

**The Dialectical Image:
Kant, Marx and Adorno**

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For the intellectuals, the philosophers and the priests, the Word has always been favoured over the Image. Since Plato's parable of the cave of shadows helping to enslave the credulous, the Image has been associated with in-authenticity, manipulation, the transient and contingent, the feeble-minded and the masses. There has been a theological dimension to this distaste for the Image. For Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, the image, which is by definition a finite thing, is singularly ill-equipped to represent something as infinite as God (Hobbes 2006: 34-5). Hence the prohibition on Graven Images in the Jewish religion. The Word by contrast seemed to belong to the Mind, not matter that could decompose, it was Universal not particular, its written manifestation belonged for a long time as the exclusive property of the ruling classes. In this context the Image threatened in effect to transfer the property of the ruling class – its cognitive concepts and moral ideas – to the masses in a form *they* can master. For Benjamin, this was one of the implications of the increasing mechanical reproduction of art in the twentieth century: 'the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition...in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced' (Benjamin 1999a: 215). In the meantime, publishing, mass democracy and mass education changed the Word from a mere instrument of ruling class power to a site of struggle between classes. But it is still an uneven struggle in which the written Word especially continues to exude class conditions. Hans Magnus Enzensberger has given a wonderful summary of

the written Word's connection with authority. He notes the rigid body posture writing demands, the taboos associated with writing that are immaterial to communicating, the intimidation with which the written word is drenched, its links with institutionalized authority (for the subject, initially the school and later business and the law) and the way the written word smoothes over contradictions and facilitates rationalization and unempathetic distancing (Enzensberger 1982: 70-72). We may add that illiteracy and linguistic divisions amongst the people have made film an attractive medium for radicals in the developing world.

So it is perhaps odd that radical intellectuals have very often gone along with this tradition of valorizing the Word over the Image. There are of course reasons for this valorization, not all of them bad. Writers across the disciplines have found that with the emergence of capitalism we find 'the ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era' (Jay 1988: 3). And the visual, dominated by the model of Cartesian perspectivalism, was hardly innocent. In French philosophical thought in particular, as Martin Jay has shown, the visual field, from Foucault's panopticon, to Debord's Society of the Spectacle, to Althusser and Lacan's specular Imaginary to Metz's cinematic apparatus, was associated with power, domination, illusion and manipulation (Jay 1994).

There is however another tradition, one largely associated with German philosophy that breaks down the hierarchical ordering in which the Word is uncritically valorized over the Image. Instead, in this tradition, we can discern a much more productive cross-fertilization between the Word and the Image, one in which the Word returns to the *aesthetic* Image as a source for revivifying its own formulations, questioning its assumptions or even circumnavigating the aporias in its own philosophical structures (Buck-Morss 1989). This is the tradition from which the Dialectical Image emerges. I want to trace this emergence in the work of Kant, with reference to the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment*. Kant provides the philosophical framework and roots of the Dialectical Image. Then we shall see how Marx takes up the Dialectical Image as cognitive metaphor for the purpose of social scientific critique within political

economy. Finally I want to give some indicators as to how the concept of the Dialectical Image informed the philosophy of cultural critique in the work of Adorno and Benjamin especially. One of the key ways that the Dialectical Image is dialectical is that it overcomes the fissures between the conceptual and the perceptual, the universal and the particular, the cognitive and the affective, the elite and the popular, the given and the ought. The Dialectical Image is much broader than a specific aesthetic strategy, for example, montage. Instead it takes us into a debate about the critical potential of the aesthetic within the visual field.

Kant and the origins of the Dialectical Image

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is a deeply contradictory text. For Adorno, the profundity of Kant's text is that it brings 'to the surface contradictions that are deeply embedded in the subject of investigation' (Adorno 2001: 82). The *Critique* splits the Word into an antinomy which has its roots in the emerging capitalist order. The Word on the one hand develops the entire field of cognitive rationality by which consciousness maps the world according to the logical relations that concepts and the pure categories of the understanding impose. The pure categories refer to Quantity, Quality, Relation and Modality. For nothing can be thought that does not have some quantity, some qualities, some relations (to itself and other things) and some modality (does it exist objectively or is its status, as with the aesthetic, of a different ontological order from reality?). The problem however is that the logical relations that order subjectivity (the transcendental subject) are so pre-given, so a priori, that no social and historical consciousness can emerge from the first *Critique*. The self-active consciousness that Kant elucidates in the *Critique of Pure Reason* turns out to be imprisoned within a cage of reified understanding. As a result, the moral-political dimension of the Word is split off and protected from the massive edifice of reification that Kant constructs, but at the cost of consigning Reason to impotence with regard to our actual institutional life. In Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, ethical practical activity is locked up in the private individual subject, self-generated, inwardly

orientated and uncoupled from 'external' institutional practices that must obey the a priori laws of nature mapped out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Thus the ethical act, Lukács observed 'collapses as soon as the first concrete content is to be created' (Lukács 1971: 125).

The first *Critique* however as well as being structured around such paralyzing antinomies, also displays the pressure of a latent dialectic, as Adorno again noted in his masterful exposition of that work (Adorno 2001:87). Two key examples of this latent dialectic are particularly relevant for thinking about the Dialectical Image. Firstly, Kant's concept of the noumena. Kant argued that the subject's mapping of the world was only a mapping of appearance-forms, that is to say only a mapping of those characteristics of the object world that *can* be known according to the logical-empirical limits of our subjectivity. What the object world may be, independent of our way of apprehending the real according to our logical-empirical machinery of consciousness, is to us an unknown object X or what Kant called a noumenon (Kant 1996: 159-160/A109). Kant's concept of the noumena and its distinction from appearances, clearly points forward to Marx's distinction between the phenomenal forms of life under capitalism, how for example the market and commodities appear to us in their *immediacy*, and the *essential* relations, that complex network of social relations that mediate and contextualise objects torn from their circumstances and conditions by the ways of seeing and behaving that commodity production imposes on us. The movement from phenomenal forms to essential relations is for Marx a question of critical social scientific research. But the limits and finitude of the image, of the world of appearances, and how the sensuous apprehension of the world might overcome those limits and register something of the domain of the noumena, was precisely what motivated Kant to take his aesthetic turn and write the *Critique of Judgment*.

The latent dialectic between the empirical and the non-empirical, the immediately given and its mediated conditions, which the concepts of appearances and noumena register, links to another latent dialectical pressure pushing against Kant's antinomous philosophical architecture. This is the

relationships between the concepts and pure categories of the understanding, where logical relations are secured as universal and necessary, and what Kant calls the Transcendental Aesthetic. Kant recognizes that in order for logical relations to have any cognitive power, they must actually be applied to sense data coming to the subject from the outside world. This sense data (the world of appearances) can only be mapped conceptually if it is ordered according to principles of temporal and spatial mapping. Time and Space however are not derived from concepts, but from the pure forms of intuition that belong to the Transcendental Aesthetic. Before we can apprehend any actual sense data the subject must have a 'receptivity for being affected by objects' and this 'precedes necessarily all intuitions of these objects' (Kant 1996: 81/B42). The Transcendental Aesthetic makes it possible for us to map objects according to the principles of time and space. Once the subject has assembled objects of sense data according to a process Kant calls synthesis, then these empirical objects can be stamped, as it were with the objective universality of empirical concepts which are in turn governed by the pure categories. So that the empirical concept 'dog' can be stamped on a particular dog *in concreto* that comes to our senses (Kant 1996: 213-4/A141). A dog like all things observable will be a particular instantiation of the pure categories, being a certain quantity (e.g. size) having certain qualities, relations and modality (a real dog or a representation of a dog). However, crucially, the entire thrust of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is to argue that concepts, whether abstract or empirical, can only be combined into combinations that generate new knowledge because of they can be *figured* in pure forms of intuition (time and space). So the Transcendental Aesthetic not only plays a determinate role in relation to actual sense data (content) they also play a crucial role in relation the development of our conceptual and cognitive capacities. This lays the basis for overcoming Kant's dichotomy between concepts and senseousness.

...no geometric principles – e.g., the principle that in a triangle two sides together are greater than the third – are ever derived from universal concepts of *line* and *triangle*; rather, they are all derived

from intuition, and are derived from it moreover a priori (Kant 1996: 79/ B40).

Line and triangle are concepts of the understanding but it is pure intuition of spatial relations that allows us to combine such concepts as 'line' 'length' and 'angle' into geometric principles. Thus some form of figuration becomes essential for the understanding to *combine* concepts and generate knowledge of principles and this lays one of the bases for overcoming the otherwise sharp division Kant establishes between the Transcendental Aesthetic and the understanding and further, between the pure transcendental conditions of experience and its particular (socially and historically determinate) 'contents'. What will happen with Kant's aesthetic turn in the *Critique of Pure Judgment* is that the aesthetic as an *aid to thinking* will be uncoupled from its role in providing a reified universe of concepts with sense data. Instead the aesthetic will develop its own relatively autonomous *play with sensuous forms*, a figuring that will relativize universal concepts, call them into question, historicize them and open them up to critique. This in turn provokes the moral-political capacities of reason – hitherto locked up impotently in the private conscience, into re-engaging with the world, because its own principles have been made sensuously palpable in the aesthetic. Thus it is that the aesthetic Image comes to the rescue of the Word, helping it think past the blockages in Kant's philosophical system.

In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant distinguishes between the determinative judgments that subsumed the particular (sense data) under universal concepts and categories in the first *Critique*, and a new mode of judging that he calls *reflective judgment*.

Determinative judgment, [which operates] under universal transcendental laws given by the understanding, is only subsumptive. The law is marked out for it a priori...reflective judgment...is obliged to ascend from the particular in nature to the universal...(Kant 1987:19)...To *reflect*...is to hold given presentations up to, and compare them with, either other

presentations or one's cognitive power [itself], in reference to a concept that this [comparison] makes possible (Kant 1987: 400).

Reflective judgment thus recognizes that the universal is not necessarily given, and this licenses a mode of judging that is far more open and exploratory. Here we have very clearly the origins of a German tradition of thought that mixed the aesthetic with philosophy. Rejecting the universal as given Kant lays the basis for subjective, aesthetically tinged, 'poetic' juxtapositions that illuminate specific materialist truths of an epoch. Here we have the rationale for a critical procedure (analogy or metaphor) that makes it possible to *think* a concept through perception that it was difficult or not possible to think without that sensible operation. The critical procedure combines induction (starting with the particular) with analogy (comparing particulars in a play of forms) to generate new ways of thinking or thinking about things in new ways, that the reified universe of concepts had blocked (see Figure 1). Typically in Kant's third *Critique*, some particular of nature is used to *reflect* on our own cognitive powers, and implicitly, our social relationships. This should be contrasted with the determinative judgment of the first *Critique*, where nature is over extended to the social world, with the result that our capacities for critical reflective reason atrophy.

Conceptual Metaphors in Marx

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is an attempt to develop a philosophy of consciousness based on the new emerging natural sciences (especially Newton's successes in astronomy). But this led to over-extending the logical and empirically observable laws of nature to the entire terrain of human endeavour. While we are natural creatures we are, by nature, also social creatures and it is our social dimension that this over-extension of the natural science framework completely eclipses. This over-extension is of course quite typical, and across the disciplines, the social sciences have adapted the models developed in the natural sciences. Economics, sociology, psychology and so on have been dominated by the

problem that first beset Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Social relations and practices acquire the quality of something given, something a priori, constituted, *as if by nature*, without our own participation in their making. Marx tracked the roots of this naturalization process to the universalisation of commodity production that defines capitalism. The *Critique of Pure Reason* has a dualistic structure which bears the outlines of the commodity-form. The commodity form brackets off the wider social relationships which are a condition of commodity exchange because private property is founded on the non-interference of popular control, conscious regulation and oversight of commodity operations. This is what gives the first *Critique* its emphasis on the empirical. Yet of course it is not the case that social imperatives are in fact absent from discrete instances of commodity exchange – whether it is the buying and selling of labour power, the buying and selling of consumer goods, the buying and selling of technology, money, and so on. In fact here what imposes itself on these apparently discrete exchanges is the full force of the capitalist motive to accumulate capital. This abstract power and pressure attempts to subsume everything within its force field and this manifests itself in the first *Critique* as the subsumption of all empirical sense data by the logical rules of determinative judgment. Together, a generalized, abstract a priori capitalist imperative to accumulate and empirical instances of market exchanges torn from their context (the struggle between capital and labour for example) produces a naturalization effect.

One cannot combat this naturalization effect by simply abolishing nature and declaring that everything is a social convention. This has been the default strategy for theories of language and representation for much of the 20th century, starting with structuralism through to postmodernism. A better strategy can be found in Marx's methodology which attempts to rethink what the categories 'nature' and 'society' mean and how they relate to one another. In the preface to the German edition of *Capital*, Marx, referring to the 'capitalist and the landlord', wrote of how human behavior within the framework of capitalist social relations and class interests must be viewed 'as a process of natural history' (Marx 1983: 21). What Marx intended by this metaphorical comparison and juxtaposition between the capitalist social system and natural evolution, was *not* to naturalise

capitalism, but to suggest that within the context of capitalist society, certain forms of *capitalist* behavior, certain trends and developments, certain dynamics (such as crises or the tendency towards monopoly) do have a force of nature about them insofar as these patterns pertain to the essentials of capitalism which cannot operate in any other way without violating or at the very least mitigating (through reforms) the nature of capital. Intrinsic to the nature of capital is that it turns itself into (a second) nature, because it is premised on robbing the subject that creates it of collective control over it. Within the mainstream media for instance what the 'markets' are doing is discussed as if the 'markets' were not human made institutions, but instead forces of nature independent of human activity. This naturalization effect is paradoxically a kind of violation of what is natural to *our* species being – namely that we have differentiated ourselves from nature to a degree and can to a degree that capitalism represses, achieve conscious control over ourselves and our environment.

Marx's metaphorical reference to nature functions as a critique of the way capitalism naturalizes itself by making its dynamics and imperatives (such as capital accumulation) 'laws of nature'. From this point of view, the frequent transformation of Marx's concept of 'natural history', which is a critique of the robbing of the object from any mediation by the subject, into a positivistic science of the laws of motion of society that operates exclusively independently of collective intervention is, as Adorno remarks, a perversion. This is why it is important to note that Marx invokes the concept of natural history in relation to the capitalist and the landlord but *not* the proletariat, to whom falls the necessity of *breaking* capital's natural evolution. In the absence of such a break, 'the history of the progressing mastery of nature, continues the unconscious history of nature, of devouring and being devoured' (Adorno 1973: 355). Thus the more the species advances technologically, the more it regresses; where once nature terrorized the species, now it is *our own* powers that we have not brought under our control that does the terrorizing. The expansion of the productive forces in the absence of a change in the social relations of production, merely expands our ability to *devour and be devoured*. This transformation of the social into a new kind of nature constitutes the 'law of motion for the unconscious society'

(Adorno 1973: 356), which is to say one which escapes democratic collective control. The same point was made by Marx's friend and co-author, Engels:

Darwin did not know what a bitter satire he wrote on mankind, and especially on his countrymen, when he showed that free competition, the struggle for existence, which the economists celebrate as the highest historical achievement, is the normal state of the *animal kingdom*. Only conscious organization of social production, in which production and distribution are carried on in a planned way, can elevate mankind above the rest of the animal world...(Engels 1977: 349-50)

The Dialectical Image of Nature and History

In a suggestive analogy from his notebooks on dialectics, Leon Trotsky wrote:

Contrary to a photograph, which is the element of formal logic, the [motion-picture] film is "dialectical" (badly expressed) (Trotsky 1986: 97).

This should not be taken as the final word on photography but rather through an analogy between the two mediums, Trotsky tries to get at the difference between two antagonistic philosophical traditions, logical positivism or the formal logic that Kant outlined in the first *Critique*, and dialectical thinking, which, I have suggested, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* begins to seed. Trotsky's analogy alights on an element that is crucial to film: namely that it *moves*. The *moving* picture, the *motion* picture emerged from a whole pre-history of technological devices aimed at getting the still image to *move*: dioramas, panoramas, myrioramas, magic lanterns, mutoscopes, kinetoscopes and so forth. The moving image moves both the object and the vantage point on the object and this movement opened up the whole thematics of dialectics: change, development, shifts, altered relationships, and the revaluation of initial perspectives and identifications. If

the naturalization effect tends to freeze or congeal social nature so that change and the potential for change becomes imperceptible, the *movies*, potentially at least, de-congeals social nature by its motion dynamics. The movies realize the potential of the aesthetic as pure intuition (activating the principles of space and time) to not only aid thinking but critique what we take is given.

It was this thematic of dialectical motion that attracted the left intelligentsia to film in the 1920s and 1930s. Here's Walter Benjamin for example:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling (Benjamin 1999a: 229).

Here Benjamin stresses the potentialities of the medium as a productive cognitive augmentation of the human eye which in transforming our relations to material nature is at the same time registering new social meanings, relations and possibilities slumbering within that material nature but unrecognized because we are 'locked up hopelessly' within it. Film explodes this reified world, turning it into 'ruins and debris' – that is montage elements that can be reconfigured dialectically for cognitive travelling. Now the terms 'ruins' and 'debris' remind us that for Benjamin, the inert qualities which reified material nature acquires under capitalism can be counteracted when that material nature breaks down in some way. A key term that undergirds Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image is *decomposition*. Decomposition refers thematically to death and a dialectic between the living and the dead. Death, mortality, brings nature back into the frame, but not as a support structure for capitalism. Marx's reconfiguring of the concepts of 'nature' and 'history' show us that the conception of nature under capitalism is a thoroughly ideological one. The task is not to reject nature but recover an authentic understanding of nature and our immersion and relationship to nature which capitalism blocks us from achieving. For capitalism

and its commodity consciousness, the mortality of all natural things is a trace of historical change and transformation which it abhors. Consciousness under the sign of the commodity is encouraged to think it will live forever, as if consciousness was not also a material body that will one day die. The hostility towards aging in commodity culture, evident in the cosmetic surgery industry that has spread from film stars to the high street, is symptomatic of this deeply ideological hostility towards nature.

Benjamin's conception of *decomposition* points to a double death. The death which the commodity brings to the living when it dominates them and the potential to in turn bring the living back to a more authentic life once the commodity has aged and been left behind, rendered out of date by the next wave of commodity innovation. Decomposition as death in this double sense and as a methodology are linked for example in Benjamin's theory of the collector. The collector lovingly brings back obsolescent commodities whose original uses and exchange values have died, reconstructing their history as a 'magic encyclopedia' that traces the 'fate of his object' (Benjamin 1999a: 62). The collector as a kind of historian has an intense personal relationship with the commodity ambiguously different from the way the commodity interpellates the subject when the commodity is in its full glory as the 'prodigies' of their day (Benjamin 1999b: 203). Death or age makes the commodity more receptive to the living, its powers over the living weaken with its historical displacement into the collector's arrangement of artifacts. The collector then is not only a historian but an artist. Benjamin quotes Marx in the Convolute on The Collector in *The Arcades Project*: 'I can, in practice, relate myself humanly to an object only if the object relates itself humanly to man' (quoted in Benjamin 1999b: 209). The possibility of a human relationship (of the kind found today through Freecycle and using second hand shops) opens up only with the obsolescence or partial obsolescence of the commodity. At that point the object becomes meaningful, which is to say, through decomposition, the object from history becomes allegorical. As Benjamin cryptically puts it in *The Arcades Project*: 'Broken-down matter: the elevation of the commodity to the status of allegory' (Benjamin 1999b: 207). The genre where

broken down matter has decomposed to produce an allegory around being alive and being dead under capitalism is of course, the zombie film.

Adorno and Film

Benjamin's thematics of decomposition, ruin, death and so on was linked to his interest in montage of the kind that could be found across the avant-garde arts in the 1920s and 1930s. But like many of the political Left, he was prepared to see a latent culture of avant-garde experimentation and disruption to conventional bourgeois norms in popular and mass culture as well. This was a perspective that Adorno shared rather less than Benjamin or Brecht. Adorno regarded the integration of film into monopoly capital as fateful for the medium, destroying any claim it might have to being an autonomous art. His short essay 'Transparencies on Film' was occasioned by the dispute between the new young German filmmakers who had recently signed the 1962 Oberhausen Manifesto, and the established German cinema which the Oberhauseners described disparagingly as 'Daddy's Cinema'. Although Adorno sided with the young filmmakers of the German New Wave, describing Daddy's Cinema as 'infantile...regression manufactured on an industrial scale' (Adorno 1981: 199) and hoped that from the new cinema 'something qualitatively different' might emerge, his thoughts on the ontology of film suggest that the medium has its work cut out if it was to escape its conformist tendencies. Comparing the written word to the iconic medium of film images, he suggests that in the novel, language has an in-built capacity to achieve a distancing from mere imitation of the empirical world:

Even when dialogue is used in a novel, the spoken word is not directly spoken but is rather distanced by the act of narration – perhaps even by the typography – and thereby abstracted from the physical presence of living persons. Thus, fictional characters never

resemble their empirical counterparts no matter how minutely they are described. In fact, it may be due to the very precision of their presentation that they are removed even further from empirical reality; they become aesthetically autonomous. Such distance is abolished in film: to the extent that a film is realistic, the semblance of immediacy cannot be avoided (Adorno 1981: 200).

This is a quite conventional privileging of the aesthetic Word over images, especially mass mediated images. Where as the novel can make a claim to aesthetic autonomy from empirical reality because language must actively reconstruct its resemblance of the world, so that we are aware that its 'immediacy' has been mediated, the same cannot be said of the cinematic image. For Adorno, the iconic quality of the film image abolishes the sense of mediation and instead leaves us with the 'semblance of immediacy', the direct imitation and copying of the external physical-material world. This immediacy is a *semblance* (Adorno is not arguing that film has an unproblematic 'realist' relationship with the world) because it disguises the *mediation* of the reified social mechanisms that dress the automaticity of the film image's correlation with the real up as natural and inevitable.

The photographic process of film, primarily representational, places a higher intrinsic significance on the object, as foreign to subjectivity, than aesthetically autonomous techniques; this is the retarding aspect of film in the historical process of art. Even where film dissolves and modifies its objects as much as it can, the distintegration is never complete. Consequently, it does not permit absolute construction: its elements, however abstract, always retain something representational; they are never purely aesthetic values. Due to this difference, society projects into films quite differently – far more directly on account of the objects – than into advanced painting or literature (Adorno 1981: 202).

Adorno seems to come close to suggesting that film is beyond redemption due to the intrinsic nature of its iconic language which appears to transparently inscribe external reality. For Adorno, society 'projects' into film rather more than film itself can 'project' back into society. This it seems is questionable to me and indeed the 'intrinsic significance of the object' in film's iconic language means that film is inescapably saturated with the social through and through. But this need not mean that film cannot then acquire enough relative autonomy from the social to encourage the kind of reflective judgments that Kant identified as central to the aesthetic. Adorno however does not quite give up on film. In the next passage he evokes a juxtaposition between nature and history (here film technology) that suggests a way out:

Irrespective of the technological origins of the cinema, the aesthetics of film will do better to base itself on a subjective mode of experience which films resemble and which constitutes its artistic character. A person who, after a year in the city, spends a few weeks in the mountains abstaining from all work, may unexpectedly experience colorful images of landscapes consolingly coming over him or her in dreams or daydreams. These images do not merge into one another in a continuous flow, but are rather set off against each other in the course of their appearance, much like the magic lantern slides of our childhood. It is in the discontinuity of their movement that the images of the interior monologue resemble the phenomenon of writing...
(Adorno 1981: 201).

This passage is typical of Adorno's writing style and shows how much he worked up his arguments around a collage of images instead of the more traditional modes of logical construction. In a few short lines we find film technology and the city being juxtaposed to the countryside and leisure before the *subjective mediation* of nature in the form of daydreams and dreams that violate traditional continuity rules of the dominant film hark back, not nostalgically, but in the form of a revolutionary constellation, to the pre-cinematic technology of the magic lantern shows. This in turn suggests a model for a radical contemporary cinema

attuned to the 'interior monologue' of subjective life which is in turn then made alike, in another analogy, with the discontinuity and mobile, shifting images generated by writing (such as Adorno has just given us a wonderful demonstration of).

There are two things going on here. Firstly Adorno's aesthetic prescriptions for film would seem to insist that it moves in the direction of a non-linear free form, subjectively associational arrangement of material that would counteract its passive reflection of the reified social world just as it is. But this avant-garde prescriptiveness is problematic insofar as it limits Adorno's receptivity towards popular culture which instead organizes its movements around *stories*. For we can find dialectical images suffusing popular culture rather more routinely than Adorno would admit. In this sense the aesthetic comes to the rescue of Adorno's aesthetic theory (as it did to Kant's philosophy) by demonstrating that his cultural discrimination against popular culture in general and film in particular are non-identical with the general premises of his aesthetic theory. The second thing going on here is that Adorno is mobilising Marx's concept of natural history in his reconfiguring of nature and technology. In Adorno's poetic philosophy nature becomes an inspiration for rethinking how we use a given technology (here film) thus overcoming the division between nature and technology that is typical of dominant modes of thinking.

Adorno's concept of natural beauty, which he developed in his final work *Aesthetic Theory*, does something similar. Here Adorno again returns to the question of nature and culture. The concept of natural beauty has been on the decline ever since the mid-nineteenth century when, under the influence of Hegel, it disappeared from aesthetic theories in favour of a celebration of the autonomy of the artwork as a product made by human design. Ever since Marxists have been happy to see the back of the concept of natural beauty, seeing in it any number of irredeemable ideological problems. But Adorno is critical of Hegel's dismissal of natural beauty: for nature functions in Adorno's aesthetics as a metaphor for what is denied and disavowed within the social world of men and women – including the denial of nature itself. Now this returns us precisely to

Kant's reflective judgment, which as we saw takes a particular image of nature and metaphorically compares it with some aspect of our own relations, including our relations with nature which is always already presumed by the fact that we can find beauty in it. This strategy of using nature as a way of discussing the social and the cultural is typical of the horror genre for example, although no doubt it is handled with varying degrees of sophistication and cognitive insight. For Kant, the category of natural beauty was thoroughly historical for we can only find beauty in nature when we are no longer identical with nature but have differentiated ourselves from it. Nature thus poses the question of the terms by which we have differentiated ourselves from it and the relations among ourselves by which we have achieved that differentiation.

Let us take an example of how a popular cultural text may handle the themes of nature, difference, death, decomposition and beauty, and the relations of these terms to our broader social relationships in George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005). Here a brutalised class divided city, the remnants of civilisation, sends out raids seeking food supplies beyond the electrified fences. Arriving in a small town early on in the film, the raiding party find zombies shuffling around, still dressed in the clothes of their former life and performing, badly, some of the gestures and routines which once made them human. The humans meanwhile have a weapon of *distraction* that allows them to manipulate the zombies, shoot them and grab supplies. This weapon is the spectacle of fireworks that they fire from the militarised vehicle or quasi tank that they travel in. The fireworks or 'skyflowers' as another significantly simple-minded character calls them – refer to something beautiful which the human characters by and large can no longer appreciate but only use instrumentally. The zombies stare at the skyflowers thus indicating that despite their bestial state, they retain, ironically, a trace of human feeling for what they once were that the humans themselves have in many ways inured themselves to because of their brutal conditions of life. The eyeline match that takes the viewer to the fireworks/skyflowers, which we ourselves cannot help find attractive, is from the look of the zombies, a cut that positions the spectator in an ambiguous position which the rest of the film's narrative plays upon.

INSERT TWO IMAGES HERE FROM *LAND OF THE DEAD*

The fireworks/skyflowers then can be thought of as a dialectical image of our contemporary media whose spectacles distract and manipulate the masses – but even to formulate the allegory in the words of a cliché often associated with Adorno himself is to do an injustice to the richness of the image just elaborated, with its dialectical switching between the zombies and the humans in terms of those who still retain a *feeling for beauty* within the mechanism of distraction. The humans are in fact less human than the dead in this regard, a feeling underscored by the reversal of our expectations as to which group – the zombies or the humans- pose a threat to the other. For the humans, with their weapon of distraction, tear through the town shooting it up and taking what they want in an image that self-consciously echoes the US projection of military power around the world. The trace of a feeling for their former life, their former humanity shown by their interest in beauty, is then amplified and developed by the raid, as the zombies begin to organise and march on the city (led by a black working class zombie, a former garage mechanic). The narrative trajectory of the zombies towards (class?) consciousness of themselves and their interests means that at the end of the film, when the skyflowers are launched once more the zombies again look up and the trapped humans celebrate a moment of hope, only for the zombies to then turn their heads back to earth and lock their gaze on human flesh. Sensing now the ideological manipulation within the skyflowers, the trace of the feeling of beauty which hinted at their capacity to develop their consciousness, now has to be set aside, in a Fanonian moment of necessary violence, at least momentarily, if their liberation is to be achieved. Since we have seen enough of the city to know its corruption and brutality, the spectator has been given every opportunity to feel dialectically ambivalent about its destruction. As in the best horror films, our initial certainties regarding the firm division between the human and the monstrous, precisely the line drawn by those universal concepts that the aesthetic declares is *not given*, are subverted and a more complex dialectic and reconfiguration of the meaning and relations

between terms (here zombies and humans, the dead and the living, the civilised and the bestial) is explored.

Conclusion

We have seen that the origins of the Dialectical Image can philosophically, be discovered in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The importance of the Transcendental Aesthetic for new concept formation would then be substantively developed in the *Critique of Judgment*, but now the 'concept formation' is uncoupled from the universe of reified concepts that dominated the first *Critique*. Critique through aesthetics becomes possible. Where as in the first *Critique* Kant insisted on the absolute division between the empirical and the noumena, in the third *Critique*, the sensible becomes, through the play of aesthetic forms, a way of glimpsing the suprasensible (the real barbarism of modern capitalist 'civilization' in Romero's zombie movies). Marx developed the critical potential of Kant's reflective judgment as conceptual metaphors for social scientific critique, dialectically reconfiguring the master couplet of nature and history in the concept of natural history. This critique of reification was then taken up by German aesthetic philosophy in the work of Benjamin, Adorno and others. For Kant, what was transcendental about the aesthetic was not the particular judgments that were made - since then they would only reproduce the reified judgments they were critiquing, but the fact that we take these judgments as worth discussing and communicating. Thus the aesthetic opens up the whole dimension of the social and the historical. Evoking Benjamin in his discussion of natural beauty, Adorno poetically conjures up 'illuminated edges of clouds [that] seem to give duration to lightning flashes.' (Adorno 1997: 92). The meanings or truths of aesthetic images ought to be given just enough duration before they disappear or are reconfigured into a new pattern. 'Natural beauty is suspended history, a moment of becoming at a standstill.' (Adorno 1997: 93) argues Adorno, evoking once again Benjamin's famous definition of the dialectical image. Thus natural beauty or the Dialectical Image is a combination of stasis and transience, where the movement of the dialectic is arrested in a vivid form that illuminates a

totality (the condition of the human being under capitalism, for example) but from a position that is a *momentary arrangement* (the aesthetic experience itself) gone before it can congeal into a reified monolith or new universal concept. Yet it leaves traces behind it (in the form of the aesthetic practice and the seeds it has sown in consciousness) that can be reconfigured in future work/future receptions (and also social change) rather than be lost forever.

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Biography

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