance as an individual point, i.e. as a subject (...). The real seat of the activities of organic life remains veiled from our vision; we see only the external outlines of the animal's shape, and this again is

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 116ff

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 108

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 130

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 116

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 128 [My emphasis]

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 130 [My emphasis]

¹⁵¹ Ibid

covered throughout by feathers, scales, hair, pelt, prickles or shells. Such covering does belong to the animal kingdom, but in animals it has forms drawn from the kingdom of plants. Here at once lies the chief deficiency in the beauty of animal life. What is visible to us in the organism is not the soul; what is turned outward and appears everywhere is not inner life, but forms drawn from a lower stage than that of life proper. The animal is living only within its covering, i.e. this 'insideness' is not itself real in the form of an inner consciousness and therefore this life is not visible over all the animal. Because the inside remains *just* an inside, the outside too appears *only* as an outside and not completely penetrated in every part by the soul.¹⁵²

There are numerous points worth noting here. First of all, the passage highlights a central concern of Hegel's philosophy that we have hardly touched upon thus far, namely: 'freedom'. Without presuming to do justice to this central theme in Hegel's thought in the form of an aside, I take it that in the context of his aesthetics Hegel means 'freedom' as a self-determined, animated, i.e. ensouled expression of life, i.e. freedom from outside determination. However, as he argues, 'the living thing' – whose process of self-actualisation is explored throughout Part I, Chapter II of the lectures – 'still *lacks* freedom', even at this relatively advanced stage of its development (animal life), 'owing to its inability to bring itself into appearance' as a '*subject*'. Although Hegel's use of the term 'subject' is enormously varied, in this particular instance it seems to mean the act of "self-differentiation and self-specification (...) of the concept" of life.¹⁵³ Accordingly, the beauty of 'animal life' is deficient vis-à-vis 'life proper' for at least two reasons: firstly, because it is unable 'to bring *itself* into appearance' as a harmonious and hence beautiful unity of diverse moments (i.e. it is not self-determining and, hence, un-free); secondly, because 'what is visible to us' when we encounter an organism – its 'appearance' – 'is not the *soul*'. Accordingly, 'the real seat of the activities of organic life' remains covered over, 'veiled from our vision'. All we can see are the 'external outlines of the animal's shape', not its 'inner life'. As Gasché observes, "[n]ature itself" thus turns out to be a "medium in which life cannot unfold its full potential".¹⁵⁴ This is why Hegel argues that 'the soul *as such*' cannot make itself recognizable in nature. Although life in nature *is* beautiful in an immediate sense, upon reflection it appears '*only* as an outside' because it is not 'completely penetrated in every part by the soul'. Insofar as body and soul do not coincide here, such nature is not truly beautiful. In other words, the apparent immediacy of the idea's actuality qua natural life means that it is beautiful only for others and not for itself. There is something incidental about natural beauty. It cannot be beautiful for itself

¹⁵² Ibid, 145-146

¹⁵³ Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1992), 281

¹⁵⁴ Gasché, "The Theory of Natural Beauty and its Evil Star: Kant, Hegel, Adorno", 111

because it is not the “active agent of its own shining forth”, as Gasché puts it.¹⁵⁵ Its beauty is not self-produced and consequently it lacks any relation to itself. Therefore, it is only beautiful for the consciousness that apprehends it. The chief deficiency of natural beauty (qua animal life) is hence presented as its inability to shine through the externality of its covering – ‘feathers, scales, hair, pelt, prickles or shells’. Inasmuch as it cannot break through this covering, the beauty of nature remains abstract and indeterminate, i.e. deficient.

Having sketched the outlines of Hegel’s views concerning natural beauty with a view to one specific passage, we are led to the following preliminary conclusion: as Hegel reminds us, the topic proper of his lectures on aesthetics is the beauty of *art*, not the beauty of nature. As he argues, art is “the one reality adequate to the idea of beauty.”¹⁵⁶ The treatment of nature – the primary existence of beauty – is thus only a preamble (albeit an important one): a first ‘stage’ in the processual unfolding of the idea, whose adequate sensory articulation occurs in art alone. In the present context, this is significant because Hegel thus reverses the priority of nature over art established by Kant in the third Critique, a manoeuvre that will prove central for Adorno. In contrast to Kant, “the intimate connection of beauty with life leads Hegel to find beauty first in animate nature, in order then to judge it deficient and to replace it with a higher beauty of man-made art”:¹⁵⁷ a product *of spirit for spirit*, so to speak. In this regard, we must view the Hotho lectures *in toto* as charting a comprehensive history of the aesthetic from the idea’s most rudimentary articulation in nature to its most accomplished manifestation in art. Though it cannot be our task here to map out the whole of Hegel’s far-flung art-historical project, we can nonetheless pre-empt that art too undergoes a complex processual development. It is of particular interest then that – following the denigration of natural beauty – Hegel’s account comes to include some passages on Jewish art, which treat the ban on making graven images of God (and the correspondent priority of the word) in terms of the sublime.¹⁵⁸

b.) Let us turn, then, to the second question raised above: what is the relationship between sublimity and the image ban in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*? In order to answer this question we must call to mind two passages. As Hegel writes:

¹⁵⁵ Ibid

¹⁵⁶ Ibid

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 109

¹⁵⁸ It exceeds the scope of the present chapter to provide a summary of Hegel’s views on Judaism more generally. Suffice it to note that his attitude might politely be characterised as reserved. Cf. Simon Critchley, “A Commentary Upon Derrida’s Reading of Hegel in *Glas*”, in *Hegel After Derrida*, ed. Stuart Barnett (London: Routledge, 1998), 197-226

[A]rt has above all to make the Divine the centre of its representations. But the Divine, explicitly regarded as unity and universality, is essentially only present to thinking and, as in itself imageless, is not susceptible of being imaged and shaped by imagination; for which reason, after all, the Jews and Mahometans are forbidden to sketch a picture of God in order to bring him nearer to the vision which looks around in the sensuous field. For visual art, which always requires the most concrete vitality of form, there is therefore no room here, and the lyric alone, in rising towards God, can strike the note of praise of his power and his glory.¹⁵⁹

We will attempt a detailed reading of these lines, below. For now it suffices to note that Hegel anticipates, here, the subsequent identification of Jewish (and, indeed, Islamic) art with sublimity, rather than beauty: “sublimity in its first original character we find especially in the outlook of the Jews and in their sacred poetry. For visual art cannot appear here, where it is impossible to sketch any adequate picture of God; only the poetry of ideas, expressed in words, can.”¹⁶⁰ Form and content, beauty and sublimity, poetry and the visual arts – these are the coordinates of Hegel’s discussion. But in order to grasp the significance of these nodal points (and, thus, of the lines cited above), we must first account for how they figure in the general outline of Part II of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*: ‘The Development of the Ideal into the Particular Forms of Art’.

- *‘The Particular Forms of Art – The Symbolic’*:

The second part of Hegel’s *Aesthetics* charts the history of art in terms of its dialectical development through three particular stages: the ‘symbolic’, the ‘classical’, and the ‘romantic’.¹⁶¹ Each of these stages is associated with a specific historical epoch and, moreover, with a string of cultures and civilisations whose particular means of relating the form and content of art are explored using a variety of examples.¹⁶² Of these stages the symbolic is of particular interest to us as it is here that Hegel lays out his views on Jewish art.

¹⁵⁹ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 175

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 373. According to Rancière, this Hegelian trope is precisely what Lyotard’s identification of sublime art with ‘the jews’ tends towards. As he writes: “What is assigning a people the task of representing a moment of thought, and identifying the extermination of this people with a law of the psychic apparatus, if not a hyperbolic version of the Hegelian operation that makes the moments of the development of spirit – and forms of art – correspond to the concrete historical figures of a people or a civilization?” Rancière, “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?”, 134

¹⁶¹ For reasons of brevity, we must sidestep Hegel’s discussion of the individual arts – architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry – which follows the account of the three main ‘forms’ of art.

¹⁶² Although Hegel’s use of the terms ‘form’ and ‘content’ is extremely varied, in his aesthetics the form of art appears to simply mean its perceptible outer appearance as opposed to its inner life.

In order to account for the particular place of Jewish art in Hegel's schema, however, we must first gain a clearer sense of what motivates his tri-partite division.

We begin, then, by observing that if Hegel's *Aesthetics* trace the processual unfolding of the idea qua sensory expression in art – i.e. the harmonious coincidence of form and content – then the symbolic stage marks the earliest, most partial point of this development. As Stephen Houlgate explains, “[i]n symbolic art a particular content” – the idea – “*seeks* adequate expression in an aesthetic mode but cannot achieve it.”¹⁶³ There are two reasons for this alleged discordance. Firstly, insofar as Hegel views symbolic art as proper to a particular moment in the self-development of consciousness (manifest in certain cultures), and insofar as these cultures do not yet fully grasp themselves as free exponents of the human spirit, it follows that the content of their art – the idea – remains equally deficient. Without wishing to comment on the questionable anthropology informing Hegel's view, this means – for instance – that the cult objects of various “nature-religions”¹⁶⁴ *can* be called art to the extent that they seek to give material form to the idea; however, they ultimately fail as art because they *cannot* express this content adequately, since they have only a vague and indeterminate conception thereof. Secondly, insofar as the consciousness under consideration *is* – in fact – credited with some degree of maturity (as in Hegel's assessment of Judaism),¹⁶⁵ it is unable to express the idea artistically. As David James notes, this is because its “inner thought” and its capacity for sensory expression have “become independent of each other”.¹⁶⁶ Either way, instead of coming to a complete identification in the work of art, form and content produce a merely “abstract harmony” (albeit at various levels of accomplishment).¹⁶⁷ The point in each case is that symbolic art – the standing-in of a form *for* a particular content – falls short of the concept of art as the self-produced, sensuous shining forth of the idea *in* material form.

Having thus given some indication of why Hegel deems that symbolic art to not be truly beautiful, it remains to establish how he comes to associate Jewish art in particular with the sublime.

¹⁶³ Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 231. This ‘adequate expression’ – beauty – is attained later in classical Greek sculpture. In turn, it is surpassed in romantic, i.e. Christian art.

¹⁶⁴ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 324

¹⁶⁵ I use ‘maturity’ here in contrast with Hegel's description of “nations” – e.g. Persians, Indians, Egyptians – as persisting in a state of “*childhood*”. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 308 [My emphasis]

¹⁶⁶ David James, *Art, Myth and Society in Hegel's Aesthetics* (London: Continuum. 2009), 18

¹⁶⁷ Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 231

- *'Judaism and Sublimity'*:

In a digression on Kant's 'Analytic of the Sublime', nested in the section on symbolic art, Hegel gives the following definition of sublimity: "[t]he sublime in general is the attempt to express the infinite" – the self-determined, unconditioned, absolute idea – "without finding in the sphere of phenomena an object which proves adequate for this representation."¹⁶⁸ The analogy with symbolic art is clear: both mark the frustrated effort to materially express an infinite content. In contrast to Kant, however, Hegel does not foreground the sublime feeling stirred by this impasse in *us*. Rather, he emphasises the futility of the efforts by the visual arts to materially express such content, which – due to its sheer indeterminacy – is incommensurable with any physical form. Hegel thus reads Kant in such a way as to suggest that sublimity is not so much an affectively experienced limit-case of the imagination, as an impossible attempt to sensibly present the ideas of reason by finite means. At the lowest levels of symbolic art, Hegel characterises these efforts as being "unconscious" of their own ineffectiveness. Zoroastrianism, for instance, is supposed to lack the maturity to recognise the shortcomings of its tendency to identify light with divinity part and parcel. By contrast, Judaism is singled out as the genuine, i.e. self-conscious form of the sublime because it renders explicit the relation between form and content that constitutes the essence of symbolic art, namely: total discordance. Crucially for Hegel the marker of this schism is the ban on images itself. As James observes, "Judaism's complete separation of the spiritual content from the sensory form in which it is presented is possible because this content is known independently of that which can be intuited by means of the senses".¹⁶⁹ Judaism does not locate the divine in natural phenomena, nor does it put art objects in its stead; rather, the image ban marks Judaism's consciousness of the fact that the infinite content of art is essentially different from its finite articulation. "Consequently, although we find in holy scripture and sacred poetry (i.e. the Psalms) a host of (...) images of God's greatness and glory, (...) the Jewish people were aware, or so Hegel claims, that these images could never adequately express the idea of the infinite or unconditioned which formed the true content of their religion."¹⁷⁰ In this regard, Hegel perceives the Jewish conception of God as being highly advanced; but insofar as it is articulated in lieu of any material expression (besides 'symbolic' poetry), it remains abstract. How, then, is this reflected in the passages cited above?

¹⁶⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 365

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁰ James, *Art, Myth and Society in Hegel's Aesthetics*, 21

If, as Hegel argues, ‘art has above all to make the divine the centre of its representations’, then symbolic art is characterised by a particular impasse: the infinite incommensurability of divine content and material form. Insofar as form and content do not harmonise in symbolic art, such art cannot truly be called beautiful. This discordance, in turn, is associated with sublimity (rather than beauty) because it is not susceptible to being imaged and shaped by the imagination. Given Hegel’s view that the visual arts seek ‘the most concrete vitality of form’, expressed – for instance – in the beauty of Greek sculpture, it follows that the sublime formlessness of Jewish art may only appear in the form of poetry – as imageless language.¹⁷¹ On the one hand, then, Hegel’s citation of the Psalms points forward to his ultimate prioritisation of the spiritual over the sensory. After all, at the end of the *Encyclopaedia* religion and philosophy supersede art as the true exponents of absolute spirit. On the other hand, however, the Jewish conception of God is deemed to be aesthetically deficient precisely because it is immaterial. In this respect, it is perhaps unsurprising that Hegel favours the idea of a Christian God made flesh. To the extent that Hegel identifies Kant with sublimity, he *de facto* portrays him as a Jewish thinker – the proponent of a partial truth. Although it exceeds the confines of the present chapter to discuss Hegel’s philosophy of religion *per se*,¹⁷² we are led to the following preliminary conclusion: although Hegel credits Judaism with emancipating itself from the un-freedom of natural determination by displacing divine content from the physical realm into the super-sensible, he does not think that this is sufficient to make Jewish art truly beautiful. Only where form and content coincide is art a genuine expression of the self-determined, unconditioned, absolute idea and hence of beauty, freedom and ethical life. Accordingly, in Judaism, “the transition to the realm of freedom is not properly made, despite its radical break with nature.”¹⁷³

It cannot presently be our task to unpack Hegel’s idiosyncratic reflections on Judaism any further. Suffice it to note that, in the present context, the salient lesson gleaned from his lectures on aesthetics is twofold: firstly, Hegel reverses Kant’s prioritisation of natural beauty over the beauty of art – a decisive move for Adorno’s subsequent analysis; secondly, he proceeds to outline a large-scale account of art’s historical development, chronicled from the

¹⁷¹ To be sure, Hegel’s suggestion that there are no Jewish visual arts is patently untrue. One need only think of the lavishly painted interiors of East-European synagogues, such as the one at Gwoździec (present-day Ukraine).

¹⁷² Cf. Peter C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

¹⁷³ James, *Art, Myth and Society in Hegel’s Aesthetics*, 23

standpoint of beauty. As we have seen, Hegel's far-flung annals contain some striking passages on Jewish art, whose foremost feature is portrayed as the strict abidance by the biblical ban on making images of God. Hegel then claims that poetry is the only appropriate medium for Jewish art. This is because the Psalms are supposed to be self-consciously 'symbolic' insofar as they acknowledge that the standing-in of an artistic form for a spiritual content is infinitely inadequate. After all, as we have intimated, for Hegel art is beautiful only where form and content coincide (as in the case of classical sculpture). Since Hegel deems that the Psalms cannot do justice to God's sheer ineffability, he concludes that Jewish art is sublime rather than beautiful. His aesthetics thus pose a challenge to Kant, for whom sublimity served to affirm precisely those ideas of reason that – in Hegel's view – remain abstract in symbolic art: freedom, immortality, God. These shine forth in the later stages of his lectures. We have already seen how this tension lives on in Lyotard's particular contribution to the sublimity debate; it remains to see now how it plays out in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.

II: Natural Beauty & Bilderverbot

As will be recalled, the previous sections have explored the aesthetic theories of Kant, Hegel and Lyotard in light of their common interest in the Old Testament ban on making images of God. In each case, this motif was said to designate an ineffable sphere beyond imagination, representation and commensurability – a moment in the relationship between thought and what is variously figured as the unconditioned, absolute, other. For Adorno, too, the image ban was said to signal something beyond the spellbound sphere of existence, namely: the prospective reconciliation with “that which surpasses all human immanence”.¹⁷⁴ In a word: nature. As was suggested, this Utopian impulse is discernible not least in Adorno's singular recovery of the much-maligned notion of natural beauty, which – for its part – depends on the specific way that *Aesthetic Theory* pits certain precepts familiar from the works of Kant and Hegel against each other. Broadly speaking, this means the following: on the one hand, Adorno invokes Hegel against Kant by arguing that the prioritisation of art over nature is an “immeasurable progress”.¹⁷⁵ (As he contends, Hegel frees art from the constraint of acting “*as if* it were a mere product of nature”).¹⁷⁶ However, at the same time this progression is taken to signal the “intensification of the domination of nature discussed in *Dialectic of*

¹⁷⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 73

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 62

¹⁷⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 185 [My emphasis]

Enlightenment.”¹⁷⁷ Accordingly, the priority of art is double-coded with respect to Adorno’s philosophy of history: art is at once a product of the ‘domination of nature’ *and* a privileged medium for the critique of this condition – a point to which we will return below. On the other hand, Adorno invokes Kant against Hegel by noting that “[w]hat Hegel chalks up as the deficiency of natural beauty – the characteristic of escaping from fixed concept – is” in fact “the substance of beauty itself”, including the beauty of art.¹⁷⁸ This is significant because the opposition of art and nature appears here as an aesthetic rearticulation of the opposition between the conceptual and the extra-conceptual discussed at length in the opening chapter. This tension is further reflected in Adorno’s analysis of the dynamics internal to works of art e.g. the tension between expression and construction, mimesis and rationality, etc. By confronting Hegel’s prioritisation of art, conceived of as the sensuous shining forth of the idea, with the extra-conceptual moment from Kant’s theory of natural beauty, Adorno foregrounds what he describes as art’s “cognitive character”:¹⁷⁹ the highly equivocal sense in which “the most advanced works of any period”¹⁸⁰ model a particular relationship between nature and culture, subject and object, which we have previously described in meta-epistemological terms as a “Utopia of cognition”.¹⁸¹ This modelling, however, occurs in the realm of semblance (*Schein*). Accordingly Adorno writes: “[n]ature is beautiful in that it *appears* to say more than it is. To wrest this more” – ‘that which surpasses all human immanence’ – “from that more’s contingency, to gain control of its semblance, to determine it as semblance as well as to negate it as unreal: This is the idea of art.”¹⁸² Adorno’s inquiry thus proceeds on several overlapping registers: a philosophy of history that plays out in his aesthetics, an aesthetics that bears the weight of his metaphysical concern with transcendence, and a metaphysics that is compounded in a quasi-epistemological model which Adorno associates with the specific “truth content” of art.¹⁸³ We will explore these matters in greater depth, below. For now it suffices to note that Adorno’s confrontation of Kant and Hegel is more than a mere exercise in the history of philosophy. Rather, *Aesthetic Theory* stages an encounter between Adorno’s historical moment and the preceding 200 years of German aesthetics in order to reappraise the dialectic between the beauty of art and the beauty of

¹⁷⁷ Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 99

¹⁷⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 76

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 243

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 41

¹⁸¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 10 [Translation altered] See p. 54 of the present study. The view that there are more or less advanced works of art has earned Adorno the charge of progressivism from the likes of Peter Bürger. Cf. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984)

¹⁸² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 78 [My emphasis]

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 3

nature under the specific conditions of capitalist modernity. (After all, *Aesthetic Theory* opens with the verdict that, under such conditions, “nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.”)¹⁸⁴ In the context of the present chapter, this raises the following question: *if the aesthetic dimension of the image ban can be grasped neither as a limit case of the imagination (Kant), nor as a discordance between divine content and artistic form (Hegel), nor – indeed – as an imperative to artistically attest to the forgetting of thought’s irreducible other (Lyotard), then what exactly is the significance of this figure for Adorno’s account of natural beauty?* Responding to this question requires that we situate its terms in the wider context of Adorno’s thought. Accordingly we will proceed by asking: i.) What motivates Adorno’s return to the seemingly outmoded concept of natural beauty in the first place?; ii.) How does Adorno conceive of the relation between art, nature and beauty in capitalist modernity?; iii.) Why does Adorno associate natural beauty with the image ban?

i.) In order to answer the question as to what motivates Adorno’s singular recovery of the concept of natural beauty, we must begin by locating these efforts in the wider context of his thought. To this end it is worth calling to mind the following lines from *Aesthetic Theory*. As Adorno writes:

Since Schelling, whose aesthetics is entitled the *Philosophy of Art*, aesthetic interest has centred on artworks. Natural beauty, which was still the occasion of the most penetrating insights in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, is now scarcely even a topic of theory. The reason for this is not that natural beauty was dialectically transcended, both negated and maintained on a higher plane, as Hegel’s theory had propounded, but, rather, that it was repressed.¹⁸⁵

Indeed, as we have seen, the emergence of idealist aesthetics has lastingly displaced Kant’s prioritisation of natural beauty over the beauty of art.¹⁸⁶ Although Adorno also unequivocally foregrounds art, he rejects the claim (advanced by Hegel in particular) that the beauty of art has ‘dialectically *transcended*’ that of nature, both negating it and maintaining it ‘on a higher plane’. Instead of attaining a greater degree of articulation in the beauty of art, Adorno argues that the beauty of nature falls prey to “the hubris of a spirit that has exalted itself as an

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 1

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 61 [Translation altered]

¹⁸⁶ For reasons of brevity we will sidestep Adorno’s discussion of Schelling.

absolute”.¹⁸⁷ Natural beauty is, in a word, ‘repressed’. The Freudian provenance of Adorno’s phrasing betrays the general direction of his plaint. After all, as we have seen, one of the central tenets of psychoanalysis teaches that what is repressed must return elsewhere in a distorted form.¹⁸⁸ Adorno thus brings one of the principal claims from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to bear upon his outwardly innocuous diagnosis concerning the supposed repression of natural beauty, namely: that man’s efforts to free himself from the overwhelming forces of nature tend to relapse into their opposite. As he argues, this dynamic is discernible in the works of Kant, Schiller, Hegel *et al*: “[n]atural beauty vanished from aesthetics as a result of the burgeoning domination of the concept of freedom and human dignity, which was inaugurated by Kant and then rigorously transplanted into aesthetics by Schiller and Hegel.”¹⁸⁹ To be sure, the notions of ‘freedom’ and ‘dignity’ at issue here chiefly mean *man*’s autonomy from natural determination, i.e. “freedom from the realm of causality.”¹⁹⁰ This is the sense in which Gasché notes that, in Adorno’s view, the fully-fledged “terror that idealist aesthetics exercises by degrading natural beauty” (i.e. “by depriving freedom from everything that is other than the subject”) is part and parcel with the dialectic of reason.¹⁹¹ To be sure, Adorno’s notion of ‘freedom’ also has an aesthetic aspect that is conceptualised in terms of artistic autonomy;¹⁹² however, in the present context it suffices to note that his concern with natural beauty is primarily motivated by a commitment to that which resists the purview of man’s physical and intellectual domination over nature. The stakes are high. As Adorno wagers, “[t]he reorientation of aesthetic theory towards natural beauty” aims at nothing less than the “vindication of what capitalism has oppressed: animal,

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 72

¹⁸⁸ See pp. 102-103 of the present study.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 62

¹⁹⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 220. In addition to the ‘Freedom’ model from *Negative Dialectics*, see: Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006)

¹⁹¹ Gasché, “The Theory of Natural Beauty and its Evil Star: Kant, Hegel, Adorno”, 116

¹⁹² According to Adorno, the autonomy of art has at least two facets: one formal, the other socio-historical. Whereas the former concerns his view that artworks function as allegories of an emphatic kind of freedom by virtue of the immanent organisation of their forms – a point to which we will return below – the latter means the institutional circumstances that allow for this function to unfold. Adorno thus narrates the socio-historical conditions of art’s independence from traditional cultic functions and time-honoured relations of patronage. Inasmuch as he contends that these conditions follow from the emergence of capitalism, however, ‘autonomous art’ cannot be understood as being unfettered by its economic setting (as claimed by the proponents of *l’art pour l’art*, for instance). As Stewart Martin observes, for Adorno “autonomous art is” thus “both a commodity and not, both destroyed by and a product of capitalism, both its critique and its ideology. The artwork is presented as a contradiction produced by capitalism. Commodification is a condition of possibility of autonomous art as well as a condition of its impossibility.” In other words, Adorno is concerned at once with “the generation of art’s autonomy from out of commodification” and with “the refusal of commodification by a subversive mimesis of it”. Stewart Martin, “The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity”, *Radical Philosophy*, No. 146 (November/December 2007): 18. See also: Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Human Freedom and the Autonomy of Art: The Legacy of Kant”, in *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 33-56

landscape, woman.”¹⁹³ Indeed, as J.M. Bernstein emphasises, Adorno views capitalism as the epitome of reason’s sacrificial logic of exchange: “technological domination, which is at one with capital in demanding the fungibility of all individuals, is, most literally, mastery over nature (within and without).”¹⁹⁴ That is to say, “[b]ecause Adorno regards art as a counter movement to rationalised domination, he is sensitive to the traditional claims for natural beauty.”¹⁹⁵ Far from designating a simple opposition of ‘good’ nature vs. ‘bad’ art or, indeed, ‘good’ art vs. ‘bad’ capitalism, however, *Aesthetic Theory* seeks to dialectically short-circuit these antitheses. How so?

ii.) Having thus given some indication of what motivates Adorno’s return to the theme of natural beauty to begin with, it remains to note the following: as we have intimated, Adorno’s estimation that ‘nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore’ leads him to conclude that the traditional connections between art, nature and beauty (laid out by Kant, Hegel, etc.) are no longer binding in their established forms. The question then arises as to how *Aesthetic Theory* aims to recast these relationships. Let us demarcate this question further: as we have already seen, Adorno does not share Hegel’s view that the beauty of nature is sublated into the beauty of art. By the same token, he does not conceive of artworks as mere stand-ins for all that is supposed to be affective and irrational in nature. Nor, for that matter, does he think of ‘nature’ as a mere repository of authenticity – an original substratum, so to speak. Adorno follows Lukács on this point: “a pure nature (...) that has not passed through social processes of mediation does not exist.”¹⁹⁶ He argues as follows:

Wholly artificial, the artwork seems to be the opposite of what is not made, nature. As pure antitheses, however, each refers to the other: nature to the experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy. Therefore reflection on natural beauty is irrevocably requisite to the theory of art.¹⁹⁷

Art and nature are entwined. The dialectic of art ‘as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy’ and nature as the mediated world of convention dissolves their putative antithesis. “Like the experience of art”, Adorno claims, “the aesthetic experience of nature is

¹⁹³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 63

¹⁹⁴ J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 217

¹⁹⁵ Ibid

¹⁹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, ed. Eberhard Ortland (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 125 [My translation]

¹⁹⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 62

that of images”, i.e. of thoroughly mediated re-presentations.¹⁹⁸ This is because the notion of a ‘pure nature’ – an original presentation, so to speak – is seen as an illusion that is retroactively projected from the standpoint of culture. “[N]ature”, in the emphatic sense, “does not yet exist”.¹⁹⁹ Adorno illustrates this point with an implicit nod to Georg Simmel’s conception of *Kulturlandschaft*:²⁰⁰ “[t]he phenomenon of landscape” – an instance of ‘beautiful’ nature – “is the result of a process of societal modernisation that includes the division of labour and the social division in labour and leisure time. It is only in leisure that we experience the landscape aesthetically, but this experience presupposes human mastery of nature.”²⁰¹ Nature, in short, is only experienced aesthetically as a function of its domination – hence its melancholia. Its beauty ensues from its repression. The effort to artistically effect reconciliation between man and ‘that which surpasses all human immanence’, then, does not constitute a *return* to nature conceived of as a storehouse of immediacy. Rather, artworks “hold fast to the idea of reconciliation with nature by” – paradoxically – “making themselves completely a *second nature*”,²⁰² i.e. by self-consciously laying bare the very artificiality that lies concealed in a phenomenon like landscape. (As we will find, Adorno cites works by Rudolph Borchardt and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot to illustrate this point.) His view of the relationship between art and nature might thus provisionally be summarised as follows: although the ever-progressing domination of nature has irrevocably cemented the priority of art, art nonetheless ‘stands in’ for nature precisely where it bares itself as wholly artificial. As Adorno puts it: “[a]rt stands in for nature through its abolition in effigy”.²⁰³

Strikingly, Adorno’s dialectical dissolution of the art-nature dyad recalls his early lecture on “The Idea of Natural History” (1932). Herein the traditional opposition of nature and history (later re-coded as that of nature and art) gives way to the chiasmus that all nature is historical and all history is natural. Adorno thus invites us “*to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.*”²⁰⁴ On the one hand, this means that nature is rendered historical by dint of

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 65

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 74

²⁰⁰ Cf. Georg Simmel, “The Philosophy of Landscape”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 24, No. 7-8 (December 2007): 20-29; see also: Joachim Ritter, *Landschaft: zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1963)

²⁰¹ Heinz Paetzold, “Adorno’s Notion of Natural Beauty: A Reconsideration”, in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays on Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Tom Huhn & Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 219

²⁰² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 63 [My emphasis]

²⁰³ Ibid, 66

²⁰⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History”, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos*, No. 57 (Fall 1983): 117

being transient (a point that harks back to Benjamin's account of Baroque allegory in his ill-fated *Habilitationsschrift* on the *Origin of the German Mourning-Play*, 1928); on the other hand, it means that history is rendered natural by dint of being conventional (an allusion to the concept of 'second nature' from Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*, 1916). Adorno's question, in turn, is how to "interpret" the "alienated, reified, dead world" of second nature so as to break its spell.²⁰⁵ In the present context this translates as: how are we to 'interpret' the aesthetic experience of nature (whose proper place is in art) if the beauty of nature is a function of its domination? In other words, how can works of art, the 'mediated plenipotentiaries' of nature, hope to "step outside of themselves" – 'into the open', as Adorno writes elsewhere – if such a beyond (nature qua nature) 'does not yet exist'?²⁰⁶

- *The Promise of Natural Beauty:*

There are three aspects of *Aesthetic Theory* that are helpful in formulating a possible response to the question posed above. They concern: a.) Adorno's notion of a *promise* of natural beauty; b.) His conviction that this promise is fulfilled through *remembrance*; c.) His particular view of the *language* in which this promise is supposed to be articulated. Clarifying these terms will give us a sense of how Adorno conceives of the relationship between art, nature and beauty in capitalist modernity, allowing us to finally revisit the passage concerning the aesthetic dimension of the image ban quoted at the outset of the present chapter.

a.) Firstly, then, Adorno argues that art throws into relief what the aesthetic experience of nature "*promises*",²⁰⁷ namely: the aforementioned reconciliation with 'that which surpasses all human immanence'. In this respect art is seen as paradoxically prefiguring "Utopia as the harmony between man and nature", as Alfred Schmidt puts it.²⁰⁸ As Adorno argues, art "wants to keep nature's promise",²⁰⁹ the unassailable *promesse du bonheur* once strikingly summoned

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 118

²⁰⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 63. The notion of 'stepping out into the open' is an echo of Adorno's declaration of solidarity with metaphysics at the time of its fall. As he writes: "thinking beyond itself, into *openness* – that, precisely, is metaphysics." Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 7. See pp. 86-87 of the present study.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 73 [My emphasis]

²⁰⁸ Alfred Schmidt, "Der Begriff des Materialismus bei Adorno", in *Adorno Konferenz 1983*, eds. Ludwig v. Friedenburg & Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 25 [My translation]

²⁰⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65

by Stendhal;²¹⁰ however, it can do so only obliquely – “by breaking that promise” – lest it foreclose on the Utopia it presages.²¹¹ (After all, as we have seen, Adorno insists emphatically that “one may not cast a picture of Utopia in a positive manner”; “one can only talk about Utopia in a negative way”).²¹² Instead of pleasing without interest, as it were, the promise of natural beauty “rubs on a wound”.²¹³ It signals an indeterminate “longing for what beauty promises but never unveils”.²¹⁴ The experience of natural beauty, in other words, is eminently negative. Pace Kant and Hegel, its watchword is dissonance, not harmony. Dissonance – “the technical term for (...) what aesthetics (...) calls ugly” – registers the discord between man and nature in capitalist modernity, just as suffering registers the non-identity between subject and object in *Negative Dialectics*.²¹⁵ Accordingly, the ‘promise’ of natural beauty – ‘the harmony between man and nature’ – appears *ex negativo* in those modern works of art that most obstinately refuse to yield to the dictate of harmony.

b.) The second point worth noting here is that, in Adorno’s view, ‘the reorientation of aesthetic theory towards natural beauty’ is a labour of recovery: an “attempt to do justice to that which falls victim to the ever-progressing (...) domination of nature”.²¹⁶ Such justice, Adorno assures us, is carried out “symbolically”;²¹⁷ its instrument is “remembrance”.²¹⁸ But Adorno’s quasi-Proustian appeal to memory is ambiguous. On the one hand, he writes that “humanity becomes aware in art of what rationality has erased from memory”,²¹⁹ i.e. all that is affective, somatic, and irrational. In this regard, Adorno appears to come close to Lyotard for whom art is precisely ‘what resists the imperialism of thought forgetful of the other’. But unlike Lyotard, Adorno does not locate art’s task primarily in the ethical imperative to bear witness to this forgetting. Insofar as he deems that ‘art must be and wants to be Utopia’, his notion of ‘remembrance’ is paradoxically both retrospective and prospective. To be sure, art

²¹⁰ For an interesting account of Adorno’s apparent misreading of Stendhal’s dictum, see: James Gordon Finlayson, “The Work of Art and the Promise of Happiness in Adorno”, *World Picture*, No. 3 (Summer 2009): 1-22

²¹¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65

²¹² Theodor W. Adorno & Ernst Bloch, “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing (1964)”, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes & Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 9

²¹³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 61-62

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 62

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 46. See pp. 58-60 of the present study.

²¹⁶ Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, 79 [My translation]

²¹⁷ *Ibid* [My translation]

²¹⁸ *Ibid* [My translation]

²¹⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 67

“recollects a world without domination”; however, as he contends, such a world “probably never existed.”²²⁰ Simon Jarvis puts this in the following terms:

Adorno, in effect, is speculatively rewriting the oldest maxim of aesthetics. Art imitates nature: but nothing like ‘nature’ exists as yet: art imitates what does not yet exist. For Adorno it can be said that all authentic art is a mimesis of Utopia – yet this mimesis can be carried out only negatively. Art cannot provide an explicit image of Utopia. The possible ‘nature’ which does not yet exist can only be imitated by the determinate negation of the falsely naturalised culture which does exist.²²¹

The ‘vindication of what capitalism has oppressed’, then, lies not so much in bearing witness to the forgetting of an immemorial other, as in the conviction that even past injustices can be redeemed through criticism of the present – a criticism carried out for the sake of the future whose contours remain uncertain. To this extent, Adorno’s thought evinces undeniably messianic traits.

c.) Finally, the third point worth noting here is to do with what was previously signposted as art’s ‘cognitive character’. In a striking passage from a lecture dated 02 December 1958, Adorno writes that what “becomes audible in works of art is the *voice* of the victim”, i.e. the voice of nature.²²² Although the metaphor of the voice sits somewhat uneasily alongside Adorno’s assertion that nature appears in the form of images, it is nonetheless significant to the extent that it designates what he describes as art’s “language-like” character:²²³ its “logicality”.²²⁴ Artworks *speak*. They seek to express “what has become opaque to humans in the language of nature”.²²⁵ But insofar as nature ‘does not yet exist’, that which becomes audible in works of art cannot be grasped as a simple summoning-forth of the ‘voice of the victim’, as though it resounded – however diffusely – through the recesses of memory.

²²⁰ Ibid, 66

²²¹ Jarvis, *Adorno*, 100

²²² Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, 80 [My translation and emphasis]. The notion of the voice recalls another prominent vocal metaphor from elsewhere in Adorno’s work, namely: the scream. As he writes: “[p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream”. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362

²²³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 184 [Translation altered]. Walter Benjamin’s early essay ‘On Language as such and on the Language of Man’ (c. 1916) looms large in these passages. Cf. Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”, in *Selected Writings 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 62-74. For a lucid account of Adorno’s reception of Benjamin’s philosophy of language see: Shierry Weber Nicholzen, “Aesthetic Theory’s Mimesis of Walter Benjamin”, in *The Semblance of Subjectivity*, eds. Tom Huhn & Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 55-92

²²⁴ Ibid, 136

²²⁵ Ibid, 77

Rather, as above, such remembrance means paradoxically projecting forward the utopian model of a “nonconceptual, nonrigidified significative language” in terms of which something like nature may yet become conceivable.²²⁶ As Adorno stipulates, such a language – the language of art – would be “incommensurable with all communicative language”;²²⁷ it would be, in a word, “mute”.²²⁸ We are thus faced with two contrasting conceptions of language: one ‘communicative’, i.e. propositional, declarative and conceptual, the other artistic, i.e. ‘nonconceptual’, non-significational and ‘mute’. Adorno’s paradoxical claim thus appears to be that the muteness of art is “the single medium through which nature speaks”.²²⁹ Such a ‘medium’, in turn, is not supposed to subject what it names to the operations of a language that violently subsumes difference under larger conceptual rubrics.²³⁰ In this respect the two divergent modes of language, in fact, designate two divergent modes of thought: one connected with the ills of conceptual cognition, which Adorno associates with the domination of nature (what he calls ‘identity-thinking’);²³¹ the other connected with the metaphysical “gesture of stepping out into the open” – into a realm where nature and culture could conceivably be reconciled.²³² Bracketing the former for a moment, Adorno frames the latter by use of a syntactical analogy: the work of art becomes “like language in the development of the connection of its elements, a wordless *syntax*”.²³³ Adorno puts this in Kantian terms: insofar as works of art are quasi-syntactical, they bear a structural likeness to certain forms of judgement. As Bernstein explains:

[A]rtworks are synthetic wholes; they synthesise a manifold. (...) This unifying endeavour is the work of reason in art, art’s logicity and conceptuality, and hence the sense in which artworks are judgement-like. Nonetheless, artworks are not judgements and this is in part

²²⁶ Ibid

²²⁷ Ibid [My emphasis]

²²⁸ Ibid, 112. Adorno’s obvious distaste for the concept of communication makes efforts to read *Aesthetic Theory* as an extension of Habermas’ theory of communicative action appear somewhat implausible. For a prominent example, see: Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991)

²²⁹ Ibid, 74

²³⁰ Once again, Adorno’s thinking of the proper name comes into focus. This dimension of his thought puts him in an unlikely correspondence with French Heideggerians, such as Jean-Luc Nancy. For an interesting exploration of this theme, see: Alexander García Düttmann, “The ‘Little Cold Breasts of an English Girl’, or Art and Identity”, in *International Politics and Performance: Critical Aesthetics and Creative Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013), 78-83

²³¹ In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno contends that all thinking (and by extension all declarative speech) is conceptual. Accordingly, he defines his task as transcending the limitations of conceptual thought by means of the concept: “[t]hrough doubtful as ever, a confidence that philosophy can make it after all – that the concept can transcend the concept, the preparatory and concluding element, and can thus reach the nonconceptual – is one of philosophy’s inalienable features and part of the naïveté that ails it.” Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 9

²³² Ibid, 63

²³³ Ibid [Translation altered / My emphasis]

because their syntheses occur through the medium of artistic ‘form’ rather than through concepts, propositions and syllogisms. (...) For Adorno everything turns on form’s proximity to conceptuality in terms of its synthesising function, and its distance from conceptuality, in its restraint, its not subsuming the elements of a work in it or under it, and hence its not providing for conceptual determinacy or closure.²³⁴

Art, in other words, is *like* the philosophical language of judgement insofar as it ‘synthesises a manifold’ of materials qua form; however, it is *unlike* the philosophical language of judgement insofar as its syntheses do not subsume their compositional materials into a conceptual armature that curtails their irreducible particularity. Formally accomplished works of art ‘speak’ in terms of “judgementless judgements”,²³⁵ which model a relationship between their elements that might be described as the “state of differentiation without domination” invoked in the opening chapter of the present study:²³⁶ a utopian constellation whose particular arrangement stages the reconciliation between nature and culture that transcends the strictures of capitalist modernity, albeit only as self-conscious semblance.²³⁷

What remains unclear, however, is how Adorno negotiates the relationship between these two divergent cognitive-linguistic registers. If ‘what becomes audible in works of art is’ indeed ‘the voice of the victim’ and if this ‘victim’ is in fact nature; if in turn art is the ‘medium through which nature speaks’ (even though nothing like nature exists as yet) and the language of art is ‘mute’; and if – finally – this muteness intimates a form of ‘wordless syntax’ that ‘symbolically’ (as self-conscious semblance) models a prospective reconciliation between nature and culture, then the following question arises: how can Adorno summon forth such a Utopia without transgressing the ban on positively schematising it? Adorno’s response to this question follows from his estimation that ‘nature is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is.’ As he writes:

Artworks become artworks in the production of this more; they produce their own transcendence, rather than being its arena, and thereby they once again become separated from

²³⁴ Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 195

²³⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 20 [Translation altered]

²³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object”, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 247. See p. 57 of the present study.

²³⁷ This is to say that art stages Utopia in full awareness of its un-reality. Adorno explains this in the following terms: “The question of the truth of something made”– art – “is indeed none other than the question of semblance” – *Schein* – “and the rescue of semblance as the semblance of the true. Truth content cannot be something made. Every act of making in art is a singular effort to say what the artefact itself is not and what it does not know: precisely this is art’s spirit. This is the locus of the idea of art as the idea of the restoration of nature that has been repressed and drawn into the dynamic of history. Nature, to whose imago art is devoted, does not yet in any way exist; what is true in art is something nonexistent.” Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 131

transcendence. The actual arena of transcendence in artworks is the nexus of their elements. By straining toward, as well as adapting to, this nexus, they go beyond the appearance that they are, though this transcendence may be unreal. (...) Their transcendence is their eloquence, their script, but it is a script without meaning or, more precisely, a script with broken or veiled meaning.²³⁸

Notwithstanding the increasingly dense cluster of metaphors through which Adorno frames art's enigmatic emanations – image, voice, script – his argument follows a familiar pattern: artworks hold true to the promise of natural beauty where they break this promise; they do justice to what is oppressed in nature by standing-in for it in effigy; they render-audible the voice of nature by falling silent, etc. The relationship between the two cognitive-linguistic models under discussion here is no exception. Insofar as the 'actual arena of transcendence in artworks is the nexus of their elements', and insofar as these elements are resolutely of this world, the 'more' that artworks intimate does not require them to be removed – “even though by a hair's breadth” – from the scope of existence.²³⁹ 'Transcendence', in other words, is intimated negatively. Its 'arena' is aesthetic immanence. The relationship between art, nature and beauty, which we set out to explore, is thus exposed as unrelentingly negative.

iii.) With all the requisite tools in place, we can now finally revisit the passage cited at the outset of this chapter, where Adorno speaks of the 'aesthetic dimension' of the image ban. As will be recalled, Adorno writes the following:

The Old Testament ban on images has an aesthetic as well as a theological dimension. That one should make no image, which means no image *of* anything whatsoever, expresses at the same time that it is impossible to make such an image. Through its duplication in art, what appears in nature is robbed of its being-in-itself, in which the experience of nature is fulfilled. Art holds true to appearing nature only where it makes landscape present in the expression of its own negativity. Borchardt's 'Verse bei Betrachtung von Landschaft-Zeichnungen geschrieben' ['Verses Written Whilst Contemplating Landscape Drawings'] expressed this inimitably and shockingly. Where painting and nature seem happily reconciled – as in Corot – this reconciliation is keyed to the momentary: An everlasting fragrance is a paradox.

²³⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 78

²³⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 247

As we have seen, Adorno's assertion that 'the Old Testament ban on images has an aesthetic ... dimension' is borne out by the fact that this motif appears repeatedly throughout the history of German aesthetics, not least in the works of Kant and Hegel. Against this backdrop, the commandment that one 'should' not make an image 'of anything whatsoever' (least of all God) might appear as a variant of an old aesthetic question: by what means can 'anything' be adequately represented? But Adorno's phrasing is more emphatic. It points beyond a concern with mere representational commensurability. 'That one should make no image ... of anything whatsoever, expresses at the same time that it is *impossible* to make such an image.' (What is lost in Robert Hullot-Kentor's otherwise excellent translation is Adorno's use of the subjunctive form: "Daß man sich kein Bild ... machen soll, sagt zugleich, kein solches Bild *sei* möglich."²⁴⁰ Hullot-Kentor's omission obscures the fact that this passage is reported speech. What is unclear, however, is whose voice Adorno is adopting here – Moses? Kant?) Leaving this question in suspense, we note that Adorno proceeds to narrow his focus. The alleged impossibility of making any image 'whatsoever' is measured against the specific sense in which art depicts nature. As Adorno writes: 'through its duplication in art what appears in nature is robbed of its being-in-itself'. At first glance this verdict appears to chime with Adorno's earlier assertion that nature itself appears in the form of 'images', i.e. that art's 'duplication' of nature amounts to little more than a mere tautology. However, upon closer examination this view is complicated by Adorno's claim that 'nature, to whose imago art is devoted, does not yet in any way exist'. Adorno thus appears to present us with two contrasting views of the mimetic relation between art and nature: one based on duplication, the other on a kind of projection.²⁴¹ How so?

With regards to the former, it is striking that Adorno emphasises 'what *appears* in nature'. This appearance – "[w]as an Natur *erscheint*" – is of particular interest inasmuch as 'appearing' (*erscheinen*) contains the very notion of *Schein* (semblance) that Adorno associates with art's paradoxical claim to transcendence – its projection of a nature that 'probably never existed'.²⁴² The 'experience of nature' – its fulfilment, no less – hinges on the indeterminate 'what' at the heart of this formulation. 'What' appears *in* (or, rather, *of*) nature is 'robbed' of its 'being-in-itself' through duplication, which signals closure rather than openness. With regards to the latter, in turn, Adorno argues that 'art holds true to appearing

²⁴⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 106 [My emphasis]

²⁴¹ For an expansive analysis of the role played by mimesis in Adorno's thought, see: Josef Früchtel, *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Würzburg: Königshausen + Neumann, 1986); For an interesting account of Adorno and Horkheimer's citation of the image ban with reference to quasi-Freudian ideas of mimetic taboo, see: Gertrud Koch, "Mimesis & Bilderverbot", *Screen*, No. 34 (Autumn 1993): 211-222

²⁴² *Ibid.* The echoes of both Kant and Hegel's distinctive uses of the terms *Schein*, *scheinen*, *Erscheinung*, etc. are unmistakable here.

nature only where it makes landscape present in the expression of its own negativity'.²⁴³ He provides the context for this line by citing Borchardt's 'Verses'²⁴⁴ and Corot's landscape paintings. His conceit appears to be that Borchardt and Corot's respective renditions of 'landscape' (be they poetic, graphic or painterly) 'hold true' to that which appears in nature – its promise, its voice, its script – through an expression of their own 'negativity': melancholic muteness. This is curious because, as we have seen, Adorno appears to follow Simmel's characterisation of 'landscape' as a cultural construct: *Kulturlandschaft*. What does it mean, then, for art to 'make landscape present in the expression of its own negativity'? Adorno gives some indication hereof in the following lines: "perhaps the most profound force of resistance stored in the cultural landscape is the expression of history that is compelling, aesthetically, because it is etched by the real suffering of the past."²⁴⁵ Landscape is thus placed under the banner of Adorno's idea of 'natural-history': "[t]he cultural landscape, which resembles a ruin even when the houses still stand, embodies a wailful lament that has since fallen mute."²⁴⁶ That is to say, art's immanent organisation of forms – its 'wordless syntax' – gives a voice to nature's mute lament by appearing to say 'more than it is', even if the impression of this 'more' is both fleeting and illusory. The 'profound force of resistance' that allows Adorno to associate the image ban with natural beauty (rather than sublimity), in turn, is memorably described in a lecture, dated 18 November 1958. Herein Adorno writes:

In this feeling of resistance against mere existence lies the Utopia that this existence doesn't have the last word. And this imageless image of Utopia, this expression of a Utopia that does not pronounce itself, but which rather appears only through the sense that something is stronger (...) than the world as it is: this (...) is one of the categories of which I should like to think that it is characteristic for the beautiful in general.²⁴⁷

Accordingly, 'the profound force of resistance' that Adorno ascribes to certain artistic renditions of landscape lies in their particular ability to negatively intimate an 'imageless image of Utopia' as something beautiful. To be sure, the sense that there is 'something stronger ... than the world as it is' recalls a central tenet of the Kantian sublime – the affirmation of man's super-sensible reason vis-à-vis the overwhelming force of nature. However, Adorno's point here is precisely not to affirm the sovereign reign of reason over

²⁴³ Ibid

²⁴⁴ Cf. Rudolf Borchardt, *Gedichte*, ed. M.L. Borchardt & H. Steiner (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta Verlag, 2003), 113ff

²⁴⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 64

²⁴⁶ Ibid

²⁴⁷ Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, 52 [My translation]

nature, but rather to challenge it. To encounter Corot's painting of a 'natural' scene; to experience this scene as beautiful in the highly qualified sense described above; to heed the self-conscious artificiality of this beauty as an expression of 'negativity'; to sense that this 'negativity' – the landscape's 'wailful lament' – awakens a *feeling* of resistance' against the ills of enlightenment reason: this and nothing less is what Adorno hopes to accomplish by tying the image ban to beauty, rather than sublimity. The 'imageless image of Utopia', which is 'characteristic for the beautiful', thus appears as the nodal point of his philosophy: an inversely theological materialism whose workings are borne out in art.

Reprise:
‘Zum Ende’

“Und einmal waren wir auch, von der den Dingen und der Kreatur gewidmeten Aufmerksamkeit her,
in die Nähe eines Offenen und Freien gelangt. Und zuletzt in die Nähe der Utopie.”¹

Paul Celan

It is notable that a renewed iconoclastic zeal has caused some recent commentators to proclaim the dawn of a new barbarism.² At first glance this verdict appears to contradict the numerous civilisational meta-narratives that equate the Mosaic interdiction against idol worship and its iconoclastic enforcement with reason as such, i.e. with the triumph of a metaphysical-philosophical understanding of the absolute over and above the fateful-mythical model that is supposed to undergird iconophilic paganism.³ Indisputably such readings – e.g. Cohen’s *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* – contrast with broadly Christian narratives, such as the one proffered in Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics.⁴ After all, as we have seen, although the ban on picturing the absolute is supposed to designate a crucial stage in the unfolding of what Hegel describes as the idea, it is only through incarnation – the embodiment of God in Christ – that the abstractness for which he criticises Judaism is ultimately overcome.⁵ In both cases, though, what interests us is less to do with the image ban in its capacity as a divine decree, and more with its function as a trope in the annals of “Western metaphysics” – a point first noted at the outset of the present study.⁶ Accordingly, I have sought to emphasise the sense in which diverse thinkers such as Kant, Hegel and Freud – to name only a few – associate the monotheistic proscription against image making with the burgeoning of abstraction. For Adorno, this peculiar commonality forces a difficult question: how are we to understand the relation between reason and un-reason under the aspect of iconoclasm? To be sure, this question cannot go unqualified. For one thing, it appears to

¹ “And once, proceeding from the attention devoted to things and the creature, we even reached the vicinity of something open and free. And lastly the vicinity of Utopia.” Paul Celan, “Der Meridian”, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 3. Band, eds. Beda Allemann, Stefan Reichert & Rolf Bücher (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 200 [My translation]

² Haifa Zangana, “The barbaric destruction of Iraq’s ancient artefacts is a war crime”, *The Guardian*, last altered 27/02/2015, accessed 30/01/2016: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/27/destruction-iraq-ancient-artefacts-war-crime-islamic-state>

³ See pp. 11-13 of the present study.

⁴ Cf. Hermann Cohen, “Image-Worship”, in *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 50-58

⁵ See pp. 141-146 of the present study.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Vol. 1: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. D.F. Krell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 10

presuppose a unified view of reason in the singular, which is either vigorously reaffirmed or violently undermined by the outlawing of images. On the one hand, Moses' destruction of the golden calf is supposed to designate the overcoming of myth – a point laid out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; on the other hand, the recent ruination of ancient temples in Iraq and Syria is presumed to mark myth's barbarous return. Adorno, for his part, describes this vacillation as endemic to reason itself – an admittedly problematic, Euro-centric portrayal.⁷ He suggests the following: if reason and un-reason are indissolubly entwined, then their putative polarity is ultimately unsustainable. In other words, if the image ban is in fact a marker of enlightenment rationality, then it follows that it is equally the harbinger of cultural calamity. Adorno is clear on this point: the form of disembodied reason that this figure supposedly inaugurates finds its most gruesome expression in the Nazi death machinery; at the same time, though, it is *only* such reason that can effect its own course correction. Certainly one way to short-circuit the false opposition between iconoclasm's supposed barbarism and its alleged rationality would be to unearth the countless conflicting counter-narratives that undermine the monolithic view of *the* enlightenment.⁸ In this case, no *one* image of the absolute would be possible. However, Adorno rather attempts to dissipate this deceptive dualism from the inside out. In this regard, the image ban is both emblematic *of* and antidotal *to* the historical dynamic that it supposedly initiates. It figures, on the one hand, as the turning point of an enlightenment narrative that privileges mind over matter, and, on the other, as the foremost cipher of reason's capacity to undo its own ills.

Over the course of the preceding pages, I have sought to substantiate this claim by organising Adorno's thinking around the *topos* of imagelessness. Somewhat ironically, I have argued that his recurrent references to the Mosaic interdiction against image making have served to illustrate, elucidate and – finally – align some of his principal concerns. Foremost amongst them is Adorno's concept of an 'imageless' materialism (explored at length in Chapter One): his effort to grasp the pained particularity of material existence under the rule of universal fungibility. For Adorno, I have claimed, making an image of "any thing that is in

⁷ To clarify: Adorno is not endorsing the exclusive association of reason with Abrahamic monotheism. After all, other 'stages' in the dialectic of enlightenment equally evince forms of rationality that are proper to their specific historical moment – not all of them European. Rather, he appears to be suggesting that authors such as Cohen read the institution of the image ban as the vindication of a moral universalism conceived of along broadly Kantian lines. In this regard the universality of the one, true moral law – the *telos* of the one, true reason – is projected back onto a determinate source: the Hebrew bible with its one, true God. Although Adorno's explicit statements concerning Cohen are scant, I take it that he is concerned to critically interrogate precisely such an association. Cf. J.M. Bernstein, "A Short Genealogy of Modern Universalism: How Pure Reason Overtook Empirical Knowing", *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 151-164

⁸ For a recent critique of the Euro-centric portrayal of reason, see: Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” is akin to subordinating the specific under the general, i.e. under larger conceptual rubrics.⁹ Accordingly, I have sought to emphasise how he extends the reach of this analogy to support his claim that substitutability – the principle of exchange – is the “always-already” operational *movens* of history:¹⁰ the violent eradication of everything that does not conform to the “law of identity”.¹¹ But if making an image of ‘any thing’ means curtailing its inimitable peculiarity (subordinating quality to quantity); and if by analogy to think is to deal in mere mental representations – interchangeable copies, simulacra, *eikones* – then Adorno’s ‘imageless’ mode of materialist cognition must be seen principally as an attempt to think thought against itself: to gesture towards a realm where the relation between subject and object, man and matter, nature and culture might yet be radically recast.

This has meant – secondly – that whilst Adorno must demand a mode of grasping the particular “as it would present itself to the *intellectus archetypus*”,¹² he must concede that even the bare formulation of this demand transgresses the very law that is supposed to ensure its possibility. I have sought to expose this tension by circumscribing the contours of Adorno’s ‘inverse theology’ (Chapter Two): the paradoxical attempt to think the possibility of a radically different future beyond instrumentality, intentionality and means-ends relations by strategically marshalling the obsolete vernacular of transcendence in order to launch an immanent attack on reality under the rule of a capitalist cult religion. To be sure, such an effort appears to presuppose an ineffable “standpoint” from whence such a demand might be issued.¹³ However, as I have aimed to show, Adorno’s focus is resolutely of this world. It means “[l]ife as it is lived in the village at the foot of the hill on which” Kafka’s “castle is built”.¹⁴ Although “we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know *exactly* (...)

⁹ Exodus, 20: 4-5

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture”, in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young & Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 59. I consciously cite Adorno’s supposed antipode Heidegger at this juncture. Adorno’s incessant disavowal of Heidegger occasionally leads him to inadvertently approximate his position. The figure of the ‘always-already’, for instance, seems to me to capture precisely the historical precepts of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – the immemorial split between subject and object (the primordial division of mental and manual labour), which determines the subsequent course of the techno-scientific domination of nature.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology – A Metacritique: Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, trans. Willis Domingo (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1982), 39

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka”, in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel & Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 268

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 247

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, eds. Theodor W. Adorno & Gershom Scholem, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson & Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 453

what the false thing is”.¹⁵ In other words, if Utopia is to be attained then it can only follow from a determinate negation of the present, which – for its part – “always points (...) to what should be”.¹⁶

Thirdly, I have argued, these two central nodes receive their full articulation in Adorno’s ‘negative aesthetics’ (Chapter Three): his effort to intimate an “imageless image of Utopia” as the self-consciousness of artistic semblance.¹⁷ Accordingly, I have claimed, Adorno portrays autonomous works of art as staging, enacting and performing the operations of his ‘imageless’ materialism, albeit only at the level of *Schein* – an intimation of something beyond the spellbound sphere of existence. The argumentative pattern should be familiar by now: artworks hold fast to the promise of a reconciliation between subject and object only where they break this promise; they do justice to that which is repressed through ‘the law of identity’ by standing-in for it in effigy; they respect the right of the image by abstaining from positively picturing it, etc. In this peculiar oscillation, I have claimed, lies a “feeling of resistance against mere existence”, which is associated with Adorno’s singular re-imagination of natural beauty.¹⁸ Such a ‘feeling’, however, cannot be furnished with any positive determinations. It too is subject to the ban on images.

One could conceivably repeat the argument outlined above *ad libitum* with a view to Adorno’s nascent ethics, say, or his vexed relation to politics: to push against the boundaries of an established discourse by exaggerating its time-honoured topoi in the hope that – by doing so – our thinking may over-reach itself and open up a space in which its terms might yet be radically reconfigured. (Benjamin’s mode of thinking in constellations is decisive here.)¹⁹ In each case, Adorno’s recourse to the image ban aims to hold open the possibility

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno & Ernst Bloch, “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing (1964)”, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes & Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 11 [Translation altered]

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, ed. Eberhard Ortland (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 52 [My translation]

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ A fascinating document of Adorno’s immeasurable debt to the mode of non-hierarchical, constellational thinking outlined in the Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Mourning-Play* can be found in the notes accompanying Adorno’s *Privatissimum* on Benjamin’s book from the summer of 1932. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, “Protokolle vom Seminar über Benjamins *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Sommersemester 1932”, in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter. Bd. IV*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik), 52–77

that Utopia – variously conceived of as a “state of differentiation without domination”,²⁰ as the “harmony between man and nature”,²¹ as “undeluded happiness, including bodily pleasure”²² – may yet be attained despite the verdict that its actualisation is presently “blocked off” by historical conditions.²³ This much, I hope, has become clear. But what if, in its capacity as a philosophical-historical marker (a motif, a trope), the image ban itself were to petrify into an image? In this case, would Adorno not be in breach of his own injunction? And would such a transgression not ultimately compromise the two aspects of his thinking that I have sought to foreground: i.) His effort to do justice to particularity; ii.) His effort to safeguard the openness of the future? Let us conclude by considering this twofold difficulty.

i.) As I have sought to demonstrate, Adorno’s effort to do justice to particularity proceeds by reappraising the multifarious philosophical traditions that he deems to have fallen short of this task.²⁴ After all, the methodological self-consciousness of *Negative Dialectics* is modelled on that of the young Marx: “the ruthless criticism of all that exists”, not least of all philosophy itself.²⁵ For only if philosophy is duly criticised can it be truly overcome. But if Adorno seeks to push the contradictions that he purports to locate in, say, Jaspers or Heidegger to the point of collapsing, so that the terms of their inquiries might be re-formed from out of the rubble left by his critique – hence iconoclasm – then his *modus operandi* occasionally suffers from the lack of nuance with which he treats the texts in question. For example: when Adorno reproaches the proponents of ‘representational thinking’ for their belief in having direct access to mind independent matter, his effort to cast into relief an ‘imageless’ mode of materialist cognition by criticising the tenets of their naïve realism is undermined by the off-handedness of his approach. To be sure, Adorno’s rebukes against Engels and Lenin are not unwarranted; but if his aim is to expose the dogmatic undergirding of (in this case) ‘Marxist’ materialism – to demonstrate how such an intellectual modality might inadvertently reproduce

²⁰ Adorno, “On Subject and Object”, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, ed. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 247

²¹ Alfred Schmidt, “Der Begriff des Materialismus bei Adorno”, in *Adorno Konferenz 1983*, eds. Ludwig v. Friedenburg & Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 25 [My translation]

²² Simon Jarvis, “Adorno, Marx, Materialism”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 80

²³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 57

²⁴ For reasons of brevity, I have foregrounded only *some* instances of Adorno’s meta-critical readings of figures from the history of philosophy, e.g. Kierkegaard, whose bourgeois individualism he attempts to play off against itself. However, similar claims might be made about his reading of, say, Husserl or Nietzsche. The point in each case is that, whatever the professed intentions of the thinkers in question, in Adorno’s view they tend to unwittingly relapse into ‘idealism’: the illusion of thought’s self-sufficiency, the tendency to subsume particulars under universals.

²⁵ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 3: 1843-1844* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 142

the repressive apparatuses that it professes to displace, e.g. by reducing the specificity of matter to an intellectual principle – then his undifferentiated treatment of their admittedly problematic tracts is not just glib: it is precisely *reductive*. In this respect, Adorno appears to be caught in a performative contradiction – an accidental formalism. His insistence on imagelessness purports to mean that ‘what should be’ emerges from the determinate negation of what *is*, “without capriciousness or violence”.²⁶ Yet, the manner in which he approaches the failings of the present risks duplicating the very violence that it aims to overcome. Adorno sometimes acts as though the negative dialectic has won in advance. Hence the professed attention to detail with which he claims to complicate the bigger picture falls by the wayside.

ii.) To the extent that Adorno’s effort to think particularity is supposed to emerge from the determinate negation of the present, his ‘Utopia of cognition’ is projected forward in time.²⁷ It concerns a future beyond the perpetual return of the oldest in the guise of the new; a future in which a state of “peace” might yet be achieved between subject and object, man and matter, nature and culture, etc.²⁸ However, as Adorno is aware, “writing recipes for the soup kitchens of the future” ineluctably proceeds in terms of the present situation.²⁹ To break this cycle, new terms must be intimated that do not simply duplicate the extant ones. This is supposed to proceed through a labour of interpretation, a micrology of the false condition, which – in turn – yields the “mirror writing” of its opposite.³⁰ But if the possibility of the future, whose positive portrayal is prohibited, hinges on the determinate negation of the present, then Adorno’s appeal to Utopia turns entirely on how determinate this negation really is. The trouble is that his self-avowed un-working of the grand historical arc, which he traces “from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” – a narrative whose central marker is supposed to be the image ban itself – purports to proceed through paying particular attention to the minutiae that disrupt the progressive view of history.³¹ But, in fact, Adorno *identifies* a whole host of diverse elements. The tendency of thought to subsume particulars under universals is repeatedly equated with the making of images; the *quid pro quo* of ancient sacrificial rites is continually likened to the operations of capitalist exchange; the dreadful logic of the Nazi extermination camps is perpetually related back to an immemorial split between subject and

²⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247 [Translation altered]

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ Adorno, “On Subject and Object”, 247

²⁹ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol. 35: Capital, Vol. 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), 17 [Translation altered]. As we have seen, Adorno’s refusal to paint pictures of Utopia has prompted critics, such as Habermas, to charge that he is opening up the future to the arbitrary projections of the present, thus foregoing any hope of change.

³⁰ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247 [Translation altered]. See pp. 46-50 of the present study.

³¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320

object, which – for its part – is portrayed as the primordial division between mental and manual labour. But if animistic sacrifice is nourished by the same logic as capitalist exchange and Nazi genocide; if consequently ‘identity thinking’ means the always-already definitive mytho-logical drive to domination; and if even the terms used to criticise this condition (e.g. the image ban) are co-originary with such an identitarian regime, then surely Adorno’s effort to immanently overturn what he calls negative universal history – a task that is ostensibly carried out for the sake of particularity and openness – ultimately perpetuates the very lack of differentiation that it sets out to overcome. What remains of the proper name Auschwitz, say, when the dead are only as interchangeable as x, y or z under the yoke of conceptual thought?

In light of these difficulties, the question posed above concerning the relation between reason and un-reason under the aspect of iconoclasm comes into sharper focus. In the case of Adorno, it hinges on a tension between two competing impulses: on the one hand, he professes to heed Benjamin’s micro-logical commitment to a view of truth conceived of as the “ruffle on a dress”.³² Such truth is on the side of an emphatic concept of reason that has never before existed – a ‘Utopia of cognition’. On the other hand, he outlines a macro-logical world history of *un-truth*: a negatively Hegelian account of reason’s failure to live up to its concept, which is – in turn – equated with the history of domination as such. But in attempting to strike a balance between these two positions, Adorno is forced to paint a picture of the world with brushstrokes that are so broad that they efface even his demand for difference. In this regard, it might be objected that he ultimately falls short of his own injunction to abide by the image ban. Accordingly there is something appropriately elliptical, if ultimately unsatisfactory, about Adorno’s recourse to imagelessness. It evokes the very image that it sets out to banish, namely: that of the vicious circle.

³² Walter Benjamin, “Convolute B: Fashion”, in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 69

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Fig. 1: Bourgeois, Louise, "I Had a Flashback of Something that Never Existed", mixed media, 2002.
http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2013/02/18/louise-bourgeois-a-flashback-of-something-that-never-existed/