

## Truth, Aura, Eros

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It's a nice bit of sexual utopia not to be yourself [...]. It shakes that invariant of bourgeois society in the widest sense, which since time immemorial has always aimed at integration: the demand for identity. [...] What is merely identical with itself is without happiness.<sup>1</sup>

Apropos of the role played by the erotic dimension in Western philosophy, Jean-Luc Nancy has spoken of “philosophy’s abandonment of Eros,” arguing that “sex played a major and exemplary philosophical role at very beginnings of philosophy but was soon abandoned and then nearly forgotten or limited to almost nothing.”<sup>2</sup> However, in the twentieth century, various thinkers (with an important role played by feminist scholars) have gradually favored a rediscovery of the philosophical significance of eros, and this discourse also includes some authors belonging to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.

- 1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 75.
- 2 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sexistence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 10-11, 14.

## 1.

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno defines truth as “the constellation of subject and object in which both penetrate each other (*die Konstellation von Subjekt und Objekt, in der beide sich durchdringen*).”<sup>3</sup> Adorno’s conception of truth aims to overcome the tendency of traditional epistemologies to reductively conceive of knowledge and truth either from the subject’s side or from the object’s side, thus following an undialectical “either/or” logic, rather than a more dialectical, relational, and inclusive “both/and” logic (yet with a materialist accent on the “object’s primacy”). What Adorno suggests is that from the perspective of traditional epistemologies, subject and object are necessarily destined to be merely opposed to each other, and thus incapable of “penetrat[ing] each other,” profoundly relating to each other, and mutually influencing each other—although it is important to add that Adorno’s dialectical logic also implies that they are not merged but can be together in their distinctness. As we read in *Negative Dialectics*:

Utopia would be above identity and above contradiction; it would be a togetherness of diversity (*Utopie wäre über der Identität und über dem Widerspruch, ein Miteinander des Verschiedenen*). [...] Traditional philosophy believes that it knows the unlike by likening it to itself, while in so doing it really knows itself only. The idea of a changed philosophy would be to become aware of likeness by defining it as that which is unlike itself (*des Ähnlichen innezuwerden, indem sie es als das ihr Unähnliche bestimmt*).<sup>4</sup>

Adorno ambitiously aims to outline the possibility of “[a] changed philosophy” that is capable of overcoming what he generally called “traditional philosophy”<sup>5</sup> and is thus capable of conceiving the concept of truth in a different way. It is possible to suggest that Adorno’s conception was inspired not only by purely epistemological reasons, but also by what one can learn from experiences related to the erotic dimension. For example, the aforementioned definition of truth as “the constellation of subject and object in which both penetrate each other” may remind us of a description of what happens in the actual experience of partners involved in sexual intercourse: namely, the fact that the latter, if adequately conceived in its genuinely relational character, must be understood as a sort of mutual “interpenetration” or reciprocal “fusion” between two persons.

3 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 2004), 127.

4 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 150.

5 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 13.

At first sight, it might seem philologically questionable and philosophically implausible to establish a connection between the abstract and sophisticated concepts that are at the center of a theoretical work like *Negative Dialectics*, on the one hand, and the actuality and concreteness of the erotic dimension of human life, on the other hand. However, what the Italian translator of *Negative Dialectics*, Pietro Lauro, has argued is noteworthy in this context: that Adorno sometimes used erotic metaphors precisely to express the fundamental aims of his negative-dialectical way of thinking. For example, in *Negative Dialectics*, we read that “in philosophy we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it (*in das ihr Heterogene sich versenken*), without placing those things in prefabricated categories. We want to adhere [...] closely to the heterogeneous.”<sup>6</sup> The German expression used by Adorno in this passage is *nah sich anschmiegen*, translated into English as “adhering closely to.” Adorno’s particular use of this concept in the aforementioned quotation suggests a sort of “amalgamating oneself with the other,” inasmuch as (following Lauro’s observations)<sup>7</sup> an *anschmiegende Umarmung* is an “amalgamating embrace,” like the one that characterizes the union of two persons in a sexual encounter (although it could also be in an encounter that is not explicitly sexual). According to Lauro, in using the verb *sich anschmiegen* Adorno aimed to show precisely that “an erotic metaphor was able to express the fundamental question of non-identity.”<sup>8</sup> As he observes, “just as in sexual intercourse the individuals are united together but still different from each other, without canceling their individuality,” in a somehow comparable way *Negative Dialectics* promotes a form of non-coercive union with the non-identical, without aiming to arrive anymore at “a Hegelian form of synthesis.”<sup>9</sup>

If this is true—or, at least, if this is a plausible interpretive key—then we can say that Adorno’s negative-dialectical perspective not only explicitly promotes a critical rethinking of the traditional concept of truth, but may also implicitly suggest a parallel critical rethinking of certain traditional views of sex. For example, the adoption of a relational and dialectical perspective of this kind can lead us to observe that sexual intercourse should *not* be understood as a one-sided activity of penetration, but rather as a form of reciprocal “interpenetration” and “amalgamating oneself with the other”: that is, as a sort of dialectical relation of simultaneous “entering in” and “being-received in” (or “being-welcomed in”), in which each of the partners involved takes

6 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 13.

7 Pietro Lauro, “Glossario,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialettica Negativa* (Torino: Einaudi, 2004), 370.

8 Lauro, “Glossario,” 370.

9 Lauro, “Glossario,” 370-371.

part in an exciting dialogue and may exchange their roles in spontaneous and pleasurable ways.

It is interesting to compare Adorno's aforementioned observations on the reciprocal interpenetration of subject and object with a remark by Marcuse. In *Counterrevolution and Revolt* Marcuse observes that "the publicity with the body (at present, the female body) as object is dehumanizing, the more so since it plays up to the dominant male as the aggressive subject for whom the female is there, to be taken, to be laid"<sup>10</sup> Then, Marcuse brilliantly captures what we may call the dialectics of lovemaking, arguing that "[i]t is in the nature of sexual relationships that both, male and female, are object *and* subject at the same time."<sup>11</sup> In claiming that it is characteristic of sexual relations that two human beings are "object *and* subject at the same time," Marcuse uses terminology that has characterized modern epistemology (i.e., the subject/object relation) in order to outline an original philosophical view of sex. Marcuse's observation is important and insightful on many levels, not least because it discloses the fruitful possibility of developing a critical rethinking of what Foucault called "the penetration model,"<sup>12</sup> a model that has often characterized the conception of sex in a limited, narrow, and androcentric way that has been predominant in the Western tradition (as well as in other traditions, I fear).

As noted by Foucault, Western culture—deeply influenced by the Greco-Roman tradition—made ample room for "the question of the sexual act, but [...] *only from the point of view of the male*,"<sup>13</sup> often understanding the "act of penetration" as "*the core of sexual activity*," as "*the very essence of sexual practice*."<sup>14</sup> If viewed in this context, Marcuse's aforementioned statement seems to critically challenge the hierarchy that has been traditionally established between the different roles in sexual intercourse, thus promoting a sort of dismantling of the common association of the act of penetrating (and, conversely, of being penetrated) with, respectively, the "two poles of activity and passivity," "superiority and inferiority," "domination and submission," "vic-

10 Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 77.

11 Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 77. Marcuse's statement only mentions men and women in the dialectics of sexual relations. However, there is no reason to limit only to "male and female" this view of the reciprocity, complementarity, and interchangeability of roles in lovemaking. We can broaden the picture and claim that "[i]t is in the nature of sexual relationships" that all the persons involved "are object and subject at the same time."

12 Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works 1954-1984*, vol. 1 (New York: The New Press, 1997), 183.

13 Foucault, *The Essential Works 1954-1984*, 1:180. In Greek sexual ethics, for Foucault, "sexual relations [were] not reciprocal: in sexual relations you can penetrate or you are penetrated. [...] The Greek ethics of pleasure is linked to a virile society, dissymmetry, exclusion of the other, an obsession with penetration [...]. All that is quite disgusting!" (257-258).

14 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3 (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 29-30 (emphasis added).

tory on one side [and] defeat on the other.”<sup>15</sup> Such a critical dismantling of “the penetration model” is a key first step toward a more relational, dialogical, and dialectical view of sex as “something more joyful, more equal, freer,”<sup>16</sup> in which there is no space anymore for fixed and pre-established categorizations in terms of superiority or inferiority, except as part of a mutually pre-determined, consensual script as in certain particular sexual practices. In regard to this, it is noteworthy that feminist scholars have recently arrived at the suggestion of complementing and counterbalancing (if not replacing) the traditional—and, in their view, “phallogentric” and “hegemonic masculinity-related”—notion of penetration with a new concept: circlusion.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.

In the previous section I used a quotation from *Negative Dialectics* as the starting point for my argumentation. In that quotation, Adorno connects the concept of the mutual penetration between subject and object to the idea of truth, ambitiously defined as “supreme among the metaphysical ideas.”<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to establish a connection between that passage of *Negative Dialectics* and an aphorism from *Minima Moralia*, where Adorno observes that “he [or she] alone who could situate utopia in blind somatic pleasure, which, satisfying the ultimate intention, is intentionless, has a stable and valid idea of truth.”<sup>19</sup> What this passage of *Minima Moralia* suggests is that the “intentionless” nature and the blinding intensity that characterize the experience of sexual pleasure are able to satisfy the “ultimate intention” of life, namely, happiness and the achievement of non-suffocating, non-coercive and therefore liberating forms of unity between different (or, more precisely, non-identical) human beings.

A clear connection between eros, truth, and utopia is established here by Adorno. These ideas can be interestingly connected to something that he explained to his students in the 1958 lecture course *An Introduction to Dialectics*,

15 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3:29-30.

16 Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 95 (ebook edition).

17 See Ilka Quindeau, “Sexualität und Geschlecht: Why Bodies Matter,” in *Kritische Theorie und Feminismus*, eds. Karin Stögner and Alexandra Colligs (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2022), 326-327. The term “circlusion” was originally introduced by Bini Adamczak as “the antonym of penetration”: “it refers to the same physical process, but from the opposite perspective.” Bini Adamczak, “On Circlusion,” *The New Inquiry*, August 22, 2022, <https://thenewinquiry.com/six-years-and-counting-of-circlusion>.

18 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 401.

19 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London/New York: Verso, 2005), 61.

recently published in his *Nachgelassene Schriften*. Here, in introducing the basic features of dialectical thinking to his students, Adorno makes precise (and thus not accidental, but intentional and strategic) reference to the experience of love. As Adorno observes in his 1958 *Vorlesung*, “the recognition of difference represents a kind of utopia [...]. That the heterogeneous may coexist with the heterogeneous without each destroying the other, that one heterogeneous thing may leave room for the other to unfold as well, and that—we may also add—the heterogeneous may love and be loved, this would be the very dream of a reconciled world.”<sup>20</sup> This observation reveals the secret but nonetheless decisive relation that Adorno envisions between dialectics—as a form of thinking that attempts to understand in a critical and disillusioned way the unreconciled world, but at the same time keeps the faith in the possibility of reconciliation—and the erotic dimension, in this case exemplified by the phenomenon of love.

After having cursorily analyzed the connection between eros, truth, and utopia, it is also intriguing to note a potential connection between love and another fundamental concept of Adorno’s philosophy: aura. Aura is one of the most famous notions often associated with the aesthetic theories developed in the context of the Frankfurt School, especially thanks to Benjamin’s and Adorno’s influential treatment of it. In this context, a passage of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is particularly noteworthy, because here the very origin of the phenomenon of aura is traced back to a complex dialectics between magic, nature, experience, mimesis, and expression. As Horkheimer and Adorno observe, “the nature [...] of aesthetic illusion” consists of re-enacting “the duplication by which the thing,” in the “magic of primitives,” appears as “something spiritual,” as “a manifestation of *mana*”: it is “the appearance of the whole in the particular,” for them, that “constitutes its aura.”<sup>21</sup>

Given the questions at the center of the present contribution, it can be insightful to cite a passage from Stefan Müller-Doohm’s biography of Adorno that informs us of an extramarital affair Adorno had with Charlotte Alexander, the wife of his friend Robert Alexander. In particular, Müller-Doohm cites a letter sent by Adorno to Hermann Grab in May 1946, in which he openly talked of “his love for Charlotte,” and wrote: “[t]he term ‘fornication,’ which by the way refers to something the reverse of contemptible, is a far from adequate description of what has taken place—terms such as ‘aura’ or ‘magic’ would be more apt. It was as if the long-forgotten childhood promise

20 Theodor W. Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics* (Cambridge-Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 71 (emphasis added).

21 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 14.

of happiness had been unexpectedly, belatedly fulfilled.”<sup>22</sup> What emerges here is a constellation of aura, magic, and *promesse du bonheur*: that is, a constellation of ideas that, in general, plays a fundamental role in Adorno’s entire thinking and that he fascinatingly connected to the erotic dimension in this letter. This delicate biographical episode can be connected to the contents of another aphorism from *Minima Moralia*, in which the experience of falling in love is emphatically defined as “not letting immediacy wither under the omnipresent weight of mediation.”<sup>23</sup> Here, Adorno stimulatingly uses rigorous epistemological terminology and conceptuality (i.e., the dialectics between immediacy and mediation)<sup>24</sup> to offer an original comprehension of an erotic phenomenon: namely, love.

On the basis of the relation between the capacity to not let immediacy in human relations wither under the omnipresent weight of mediation in social life (especially in the “administered world” that we live in) and the aforementioned idea of the appearance of the universal in the particular (which is masterfully exemplified by the manifestation of the most universal among human feelings in one’s unique relation with a particular beloved person), one is tempted to interpret the experience of love as one of the hidden sources of Adorno’s notion of aura. If so, can we suggest that the phenomenon of aura offers us a promising interpretative key to try to understand the enigmaticalness of love? And, conversely, can the experience of love help us to try to understand the indefinable and atmospheric phenomenon of aura? Of course, just like it is probably impossible to conceptually grasp and define the elusive atmosphere of aura, it is probably equally impossible to establish once and for all whether the *promesse du bonheur* embodied by the experience of love is real or is only a semblance, i.e., a promise that appears like the most real of all things in the moment but in the long-term is ultimately destined to remain unfulfilled. From this point of view, one is tempted to suggest that an ephemeral phenomenon like that of fireworks is not only “prototypical for artworks,”<sup>25</sup> as Adorno claims, but also for love, which (like artworks and fireworks) is “not only the other of the empirical world” but, rather, “everything in [it] becomes other.”<sup>26</sup> Finally, all this clearly reminds us of the idea of happiness, which, in the context of Adorno’s thinking, holds together the dimensions of knowledge, aesthetics, and ethics. The origin itself of the idea

22 Stefan Müller-Doochm, *Adorno: A Biography* (Cambridge-Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 61-62.

23 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §110, 172.

24 For Adorno, “dialectic is the philosophy of universal mediation.” Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 18.

25 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London/New York: Continuum, 2002), 81.

26 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 81.

of happiness is explicitly traced back by Adorno to the experience of “being encompassed” (“an after-image of the original shelter within the mother”<sup>27</sup>) and the experience of “sexual union.”<sup>28</sup> In the end, for Adorno, “[t]o happiness the same applies as to truth” (and, *mutatis mutandis*, also to love): “one does not have it, but is in it. [...] The only relation of consciousness” to these phenomena “is gratitude: in which lies [their] incomparable dignity.”<sup>29</sup>

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27 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §72, 112.

28 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §139, 217.

29 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §72, 112.