



Journal of Adorno Studies



11/2025
DOI: 10.7413/joas015

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The Gesture of Release

GERTRUD KOCH

In Adorno's famous essay on "Schoenberg and Progress" from his *Philosophy of Modern Music*, one finds radiant, emphatic praise of the somatic power of music. This praise plays with the topos of fluidity and metaphorical extensions of the flux of time, just like Hades, and the river of no return which divides the living and the dead. Eurydice, Orpheus' dead lover, is a figure signifying a return, even if an unsuccessful one, that Orpheus initiated. And so she becomes a certain promise: "The gesture of returning, not the feeling of waiting, describes the expression of all music, even in a world worthy of death."¹ The dead come back through a "gesture of return"—emphasizing the vital power of music to reanimate.

This model of reanimation situated between the realm of the dead and the utopian return of life and vitality points to the somatic side in all human nature that links the figure of return with the figure of progress as two modes of being:

1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 99.

As at its end, so the origin of music reaches beyond the sphere of intentions, that of meaning and subjectivity. It is a gestural art, closely akin to crying. It is the gesture of dissolving. The tension of the facial muscles yields—the tension that, while the face directs itself pragmatically toward the world, separates it from this world. Music and crying open the lips and bring delivery from restraint.²

The central figure in the above quoted passage is the face that is opposed to the world when performing through its muscular contraction and hence communicative signs and meaning to others. In this regard the visage is, as the later Levinas would have it, a dialogical relation between faces. But the face is also the screen where meaning and signs are liquified: “The man who surrenders to tears in music that no longer resembles him at the same time allows the stream of what he himself is not—what was dammed up back of the world of things—to flow back into him. In tears and in singing, the alienated world is entered.”³ A reality that is alienated equally from nature and from subjectivity.

Adorno’s musical close-up of the face unveils the presupposed intertwining of human beings: they are tied at the same time to the physical environment and to society where symbolic forms become second nature. This intertwining is not binary, “either nature *or* society,” but a continuous process of materializations of the imaginary. Tears are an organic manifestation of fluidity steered by emotions and perceptions, singing forms elemental material such as air into symbolic communication. Music is the medium of this intertwining: singing and weeping come together hand in hand. This anthropological theory of music focuses on the motif of return rather than expectation: it leads back into the hall of the dead from where the wish to live takes its motive and motivation to return. A re-turn has two poles, in contrast with the U-turn or the loop, it encloses a moment of progress as stepping into the future; the musical re-turn therefore enshrines a moment of reconciliation, a way of deepening the understanding of the natural history of subjectivity stemming from natural history without entirely dissolving in society and manmade history. In an enlightening essay, Alexander Garcia Düttmann asks, “Can There Be Reconciliation with Nature?” by referring to the organic theory of music based in “singing” and “weeping.” Düttmann quotes a note Adorno added to the republication of the book on Kierkegaard in 1966: “In the imagination, nature transcends itself, nature whose impulse is imagination’s source, nature that contemplates itself in the imagination, nature that exposes itself as rescued because the imagination has submitted it to the most insignificant shift—to the most insignificant

2 Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 99.

3 Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 99.

shift since imagination is not contemplation that leaves beings as they are but an intervention. In the course of contemplation, imagination intervenes imperceptibly in beings, achieving their configuration into an image.⁴ What Adorno refers to here is an image that is a becoming, it is set at the interplay of contemplation and imagination. Imagination stems from the liminal touch between the material and the symbolic. It doesn't take long to recognize in this thought a broader concept of the philosophy of nature, that is, in itself thinking, the environmental space as a constant exchange between the material, physical world and the imaginative worldbuilding power of the spirit, that comes out of it with tears and singing.

If one reads Adorno as a thinker of the philosophy of nature as a conjoining of the environmental and the social, as we have suggested, then there opens a perspective here on similarities, where one would least expect them: A similarity to Kracauer's "curious realism,"⁵ that turns out to be a materialism in the former sense. Kracauer's aim in *Theory of Film*, to think filmic realism as an inner link between the camera and the environment, follows a similar concept of nature, of physicality as social environment: The camera is in the same space that it records, ready anytime by a simple move or turn to open to the space surrounding the filming.⁶ The technology of the camera liquifies space and at the same time captures images that enter into the symbolic world. Adorno's critique of Kracauer hides these similarities in the concept of nature that is thought as socio-natural environment. In those senses, they both share a sense for curious realism that turns out to be a materialist concept of nature.

Gertrud Koch is professor emerita of Freie Universität in Berlin. Her field of research is film theory and aesthetics. She is the author of books on Herbert Marcuse and Siegfried Kracauer, on cinematic illusion and many other subjects.

4 Alexander García Düttmann, "Can There Be Reconciliation with Nature?" *MLN: Inheriting the Frankfurt School* 133, no. 3 (April 2018): 715. The quote is translated by Düttmann.

5 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *New German Critique*, no. 54 (1991): 159–77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488432>.

6 Gertrud Koch, "A Curious Realism: Redeeming Kracauer's Film Theory Through Whitehead's Process Philosophy," *Screen* 61, Issue 2 (Summer 2020): 280–287.