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## Immanent critique as a social physiognomics of appearance: Adorno's account of the modern possibilities of experience

### 1. Modernity as a text

In an aphorism of *One-Way Street*<sup>1</sup>, entitled *Vereidigter Bücherrevisor* (*Attested Auditor of Books*), Benjamin condenses the transformations of experience in modernity in a powerful image concerning the forms of writing, in which he describes the transmigration of letters from the horizontal space of written-pages to the vertical position of the advertisement.

Printing, having found in the book a refuge in which to lead an autonomous existence, is pitilessly dragged out onto the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos. This is the hard schooling of its new form. If centuries ago it began gradually to lie down, passing from the upright inscription to the manuscript resting on sloping desks before finally taking to bed in the printed book, it now begins just as slowly to rise again from the ground. The newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal plane, while film and advertisement force the printed word entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular. And before a child of our time finds his way clear to opening a book, his eyes have been exposed to such a blizzard of changing, colourful, conflicting letters that the chances of his penetrating the archaic stillness of the book are slight.<sup>2</sup>

The account on the transformations of reading and writing – that is, the focus on newspapers, magazines and, more generally, on the role of advertisement in contemporary social life –, as a way to open up some features of the overall experience in modernity, involves many thinkers of

<sup>1</sup> *Einbahnstraße*, published by Benjamin in 1928, should be conceived, as Schiavoni says in his introduction to the Italian edition, as “a work imagined in cold blood and obtained by wisely blending essayistic considerations, philosophical markings and aphoristic brain-waves”, G. Schiavoni, *Un “pensiero in forma di passage”*. *Dai frammenti della vita weimeriana ai segnali della rivolta*, in W. Benjamin, *Strada a senso unico*, Einaudi, Torino 2006, p. XIV, transl. mine.

<sup>2</sup> W. Benjamin, *Einbahnstraße*, [1928], in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, transl. by E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, NLB, London 1979, p. 62.

the twentieth century. If Lukács has made very interesting remarks about the function of journalism in bourgeois society in his *History and Class Consciousness*,<sup>3</sup> Adorno, Kracauer, Bloch also dwelled upon this theme. Here, indeed, the “hard schooling” of the new form of printing emphasizes the deep modifications of contemporary modes of experience both on subjective and objective side. According to Benjamin, this new dimension of “verticality” represents an example of the interweaving between the everyday life of people and the functioning of the mode of production. Production, consumption, ways of living appear strictly interrelated and unified in a phantasmagoric universe, full of sparkling pictures and always increasing new goods and new architectural forms. The two-dimensional nature of advertisements is near to the very form of commodity: in an unfolded capitalistic society the exchange-value becomes itself the object of individual desires and needs, i.e. the appearance is pursued for appearance’s sake. According to this perspective, reification<sup>4</sup> represents the process at the core of modern society and also the key concept to understand its inner dynamics. The “archaic stillness of the book”, that is, according to Benjamin, out of the possibility of experience for the modern subject, symbolises the whole temporal dimension of historicity foreclosed within the reified capitalistic universe. Colourful surface hides both the spatial and temporal depth of experience.

The new vertical form of writing could be seen also as a flattening of language in a two-dimensional plane. If one can envisage the imaginative trait of reading a printed book – that is, the world of meanings, images or spaces created by the reader beyond the ink of written-page –, then the advertisement becomes the emblem of the lack of every transcendental dimension. In other terms, writing turns into image. Far to support any kind of regressive thought about modern experience, however, Benjamin does not suggest to come back to “old form” of printed books. As

<sup>3</sup> “The specialised ‘virtuoso’, the vendor of his objectified and reified faculties does not just become the [passive] observer of society; he also lapses into a contemplative attitude *vis-à-vis* the workings of his own objectified and reified faculties. [...] This phenomenon can be seen at its most grotesque in *journalism*. Here it is precisely subjectivity itself, knowledge, temperament and powers of expression that are reduced to an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously and divorced both from the personality of their ‘owner’ and from the material and concrete nature of the subject matter in hand. The journalist’s ‘lack of convictions’, the prostitution of his experiences and beliefs is comprehensible only as the apogee of capitalist reification”, G. Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* [1923], transl. by R. Livingstone, *History and Class Consciousness*, The Mit Press, Cambridge 1971, p.100, emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> The process of reification can be defined as the command of the form of commodity to all the social institutions. As it is well known, Lukács was the first to introduce this notion within Marxist debates in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite theoretical differences in the way to conceive this phenomenon, it remains a reference point for all these authors.

he clearly emphasizes in end of the previous quotation, “quantity is approaching the moment of a qualitative leap when writing, advancing ever more deeply into the graphic regions of its new eccentric figurativeness, will take sudden possession of an adequate factual content”<sup>5</sup>. This fitting “factual content” can be made visible by crossing these new graphical spaces and questioning about this new form. That means both an act of destruction and an act of reconstruction: the appearance of two-dimensionality must be reverse by digging up its hidden layers and putting them together in a renovated constellation. In other terms, the task of critical thought is to appropriate this new configuration of experience by deepening it and to read “such a blizzard of changing, colourful, conflicting letters” as enigmatic text to unveil.

According to Adorno, this is the main nexus that bonds social physiognomic of appearance and critique of society. As Susan Buck-Morss has well underlined, “Adorno [...] attempted quite literally to make the structure of bourgeois society visible within the very words of the bourgeois texts”<sup>6</sup>. Hence, the notion of immanent critique can be clarified also as a specific kind of interpretation of reality, as if the bourgeois universe was an old manuscript to be discovered in an archeological and philological way<sup>7</sup>.

The aim of my paper is to focus on this particular side of Adorno’s theoretical perspective, by showing how the attention on apparently familiar phenomena of social life opens up the possibility to understand the whole functioning of society and to reverse it. At first, I would linger on the characteristics of this approach, by crossing Adorno’s mature works and showing their deep bond with Benjamin’s reflections. I will focus on the notion of “social physiognomics of appearance”, which Adorno formulated in his *Introduction* to the so-called *Positivismusstreit* (1961). In this intervention he wrote that “knowledge of society which does not commence with the *physiognomic view* is poverty-stricken”<sup>8</sup>. This “physiognomic” and critical look on the reality means a phenomenological and theoretical view that is able to break up with the reified appearance of so-

<sup>5</sup> W. Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, cit., p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics. Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, The Free Press, New York 1977, p. 67. However, in contrast to this hermeneutics of Adorno’s method, I do not think that the analogy with reading can be interpreted as “*Sprachkritik* rather than *Ideologiekritik*”. I will elaborate this later in the paper.

<sup>7</sup> As Tavani has underlined, the linguistic texture in a broader meaning can be conceived “not only as a place where only meaning can emerge, but also as the main sediment of tradition, as a universality that is not abstract, but, so to speak, charged with history”, E. Tavani, *Theodor W. Adorno: La critica, la teoria, la tradizione*, in “Idee. Rivista di filosofia”, 58, 2005, pp. 153-176, p. 154, transl. mine.

<sup>8</sup> T.W. Adorno et. alii, *The positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, Heinemann, London 1977, p. 33, emphasis added.

cial objects by highlighting their inner mediations. The point of contact between these two authors lies in their method of approaching objects: a method, that is able to understand the particular itself as a relic of the structural whole rather than an autonomous singularity. In other terms, according to both authors, social objects have their own historicity, their own logical and diachronic genesis. Hence, Adorno's insistence on the historical stratification of facts is akin to Benjamin's concern on details.

By providing an account of Adorno's critique of positivists, however, it is possible to understand what he means by pointing out the risk of "nominalism" in Benjamin's thought. In the second part of my paper I would like to underline how Adorno gives a different meaning to the notion of "physiognomy", grounded on the importance of conceptual mediation. He stresses the need to unfold the logical stratification of "facts", instead of considering them as a pure monadological expression of totality<sup>9</sup>. According to him, this operation requires a form of interpretation that keeps its imaginative trait, i.e. the ability to disclose the temporal sedimentation of things. In this sense, as I would like to show, this kind of creative interpretation can represent the new form of experience mentioned above, i.e. the ability to read modern world by going beyond the non-historical dimension of modern phantasmagoria.

## 2. Physiognomy and critical theory of society

The acknowledgement of the tangled nexus between phenomena of everyday life and the mode of production pushes these authors to extend the field of analysis from the traditional aesthetics as a theory of art to the account of the more general forms of experience. As Adorno says in an essay titled *Sociology of art and music*, the task of sociology of culture is that to "decipher art as the medium in which the unconscious historiography of society is recorded"<sup>10</sup>. If the capitalistic system needs to extend its inner

<sup>9</sup> The close affinity between Adorno and Benjamin in regard to the notion of "physiognomy" is largely explored by critics. However, this relationship is usually read by focusing on the contrast between Adorno's attention to the fragments of modernity – traditionally considered more akin to Benjamin's approach – and his insistence on the "totalitarian" nature of capitalistic society. According to my opinion, these two sides of Adorno's theory cannot be simply seen in their opposition. The specific bond between particular phenomena and totality, which Adorno unveils, represents at the same time the real core of his way to conceive social physiognomy and the main point of distance from Benjamin's model of dialectic. I will return to this argumentation later in this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Actually, the essay is part of a collective publication of Frankfurt Institute, but these considerations are in line with Adorno's theoretical perspective. See, John Viertel (trans.), *Aspects of Sociology by The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research*, Beacon Press, Boston 1972, p.101.

antagonisms within the overall institutions of society, i.e. politics functioning, cultural dimension, human relationships, in order to reproduce itself, the experience of the subject appears totally involved in it. Capitalistic structure validates itself as a nature. Therefore, the claim of a sociological critique is to pinpoint its logic to regain its historical dimension.

In *Anmerkungen zum soziale Konflikt heute* (1968) Adorno suggests a possible way out from this reified space, by showing at the same time how critique and experience are deeply interrelated one to the other:

If experience is to regain what it might once have been able to do and of which the administered world dispossesses it: to penetrate theoretically into the incomprehensible, it would have to decipher social conversations, attitudes, gestures, and physiognomies down to the vanishingly insignificant, to make the ossified and silenced speak, whose nuances are just as much traces of violence as they are coffers of possible liberation.<sup>11</sup>

Theoretical insight into the objectivity of social life and experience are dialectically interwoven and the disintegration of this nexus stays at the core of modernity. According to Adorno, by lingering on peripheral gestures and details, which are on the fringes of society, it could be possible to reverse this tendency. Hence, the micrological gaze is inseparable from social criticism. The mentioned above “social physiognomic of appearance” is built upon this kind of look, i.e. the ability to collect singular meaningful expressions of society in order to understand its functioning in a critical way. Axel Honneth notices how the notion of *physiognomic* goes along the whole Adorno’s work<sup>12</sup>. In his account, the physiognomic method represents a hyperbolic construction of empirical gestures and materials in a constellation that both shows the “pathology of modern reason” and the way in which it could be – or return to be – different. As well as the strict bond with Benjamin’s perspective, Honneth highlights the possible connection between Adorno’s method and Weberian concept of “ideal type”.

However, although physiognomic can be understood as a specific way of social hermeneutics akin to Weber’s constructive sociology, it reveals a more complex theoretical background I would try to investigate.

As Honneth rightly remarks, the notion of physiognomic can already be tracked down in 1931. In occasion of his appointment to the professorship in Frankfurt University, Adorno delivered his first public lecture about the

<sup>11</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1972, p. 189, transl. mine.

<sup>12</sup> See, A. Honneth, *Eine Physiognomie der kapitalistischen Lebensform. Skizze der Gesellschaftstheorie Adornos*, in *Dialektik der Freiheit. Frankfurter Adorno-Konferenz 2003*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 2005.

role of philosophy in contemporary society<sup>13</sup>. In this speech, he sought to make clear the failure of systematic knowledge to conceive contingency and the necessity to open up the very functioning of society by starting from particularities and fragments. By referring directly to Benjamin, Adorno emphasized the task of philosophy as a critical and *imaginative* interpretation of discontinuities, in order to resent traditional historical-philosophical problems in a new framework, which seeks to enlighten the contradictions of present time. The following year, in the essay *The idea of natural history*, Adorno elucidated his perspective by regarding it from the point of view of historicity. Here, Adorno attempts to unify dialectically Lukács' notion of "second nature" and Benjamin's emphasis on the caducity of nature. At first, these two categories are put in a strict opposition: while historicity is defined as the genuine arising of novelty in the development of human interactions, the notion of nature exhibits its ontological invariance, by representing the static forms of historical course. Then, Adorno stresses their dialectical interdependence: the recognition of the natural element can disclose its caducity and the historical dynamic can reverse itself into a static one. Adorno's effort to highlight both their mutual opposition and their reciprocal overturning marks the meaning of historical discontinuity, that, rather to be only diachronic, shows the non-contemporary within the social structure, as Italo Testa has very well remarked<sup>14</sup>. Hence, if the mythical moment is at the same time dynamical, the historical novelty represents the "older", i.e. what could become a static residual. They both arise together in their opposition. Therefore, the social structure manifests itself as a constellation of different temporal sedimentations. Within this framework, fragments become clues of the interweaving of temporalities through the contemporary space and more generally the sign of the specific historicity of present society.

The claim to display the logical and historical functioning of modern world through its discontinuities acquires a greater theoretical weight in Adorno's sociological writing of '50s<sup>th</sup> and '60s<sup>th</sup>. According to these mature works, the inability to conceive contingency and the blindness in the face of the very dialectics between static and dynamic is a result of the objective way in which capitalistic society reproduce itself. This emerges very clearly in the essay "*Static*" and "*Dynamic*" as sociological categories (1965):

Lack of historical consciousness is more than that: it is the forerunner of a static society, in which the bourgeois principle of universal exchange

<sup>13</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aktualität der Philosophie*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. von R. Tiedmann, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1973.

<sup>14</sup> I. Testa, *Storia naturale e seconda natura. Adorno e il problema di una conciliazione non fondativa*, "La società degli individui", 1, 2007, pp. 37-52.

and balanced accounts will triumph, and in which bourgeois rationality will reign supreme. Everything historical will be excluded from such a society: to balance accounts is to leave nothing unaccounted for; but the historical is essentially what cannot be accounted for. Again, to exchange commodities it to cancel one act by another; it is, thus, an essentially timeless activity although it takes place in time – not unlike a mathematical operation which is also, in its essential nature, out of time. [...] As a result, *experience, time and memory will in the end be liquidated like an unnecessary mortgage*. There will no longer be any need for the rudiments of craftsmanship or for a long apprenticeship – the paradigms of qualitative accumulated experience. *If mankind, in its present phase, is indeed engaged in burying its memories, in order to adapt itself so much the better to every new condition it encounters, then this reflects an objective trend.*<sup>15</sup>

The metaphor of modernity as an enigmatic text to be deciphered achieves now further determinations: the logical deployment of capitalistic system both erases time and consciousness of “what is not every the same”; hence, reading this text means to excavate into the appearance, to show its systematic trend and to discover its structural genesis. In other terms, criticism needs to acknowledge society as totality.

In his contribution to the so-called *Positivismusstreit*, Popper argues that the concept of totality represents a metaphysical residual. According to him, the starting point of sociological research is a set of practical problems that lead to theoretical speculation. Moreover, in his perspective, the sociological doctrine develops through a progressive and unlimited scientific dialogue between scientists, who seek to logically formalize the contingent situations of everyday interactions between humans. By describing his analytical method, he asserts that “the tentative solution of the problem – that is, the explanation – always consists of a theory, a *deductive system*, which permits us to explain the *explicandum* by connecting it logically with other facts (the so-called initial conditions)”<sup>16</sup>. The weakness of this statement lies in its consequences: on the one side, the “facticity”, which is collected schematically in the rules of a pure deductive system, is regarded in its brutal appearance of objective datum; on the other side, the systematic bond between “facts” arises only at the level of knowledge. This theoretical position implicitly contrasts a reality understood as a static structure of objectifications and a science depicted as a dynamic and intersubjective deductive system, underestimating the temporality and genesis of social facts. By defining the unified and dominant totality as the structure of society itself, Adorno clearly criticises this sociological approach. In the 1962

<sup>15</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Über Statik und Dynamic als soziologische Kategorien*, transl. by H. Kaal, “*Static*” and “*Dynamic*” as sociological categories, in “*Diogenes*”, 1, 1961, pp. 28-49, pp. 41-2.

<sup>16</sup> T. W. Adorno et. alii, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

seminar, transcribed by Backhaus, he wonders about the relation between the concept and the object, by asking: “is really the concept just an addition on the material by the knowing subject, or rather there is some conceptual element also in the object we have to do with?”<sup>17</sup>. In his theoretical framework, the sociological critique should be able to disclose the logical form of the object itself, i.e. its function within the structural and concrete social whole, by “thinking *out of things*”<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, “the content of the theorem which is to be criticized decides when the critique of sociological categories is only that of the method, and when the discrepancy between concept and object is to the latter’s detriment since it claims to be that which it is not. The critical path is not merely formal but also material”<sup>19</sup>. Such a statement remarks again how the dissonance between the conceptuality and the social objectifications, rather than to depend on a lack of knowledge, inhabits the social structure and makes it antagonistic. Social things should be analyzed not merely as things, but rather in the process that makes them things. If social institutions appear to the positivist as pure data to consider, the task of the social critique is to highlight the ideological genesis of this appearance. Hence, the positivist contrast between the dynamic development of theory and the static surface of reality should be dialectically overturned.

According to Adorno, in the capitalistic world society exhibits itself as a fact, as an abstract totality that dominates the individual acts. In this sense, totality is at the same time true – as a “real abstraction” – and false, i.e. it claims to a universality that it is not able to realize concretely. By emphasizing the inner dissonance between society and its own concept, which become visible through the structure of capitalistic social organization, Adorno attempts to make concrete the possibility to think something different. “History mediates between the phenomenon and its content which requires interpretation. The essential which appears in the phenomenon is that whereby it became what it is, what was silenced in it and what, in painful stultification, releases that which yet becomes. The orientation of physiognomy is directed towards what is silenced, the second level of phenomena”<sup>20</sup>. Rather than being a metaphysical residual, the recognition of the fracture between the phenomenon and its essence restores the historical dimension of society.

<sup>17</sup> H.G. Backhaus, *Theodor W. Adorno über Marx und die Grundbegriffe der soziologischen Theorie. Aus einer Seminarschrift in Sommersemester 1962*, in *Dialektik der Wertform. Untersuchungen zur marxischen Ökonomiekritik*, Ça ira, Freiburg 2011, p. 503, translation mine.

<sup>18</sup> W. Bonefeld, *Emancipatory Praxis and Conceptuality in Adorno*, in *Negativity and Revolution. Adorno and the political activism*, Pluto Press, London 2009, p. 128.

<sup>19</sup> T.W. Adorno et. alii, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 36.



In this framework, the physiognomic view represents a theoretical approach to things that is able to unfold their synchronic nexus with other forms of social objectifications. The conceptual understanding of things, thus, means thinking their individuality through their function within the social whole. In this framework, social “facts” are neither naturalized object to be analyzed nor fleeting institutions or relationships, but things with their own function in the overall society. That is why “conceptualization is an act of revolt against immediacy. It does not bow to things. It wants to know what they are and what there are is within them”<sup>21</sup>. In other terms, the physiognomic view highlights how the empirical material pushes towards the totality.

These brief considerations allow us to emphasize another important side of social physiognomy, i.e. its specific political relevance. In already mentioned *Anmerkungen zum soziale Konflikt heute*, Adorno says that “conflict, invisible under the surface of the partnership, expresses itself in *social marginal phenomena*; either where integration is not yet quite sufficient, or in every ‘dross of the phenomenal world’, which the antagonistic process continues to secrete from itself; often in the irrational outbursts of those who are not fully immanent in society, either as workers or as consumers”<sup>22</sup>. Physiognomy does not collect every detail of society; it represents, instead, an oriented gaze through its antagonisms. This kind of criticism, built upon the importance of mediation and conceptual understanding of things, chases the footprints of structural contradictions in apparently tiny fragments of social life and seeks to reverse them in operating conflicts. In order to realize this task, social critique needs to image the transcendence through inner contradictions of society. As Zanotti clearly explains<sup>23</sup>, the antagonism can be understood as “historically pervasive” only if a non-antagonistic society could be imagined. In this framework, by inheriting the Enlightenment’s claim of emancipation well defined in the famous Horkheimer’s essay *Traditional theory and critical theory* (1937), Adorno expressed the deep bond between the physiognomic analysis of society and the dimension of future: interpretation of facts needs to keep its imaginative trait in order to think out of antagonisms the material possibility of a renovated society.

<sup>21</sup> W. Bonefeld, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>22</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften*, cit., p. 184, emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> G. Zanotti, *Contingent Antagonism. A key to Adorno’s dialectic*, in G. Matteucci, S. Marino (eds.), *Theodor W. Adorno: Truth and dialectical Experience*, “Discipline Filosofiche”, 2, XXVI, 2016, pp.139-150.

### 3. Death and imagination

On 15 March 1929, in a letter to Scholem, Benjamin, by referring to his work for the *Paris Arcades*, said that “the issue here is precisely [...] to attain the most extreme concreteness for an era, as it occasionally manifested itself in children’s games, a building, or a real-life situation”<sup>24</sup>. Children’s games represent a powerful clue to investigate Benjamin’s effort, since this reference recurs often alongside his production. In a brief text of ‘30s<sup>th</sup> Benjamin remarked how “the spirit from which handmade products originate, the whole production process and not only its result, is present to the child in the toy, and he naturally understands a rudimentary-built toy much better than one, which has been produced by a complicated industrial process”<sup>25</sup>. Objects have their own life through their “spirit”, i.e. the living work which produces them. Children play with toys by trying to destroy them and put back together their pieces as they want to reconstruct their process of production. Children are able to enact a form of genetic memory which seems to be hindered in the framework of a reified society.

As it should be evident from the previous considerations, the task of concreteness involved into physiognomy is related both to a synchronic and diachronic dimension. Such a phenomenological investigation on reality claims to take into account phenomena by considering them as a product of a given social structure and results of a specific historical process. If, according to Adorno, facts cannot be conceived as simply objective data, but rather are embedded in the larger logic of society, they appear as an interweaving of mediations. In other terms, they are particularities which repeat the universality of society in a dialectical way and hide its genetic roots. Facts are not the static tools of an abstract knowledge. Rather, they have their own specific historicity.

If modernity, as we have said at the beginning, can be conceived as a text printed on two-dimensional support, this does not mean to take seriously this appearance of no depth. Modern world is a great phantasmagoria precisely because is the ideology of itself in the form of a self-validating appearance. However, reading the bourgeois world as a puzzle beyond its surface does not mean to restore the essence beneath it, or, by following the starting Benjamin’s image, to come back to horizontal space of printed books. The essence of capitalistic society is a dream-

<sup>24</sup> G. Scholem, T.W. Adorno (eds.), *The correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, transl. by M. R. Jacobson and E.M. Jacobson, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1994, p. 348.

<sup>25</sup> W. Benjamin, *Russische Spielsachen*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 4, hrsg von T. Rexroth, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1972, p. 623, transl. mine. See, G. Agamben, *Il paese dei balocchi. Riflessioni sulla storia e sul gioco*, in Id., *Infanzia e storia. Distruzione dell’esperienza e origine della storia*, Einaudi, Torino 2001.

world, as Benjamin defined it, or, according to Adorno's words, a "fatal mischief" (*Unwesen*)<sup>26</sup>. The truth of phantasmagoria is not hidden below it, but it should be constructed by showing its silenced layers and hidden possibilities, i.e. by learning a new way to read it.

The great physiognomy of modernity represented by Benjamin's project of *Paris Arcades* and Adorno's proposal of physiognomic look on society as the main core of immanent critique are really akin in their assumptions. They both involved an attempt to face with the commodity fetishism and to understand the extension of the power of exchange-value within the whole social expressions. However, they are engaged with two different models of conceiving temporality and present time, I will briefly sketch here.

Benjamin's *Arcade project* is entirely built upon the attempt to define the possible modes to get away from this a-historical dreaming world. By collecting empirical objects from 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, Benjamin seeks, as it is well known, to outline a "prehistory of modernity", in order to make clear its deep temporal structure. The analysis of *passages*, fashion, new technological materials (iron, glass) opens up its actual dialectics, in which products need to seem always the "newest". Subjects appropriate things whose use value is deteriorated in the form of desire: things become images of self-enjoyment. In that sense, they disclose an old meaning, since they are the repetition of a satisfaction impossible to gain. Exchange value turns objects in dream images.

Benjamin's operation can be summarized by taking into account a triad of characters, which could represent the three steps of the process of reawakening he seeks to figure out. Firstly, the *flaneur*, who is at the real core of his analysis of Baudelaire's portrait of modernity. As a sort of wanderer across the streets and the buildings of modern city, he<sup>27</sup> lost himself into the dream: his gaze catches the details of outer space and makes them his own. He represents the dialectics between private and public sphere in bourgeois world. At the same time, he brings to consciousness the caducity of things, their flowing through time: he represents the melancholy<sup>28</sup> of a novelty that needs to apparently always destroy the older, i.e. the fragility of the fashion.

<sup>26</sup> "Such essence, to begin with, is the fatal mischief of a world arranged so as to degrade men to means of their *sese conservare*, a world that curtails and threatens their life by reproducing it and making them believe that it has this character so as to satisfy their needs", T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (1966), transl. by E. B. Ashton, *Negative Dialectics*, Routledge, London-New York 1973, p. 167.

<sup>27</sup> I decided to keep the masculine gender to indicate these figures out of respect for the original German version, where Benjamin seems to conceive them as masculine.

<sup>28</sup> See, F. Jamenson, *Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia*, in "Salmagundi", 10/11 Fall 1969-Winter 1970, pp. 52-68.

Secondly, the figure of the *collector*, very well drawn by Benjamin in his essay on Fuchs<sup>29</sup>. The collector can be interpreted as the realization of the micrological gaze of the *flâneur*. He looks at the debris as objects to accumulate and represents the very metaphor of Benjamin's notion of dialectical images. He takes dead things, which have lost their use-value dimension, and restores their own life by arranging them in its private collection. By being relocated in a new constellation, things are able to show silent strata of their life in the past and, hence, highlight the different temporalities involved into the present time.

Third, the *archaeologist*, who is also a *philologist*, because his task is to give word to this dead life, to let objects speak as if they were hieroglyphs to be known<sup>30</sup>. Benjamin's method is that of a "retrospective prophet"<sup>31</sup>: he regards 19<sup>th</sup> century in its caducity and its monuments in their deep nature of ruins. By reconstructing this primal history of modernity beyond his mythical appearance<sup>32</sup>, he seeks to emphasize its decadence masked into the false brightness of the new. Such image of modernity can be conceptualized through the notion of *allegory* sketched in Benjamin's essay *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, published in 1928, which he explicitly takes up and compare in another text with the category of *Andenken*, memory of caducity.

The key figure of the late allegory is the corpse. The figure of the new allegory is the commemoration [*das "Andenken"*]. The "commemoration" is the diagram of the transformation of commodity into a collectors' item. The *correspondances* are, actually, the infinitely multiple echoes of each other's memory.<sup>33</sup>

In this kind of remembering images become frozen figures of the crumbling essence of things: social products are natural as far as they are perishable.

Hence, in this direction, the Arcade's project is deeply related to the perspective of the so-called *Theses on the philosophy of history*, in which

<sup>29</sup> W. Benjamin, *Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker* (1937), transl. by E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, *Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian*, in W. Benjamin, *One-Way Street and other Writings*, cit., p. 349ss.

<sup>30</sup> About the analogy with hieroglyphs, see Bloch's considerations on Benjamin's approach in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 1962.

<sup>31</sup> D. Frisby, *Walter Benjamin. The Prehistory of Modernity*, in Id., *Fragments of Modernity. Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*, Routledge, New York 1986, p. 263.

<sup>32</sup> See, F. Desideri, *Teologia dell'inferno. Walter Benjamin e il feticismo moderno*, in S. Mistura (a cura di), *Figure del feticismo*, Einaudi, Torino 2001.

<sup>33</sup> W. Benjamin, *Zentralpark*, in Id. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 1, hrsg. von R. Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1974, p. 691, transl. mine.

history is unveiled as a history of debris. Here, future means the repetition of the true movement of modernity – i.e. the repetition of a new that is every the same – and takes the form of false progress, because it originates from the incessant accumulation of ruins.

Therefore, we could affirm schematically that two kinds of death are involved in Benjamin's portrait of modern phantasmagoria: on the one side, the death implied in the false novelty of its appearance, which represents its decadence; on the other side, the death of ancient time involved into present, which, in a true dialectical perspective, could be what is still alive, i.e. a dream of emancipation hidden into rubbles which is not yet turned off.

In a letter of 1935 Adorno questioned the theoretical tightness of the *Exposé*, which Benjamin has sent him a few months earlier, and wondered whether it actually showed a dialectical understanding of reality. According to his own words:

In keeping with an immanent version of the dialectical image [...] you construe the relationship between the oldest and the newest, which was already central to your first draft, as one of Utopian reference to a “classless society”. Thus the archaic becomes a complementary addition to the new, instead of being the “newest” itself: it is de-dialecticized. However, at the same time, and equally undialectically, the image of classlessness is put back into mythology instead of becoming truly transparent as a phantasmagoria of Hell. Therefore the category in which the archaic coalesces into the modern seems to me far less a Golden Age than a catastrophe.<sup>34</sup>

From the point of view of Adorno, in Benjamin's perspective the archaic is not dialectically bound in the actual structure of the present time. The turmoil of dreams seems to involve his analysis too, by puzzling the dimension of myth with that one of primal history. The reference to a free “classless society” appears abstract and not mediated within the contradiction of present society.

In the framework of this criticism, Benjamin's theoretical gesture can be compared with Goethe's perspective upon the *Urpflanze*<sup>35</sup>, the original form of the plant that can be found in all its subsequent developments. Since Benjamin attempts to find the primal form of modernity, he tries to collect every object which can contribute to this picture, by doing

<sup>34</sup> G. Scholem, T.W. Adorno (eds.), *The correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, cit., p. 111.

<sup>35</sup> See particularly Goethe's considerations about the metamorphosis of plants. The notion of physiognomy refers to a larger debate, that involves a plenty of important German thinkers of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we cannot resume here. See, at this regard, G. Guri-satti, *Dizionario fisiognomico. Il volto, la forma, l'espressione*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2006.

an extensive inspection of the finitude. Debris and ruins unveil the actual configuration of phantasmagoric world as a deployment of this original configuration. However, the subjective living work from which things arise, i.e. the subjective mediation of this process, seems to disappear<sup>36</sup>.

In another paragraph of his Introduction to the *Positivismusstreit* Adorno explores very clearly this point:

Since the individual phenomenon conceals in itself the whole society, micrology and mediation through totality act as a counterpoint to one another. It was the intention of a contribution to the theory of social conflict today to elucidate this; the same point was central to the earlier controversy with Benjamin concerning the dialectical interpretation of societal phenomena. Benjamin's social physiognomy was criticized for being too immediate, for lacking reflection upon the total societal mediation. He suspected the latter of being idealistic, but without it the materialistic construction of social phenomena would lag behind theory. The firmly established *nominalism*, which relegates the concept to the status of an illusion or an abbreviation, and represents the facts as something concept-free or indeterminate in an emphatic sense, thereby becomes necessarily abstract. Abstraction is the indiscrete incision between the general and the particular. It is not the apprehension of the general as the determination of the particular in itself.<sup>37</sup>

According to this perspective, if the phenomenon is simply named as a repeating form, what escapes is the conceptual mediation that constitutes not only its past history, but also its future history.

Adorno's physiognomy of society presupposes a synchronic analysis of its structural determinations not in order to oppress its very discontinuities into an overwhelming totality, but to give them their actual meaning<sup>38</sup>. This kind of analysis does not take into account singularities because they represent the primal form of capitalistic society, but, rather, because they display the possibility to overcome it. In this framework, marginalities become traces of "non-identical" elements in the present time and, deeper, they become tendencies to the future. According to my opinion, here Adorno distances himself from Benjamin's perspective and underlines the very limits of a mere phenomenological gaze on the reality. From his theoretical point of view, the "immanent critique" as "social physiognomic of appearance" might locate discontinuities which show both the antagonistic nature of

<sup>36</sup> This critical point acquires more complexity in the framework of the broader Benjamin's production. In essays as *Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Leskows* or *Die Aufgabe der Übersetzer* the temporal weft involved in the notion of "transmission" leads to a more articulated theoretical frame than that one briefly sketched here.

<sup>37</sup> T. W. Adorno et. alii, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>38</sup> In contrast to Gurisatti's opinion in *Benjamin, Adorno e la fisiognomica*, "Aisthesis", 2, 2010, pp. 181-191, particularly p. 186ss.

society and spaces to reverse it. In already cited *Anmerkungen zum soziale Konflikte heute* Adorno makes clear this nexus through the example of an old man and the brutal laugh of people who see him stuck in the tram doors. This tiny gesture of the crowd not only shows the overall antagonistic nature of society but, by repeating this contradiction in a mediated way, reasserts the possibility to dialectically conceive it. In other terms, this experience highlights the non identity between the act of laughing and the emotions involved in it, i.e., in this case, suffering<sup>39</sup>. In the same time, it reawakens the memory of another kind of laugh, by showing how the present antagonisms prevent it. In this way, it becomes a clue of an experience that should be actually different. In this sense, the physiognomic is concerned with the living mediations of social objects, not only because they mark the fleeting nature of society, but rather because they enable to orient the process of this very caducity.

According to Adorno's account, this portrayal of possible emancipation needs the "rhetorical moment of dialectics", which is the figurative ability of language to go beyond fixed determinations of reality without suppressing the distance between the concept and the object. In other terms, an imaginative trait of reason, a kind of "obstinacy of fantasy"<sup>40</sup> is necessary to a knowledge which wants to preserve its critical potentialities and to hold the non identity of things – i.e., not only the non identity between the concept and the object, but also the genetic non identity of things within capitalistic society, that can be disclosed through the possibilities of concept and language – by orienting it. Experience and critique are bond in this nexus, in an "emphatic experience", which is the determinate negation of identity as a possibility to reach the true content of the two-dimensional world of bourgeois society and, hence, to supersede it. In this way, a social physiognomic of appearance is not just a hermeneutics of society, but its critical interpretation marked by a deep political effort.

#### 4. Conclusion

What seems to be familiar in everyday experience is not really known in the framework of the capitalistic phantasmagoria. Adorno and Benjamin, in two different ways, try to read the enigmatic text of a modernity

<sup>39</sup> This gesture expresses suffering because it does not represent the emancipation from the presumed need for things to happen smoothly, but instead the repetition of this necessity through the oppression of a weaken subject.

<sup>40</sup> M. Horkheimer, *Traditionelle und kritische Theorie* (1937), transl. by M. J. O'Connell, *Traditional and Critical Theory*, in Id., *Critical Theory. Selected essays*, Continuum, New York 1982, p. 220.

dominated by reified and frozen relationships. If Benjamin interprets modernity as the philologist does, by investigating its primal history, Adorno resembles more to a philosopher, who reads the text of society in a speculative way. By regarding the dialectical play between what the society formally aspires to be and what it really is, Adorno discloses the utopian dimension through negativity and highlights how the conceptual mediation pushes itself toward the future. According to his own words, “what is not quite literal testifies to the tense non-identity of essence and appearance. Emphatic knowledge does not lapse into irrationalism if it does not absolutely renounce art. The scientific adult mockery of ‘mind music’ simply drowns the creaking of the cupboard drawers in which the questionnaires are deposited – the sound of the enterprise of pure literalness”<sup>41</sup>. Only by keeping an imaginative trait, criticism is able to underline what is not true in phenomena, and, at the same time, what could be true in the future.

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<sup>41</sup> T.W. Adorno et. alii, *op.cit.*, p. 35.



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### **Immanent critique as a social physiognomics of appearance: Adorno's account of the modern possibilities of experience**

The aim of my paper is to focus on the notion of “social physiognomics of appearance”, which Adorno formulated in his *Introduction* to the so-called *Positivismusstreit* (1961). At first, I would linger on the characteristics of this approach, by crossing the Adorno's mature works and showing their deep bond with Benjamin's reflections. In the second part of my paper I would like to underline how Adorno gives a different meaning to the notion of “physiognomy”, grounded on the importance of conceptual mediation. He stresses the need to unfold the logical stratification of “facts”, instead of considering them as a pure monadological expression of totality. According to him, this operation requires a form of interpretation that keeps its imaginative trait, i.e. the ability to disclose the temporal sedimentation of things. In this sense this kind of creative interpretation can represent a new form of experience, that goes beyond the non-historical dimension of modern phantasmagoria.

KEYWORDS: physiognomics; immanent critique; appearance; experience; imaginative interpretation.