

From art after Auschwitz towards a sociology of disrespect of Buchenwald*

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ABSTRACT

The aesthetic works of the Frankfurt School receive little attention by contemporary sociology. However, the article shows the relevance of aesthetic theory for a critical understanding of the social world. Therefore, we introduce the contradictions presented by critical theory of society especially after Auschwitz and we ask ourselves about how to conceive the inconceivable when the tools of Enlightenment are intrinsically guilty. Finally, we propose a mosaic of aesthetic sociology of disrespect as an option to overcome the paradoxes of Auschwitz. This procedure is related to the artistic production around the concentration camp of Buchenwald.

Keywords: *Aesthetics, Frankfurt School, Holocaust, Honneth, recognition, disrespect*

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INTRODUCTION

The aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School is practically inexistent for social debates and contemporary policies. Critical theory from the society of the first generation of the Frankfurt School is now considered too complex and of little relevance in terms of having a profound intellectual impact on the current world, and even less so for empirical analysis.

This verdict is true a *fortiori* for the aesthetic work of Adorno above all, but it also applies to Benjamin, Kracauer and others. However, the aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School is inextricably linked to a crucial question of social sciences: Despite the powers that blur, shape or distort human perception, is it possible to know the social world? This question, for

* In this text we summarise some of the reflections we published in Hernández and Herzog (2015).

which sociology does not dare to suggest a negative response, is accompanied by an additional question in view of an affirmative answer: How can we know this world?

The purpose of this article is to show the relevance of aesthetic theory when it comes to forming a critical understanding of the social world. To that end, first we shall present the aporiae put forwards by the critical theory of society, especially after Auschwitz. Secondly, we shall ask how we can conceive — both logically and artistically — the inconceivable if the tools of Enlightenment are affected by blame. This deals with the relationship between Auschwitz and aesthetic theory. Finally, we propose the mosaic of the aesthetic sociology of disrespect as a way of overcoming the aporia of Auschwitz. This solution is related to the artistic production linked to the Buchenwald concentration camp.

FROM CRITICAL THEORY TO AESTHETICS AFTER AUSCHWITZ

Within the evolution of the Frankfurt School and with the intention of producing a critical theory, the book *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (1944/47) by Horkheimer and Adorno represents a turning point (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2010). Following Honneth (1986), this book radicalises a “loss of the social” that had already been pointed out in the article “*Traditionelle und kritische Theorie*” in 1937. This concept text, and other contributions made by Horkheimer and the members of the Frankfurt School Institute for Social Research before the Second World War, defended a multidisciplinary approach in principle. However, the fact is that the main argument was devised around the framework of a philosophy of history centred on the Marxist model of social work. This model initially set aside other forms of social interaction in general and cultural reproduction in particular. However, if the working class had not decisively backed revolutionary change and had integrated in a non-conflictive manner into

industrial capitalism and National Socialism, it would be necessary to draw a terrible conclusion: the disappearance of the creative capacity and resistance of the members of the working class, as well as their potential for individual and collective conflict. The psychoanalytical model relating to the socialization and the psychology of masses provided Adorno and Horkheimer with reasons for understanding why those who were supposed to be the revolutionary vanguard joined the henchmen of barbarism.

In *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, a work created under the influence of the rise of national socialism and the war, with a clear intuition of the barbarism of the concentration and extermination camps that would emerge at the end of the war, Horkheimer and Adorno linked the transformations of subjects to the original act of dominance over nature. In this manner, they continued to use the Marxist philosophical-historical model centred on word, but they did so adding a greater distance between the objects of analysis, namely, social groups, and their interactions. Forms of conscience relate to material production. However, unlike the usual interpretations of Marx, Lukács or even Sohn-Rethel, it was not about analysing the modes of production or the forms of the exchange of goods. Rather, it was about going back to the first act of the appropriation of nature. That is to say, that first act would trigger a social pathology so powerful that it would even subsume scientific knowledge within the negative model of rational domination over nature. This inclusion even ruled out the very possibility of creating a critical theory. This is the conclusion that seems to emerge from the writing of Horkheimer and Adorno after *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, which have a deeply pessimistic tone.

Both *Eclipse of Reason*, from 1947, by Horkheimer and *Minima moralia*, from 1951, by Adorno, are fragmentary works, marked by a profound despair in the emancipatory capacity of human reason. (Horkheimer, 2004; Adorno, 1964). The fact that its course of action is subjected to the logical of identity, in terms of its linguistic framework and

way of reasoning, that is to say to objectifying thinking, would thus be the factor that would allow for knowledge and science, but also massification and barbarism. Faced with this objectifying dynamic, inherent to “instrumental” reason, one can only carry out a self-reflexive philosophical exercise, which is as hopeless as it is aporetic. From the outset, it must renounce all confidence in the revelatory capacity of language, in its claim to be a transparent enunciation.

The critique of language that Benjamin’s theory of messianic time had outlined, thus was radicalised with the critique of instrumental reason by Horkheimer and Adorno. What can be done then once the instrumental character of reason and language has been revealed, it seems that the possibility of producing a critical theory vanishes? The question goes beyond that and even affects the very creation of an aesthetic theory. The only task that is possible, and even “obligatory”, is its dissolution. Adorno states: The elucidated and concrete dissolution of conventional aesthetic categories is the only remaining form that aesthetics can take; at the same time it releases the transformed truth of these categories” (Adorno, 1997: 597).

Thus, the paths of Adorno’s *Ästhetik* from 1958/59 as well as his posthumous work *Ästhetische Theorie* (Adorno 2009 and 1997, respectively) are organised based on the dissolution of categories: natural beauty and artistic beauty, the ugly and the sublime, reflection and artistic praxis, aura, aesthetic enjoyment, dissonance, expression and artistic construction, creativity, abstract art, etc., not as a closed list of clichés, but rather as stages of dialectical reasoning where each station illuminates its opposite and collides with it in order to allow passage to the following one, in order to free “transformed truth”.

In short, critical theory after *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, faced insurmountable aporias, linked to notions of reasons of reason and language that it reached. They seemed to shut off the path towards not only a critical theory of society, but even of aesthetics and

any other discipline that does not carry out its own dissolution of categories. Let us take a closer look at the relationship between the historical experience of Auschwitz and aesthetic theory.

AUSCHWITZ AND THE END OF COMPREHENSIVE SOCIOLOGY AND AESTHETICS

Few historical phenomena elude language more than that of the Nazi concentration camps. Their common name does not allude to the exterminating role that they fulfilled. However, even talking about extermination camps involves a reduction of the forms of torture and murder that were carried out in these places and their surrounding areas. In the camps, millions of people were incarcerated extrajudicially. Camps were a place of non-rights.

One way of bypassing the semantic difficulty inherent to the notion of “concentration camp” is to simply talk of “Auschwitz”. This is what Theodor W. Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School did. Used in this manner, the word does not have a specific meaning. Rather, it refers to the historic phenomenon of the epiphany of absolute evil, the emergence of inconceivable evil. However, whether we talk about “concentration camp” or mention the word “Auschwitz” we carry out an abstraction that effaces the differences between the camps. Any person who reads about Nazi concentration camps, watches documentaries or visits the remains, will find a peculiar dialectic of similarities and differences. The dissimilarities also have to do with the associations that each camp brings to mind: Anne Frank and Bergen-Belsen, the Stairs of Death and Mauthausen, etc., associations that are neutralised with a mere mention of “Auschwitz”.

But, furthermore, in terms of abstraction, Auschwitz was literally incomprehensible for sociology for three reasons. Firstly, invoking Auschwitz undermines the idea of comprehension, which is at the core of post-Weberian human and social sciences. Auschwitz cannot be conceived because it escapes all logic. In

short, what happened made no sense in the middle of a military conflict which required efficient action. From the perspective of administrative rationale, it would have been more understandable, for example, to subject the Jewish people to slavery (in the style of Schindler). Generalizing: any mechanism that explains social reproduction was abolished in Auschwitz (Claussen, 1996: 53). In reality, Auschwitz operated with a logic that is inherent to the spirit, its regression, however, knowledge cannot reach this heart of darkness: “Horror is beyond the reach of psychology” (Adorno, 1964: 215). Secondly, the critical theorists that tried to capture the complexity of Auschwitz were deemed to be “too difficult, brilliant or esoteric” to be of relevance to the daily work of academic or political discourse (Stoetzler, 2010: 165). This circumvention also made the possibility of understanding the historical phenomenon even more remote. This is to say, “Auschwitz” completely eradicated the conception of history as rationalisation and showed the contingency and irrationality of history (Krahl 1985: 287 s., cited by Claussen, 1996: 51). Thirdly, far from perceiving the Holocaust as a *possibility* of modern society, without which Auschwitz would not have been possible (Baumann, 1989: 12s), it was conceived as the opposite, as a “pre-bourgeois vestige” (Claussen, 2012), which likewise did not aid its comprehension.

However, the inconceivable nature of Auschwitz does not lead to scepticism, rather it poses a challenge to human reason, as Adorno states in his classes:

“One simply needs to say the word *Auschwitz* to make them (the students, F.H and B.H) remember that is now barely possible to think of another figure of spiritual love, of *amor intellectualis* as meant by Spinoza, that is not the inexorable hatred of what is bad, false and frightening in our world. It is one of the most terrible configurations of our era the fact that almost all these formulas which immediately proclaim good, love of men, are turned, in secret and against will itself, into

something bad. Meanwhile, those that do not abandon that inexorability are reproached as inhuman, sceptical and destructive. I believe that learning to penetrate that strange inversion is one of the first demands that philosophy requires of you if you contemplate it seriously and if, to put it this way, you do not want to use it as one of the little bits of firewood which that little old women brought to the stake of Jan Huss. I am aware of what I demand of them, but I cannot remedy it” (Adorno, 1977: 153).

Therefore, following in the wake of the old negative theology, which bowed defeated before the God that like to hide himself, the *Deus absconditus*. Reason does not ascertain what is absolute, rather, on the contrary: that which cannot be conceived negatively shows reason its very self. This inconceivable nature of the world has important consequence not only for language and logocentric knowledge, but also for art, as this other passage by Adorno explains:

“If thought is able to gain a relation to art it must be on the basis that something in reality — something beyond the veil spun by the interplay of institutions and false needs — objectively demands art, and in doing so, demands an art that expresses what the veil hides. Though discursive knowledge is adequate to reality, and even to its irrationalities (which originate in its laws of motion), something in reality rebuffs rational knowledge. Suffering remains foreign to knowledge; though knowledge can subordinate it conceptually and provide means for its amelioration, knowledge can scarcely express it through its own means of experience without itself becoming irrational. Suffering conceptualised remains mute and inconsequential, as is obvious in post-Hitler Germany. In an age of incomprehensible horror, Hegel’s principle (which Brecht adopted as his motto), that truth is concrete, can perhaps suffice only for art. Hegel’s

thesis that art is consciousness of plight has been confirmed beyond anything he could have envisioned. (...) The darkening of the world makes the irrationality of art irrational: radically darkened art. What the enemies of modern art, with a better instinct than its anxious apologists, call its *negativity* is the epitome of what established culture has repressed and that towards which art is drawn” (Adorno, 1997: 32s).

However, although “the darkening of the world makes the irrationality of art irrational: radically darkened art”, the well-known Adorno thesis: “Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”, seems to close the door to any form of artistic expression. Many people understood it as this, from León Felipe¹ to Günter Grass².

RECOVERING THE CAPACITY TO IMAGINE: THE AESTHETIC SOCIOLOGY OF DISRESPECT OF BUCHENWALD

However, to understand Adorno’s sentence requires an effort on our behalf. We believe that the Frankfurt school of philosophy was not attacking the possibility of art, but rather the reduction of what art is saying to what art shows.³ Adorno himself tried to explain that art always goes beyond its concept. The solution to the aporia is the Wittgensteinian distinction between *showing* and *saying*. Language or art can *show* barbarism, which cannot be *said*. In short, the closest thing to *saying* barbarism is the plurality of its *showings*, without it being possible to have a

1 León Felipe expressed it in his poem “Auschwitz”: “Look! This is a place where you cannot play the violin. / Here, the strings of every violin in the world are broken.”

2 In the autobiography of Günter Grass, we read how his literary generation precisely understood Adorno’s sentence in that way, as an appeal to believe there was a place for the creation of literature after Auschwitz (Grass, 1996: 132s; cf. also Grass, 1999).

3 “Say” (sagen) and “show” (zeigen) in the sense meant by L. Wittgenstein: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 4022.

single subsequent understanding. That would be approaching the world as a mosaic or as a limit (in the mathematical sense). Perhaps, what thus surges from moral desperation is in reality a practice of virtue, a form of art, the art of inquiring in the knowledge that there is no valid answer.

Below, we provide an example: different artistic manifestations linked to the Buchenwald extermination camp, that allude to the same day, the 15th April 1945, the date on which the camp was liberated: the photographs of Margaret Bourke-White and the literary accounts of Jorge Semprún, Fred Wander and Imre Kertész. This collage shows, in our view, what Siegfried Kracauer already said in *Die Angestellten, that reality is a construction inscribed in the mosaic of singular observations* (Kracauer 2006).

Margaret Bourke-White

Sunday, 15 April 1945, in the morning. The photographer Margaret Bourke-White began to take photographs of a group of German citizens, mostly women and elderly people from the town of Ettersberg, next to the city of Weimar, that came to Buchenwald camp, located very close to the town. Soldiers from the Third Army of the United States, led by General Patton, control the facilities of the concentration camp and escort the group. The photographs show some women crying or covering their face with handkerchiefs in front of piles of corpses and the cremation ovens. The survivors walk around or are held back by the soldiers.⁴

Some of the photographs that Margaret Bourke-White took that morning were published. Others remained in the image archive of the magazine *Life*, until Google digitalized and published thousands of photographs from that archive in 2008, and they can now be viewed on the internet.

4 A reconstruction of the event can be found in the ninth episode of the series *Band of Brothers*, produced by the television channel HBO and broadcast for the first time in October 2001.



Source: *Life Archive* hosted by Google.

Jorge Semprún

A young 21-year-old prisoner, Jorge Semprún, witnessed the scene at Buchenwald photographed by Bourke-White. He recounts this in his novel *Le grand voyage*. According to the book, when he looked at the group he became distressed and went to the other side of the camp, where he buried his head in the grass and listened to the silence of Ettersberg forest. *L'écriture ou la vie* dedicates a chapter to the American army official who spoke to the group.

In 2006, Semprún received the Annetje Fels-Kupferschmidt prize and, when he went to collect it in Holland, where he had lived before the Second World War, he gave an interview (in Spanish) to RNW television, where among other declarations, he recalled the event.

JORGE SEMPRÚN. [...] That phenomenon of voluntary forgetting, which is sincere yet simultaneously opportunistic, is a very widespread phenomenon. It is possible to find that phenomenon in all countries where there have been dictatorships.

INTERVIEWER. Wouldn't that be because, in such dramatic circumstances, people find themselves facing an almost impossible dilemma? If people say "I knew about the situation", one assumes that if they knew, they could have done something...



JS. That is precisely the problem. Regarding this specific issue, I have an anecdote, an incident that I could recount if we have time...

I. Yes, please!

JS. In April 1945, on 11 April, the American army, specifically, Patton's Third Army, liberated Buchenwald camp. A few days after — I am not sure how many days, three or four days later —, the American military leaders organised a trip for the civic population of the city of Weimar to the Buchenwald camp. Weimar was the famous city of Goethe, of Nietzsche, the city of culture, home to all the museums and archives of Germany's cultural history. A visit for the civic population. I watched a group. The guide of that group was an American army lieutenant who spoke perfect German and went around explaining things. He took that group of about one hundred civilians from Weimar, mostly women and children (because men of a military age were still at war, mobilised as the war was still not over), to the yard of the crematorium, where hundreds of corpses were piled up like tree trunks. He began to explain what took place there, in the crematorium. Then, the German women began to shout and cry, and to say: "We did not know, we were not aware..." And



the American lieutenant calmly told them: “You did not know, because you did not want to find out. For years, have you not seen the trains pass through Weimar? Have you not seen your brothers or husbands make the deportees work in such and such a factory, the same people you used to work with? You are not guilty, but you are responsible.” That episode has remained etched on my memory. Then it emerged (and I will not explain the rest, because it would constitute another story) that this American lieutenant was a German Jew, who was called Rosenberg.⁵ I have put him in one of my books using the name Rosenfeld (Semprún, 1997), because I did not know whether he was still alive....and even to protect him from a possible glitch in my memory. However, a reader of the English version identified him and she told me that it was “Rosenberg”. A man that is still alive. We have been in correspondence. The American lieutenant who gave the explanation was a German Jew, who had emigrated in the 30’s, acquired U.S. Citizenship and enlisted in the army in order to wage an antifascist war against his own country, as someone fighting for freedom. That is why he spoke such perfect German.

I. Is it true that this story you witnessed caused you to suffer from stomach ache, and you went to the countryside to rest...?

JS. Yes, it is.⁶

Fred Wander

Fred Wander, who was 29 years old when the citizens of Weimar entered Buchenwald, remained in the barracks, according to his autobiography (Wander, 2010). Really, Wander does not say that he was inside the barracks exactly, while the group of German civilians was walking around. Rather, he goes beyond that: he turned the situation of remaining inside the barracks into his essential vital condition. Up until the end of his life, when he would wake up in the middle of the night in distress he would ask himself, in anguish, if he was still in the barracks: “Is it not that I have installed the barracks in the depths of my being?”, he writes in the conclusion of *Das Gute Leben* (The Good Life). Wander published a book, *The Seventh Well*, about young victims in extermination camps, a Jewish

⁵ Albert G. Rosenberg.

⁶ Cf. www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_QmLezLoy8; also in the Google video archive: [video.google.com/videoplay?docid=9059014605533661549#](https://www.google.com/videoplay?docid=9059014605533661549#).

image⁷ of the deepest part of our being. However, in *The Good Life* he declares that all his books are the same, in short, a repeated exercise of ascesis, which he notes quoting Semprún.⁸ To be by not being what we are, and ending up discovering that we are precisely that. This is a formulation that practically paraphrases Hegel's *Logic*.⁹ This is about the repeated exercise of reading and writing, and the narration of stories, a passion for Wander. He described himself as someone that would travel lightly, but always with a book. Because books, he would say, are found everywhere. Always reading and always travelling. A pariah, a *schlemihl*, a poor wretch. Facing, as Kertész wrote and Wander quoted, “a spiritual form of existence based on negative experience”, a passion for narrating that which is unspeakable. Because, quoting again from Wander, “all suffering becomes tolerable if someone tells a story”, as Hannah Arendt wrote.

The recent publication of Primo Levi's conversations with Giovanni Tesio further underlines Wander's approach. Levi is, as is well-known, the author of the most compelling autobiographical account of Auschwitz, *If This Is a Man*, which shares the pathos of Wander: “*una vita da inibito*” (Levi, 2016: 43).

Wander's story of his stay in Buchenwald recalls another famous image. When it was built, it was to be named the Ettersberg Camp or Weimar Camp, but that name was ruled out due to its literary and cultural

associations. It is said that it was Himmler himself who suggested Buchenwald, as it was located in a beechwood. However, the German term for beeches (*Buchen*) is very similar to the word “books” (*Bücher*). It is a coincidence that the camp that housed so many writers had a name that was similar to a “wood of books”, which immediately brings to mind the forest of book-men in *Fahrenheit 451*, the novel by Ray Bradbury that was made into a film by François Truffaut.

Imre Kertész

Imre Kertész received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2002. In April 1945 he was a skeletal 15-year-old, incarcerated in Buchenwald. He remembered having seen the group of citizens from Weimar, while he was wrapped in a blanket and sat on a portable toilet in front of the hospital barracks, “as if I was the Duke of Vendôme greeting the Bishop of Parma.” He was chewing American chewing gum, that a soldier had given to him.

“Those moments retain an experience that is irretrievable and unmentionable. If I could live them again, I would say that I have conquered time, that I have conquered life. However, human beings were not created for that, rather, at most they can remember. And meanwhile, they should keep watch over the accuracy and immovable nature of their memory”. (Kertész, 2002: 127).

With regard to the *dictum* of Adorno, he suggests inverting it: “I would modify in the same broad sense, by saying that after Auschwitz there could only be poetry about Auschwitz”. The horror of the Holocaust “broadens out to enter the realm of a universal experience” (Kertész, 2002: 66 and 69). It is the end of the road for great adventures, reached after two millennia of ethical and moral culture, whose traumatic effect has dominated decades of modern art and drives current human creative strength: “In thinking about Auschwitz, I reflect, paradoxically, not on the past but the future” (Kertész, 2002: 60). Thus, the Hungarian Nobel Laureate concludes that it is possible to understand the Holocaust as “culture”. “Suffering falls

7 The well that is dug in the desert in order to find water. That is why other translations refer to the *Seventh Well*.

8 “*L'écriture, si elle prétend être davantage qu'un jeu, ou un enjeu, n'est qu'un long, interminable travail d'ascèse, une façon de se dépendre de soi en prenant sur soi: en devenant soi-même parce qu'on aura reconnu, mis au monde l'autre qu'on est toujours*” (Semprún, 1994: 377): “Writing, if it claims to be more than a game, or a gamble, is but a long, endless labour of ascesis, a way of casting off one's self by keeping a firm hold on oneself. Becoming oneself though recognising and bringing into the world that *other* one always is”

9 Jorge Semprún remembered having flicked through a Glockner edition of Hegel's *Logic* in Buchenwald, with a yellow hardback cover and Gothic typeface. In a subsequent visit to the camp he was able to check that indeed, in the barracks of the infirmary, there were for no apparent reason, some of the volumes of that edition.

on man like an order, and the solemn protest against it: that is what art is today, and it can be nothing else" (Kertész, 2002: 125).

CONCLUSION

Just one thought that takes Auschwitz seriously may can help to prevent the repetition of such barbarism. However, taking Auschwitz seriously has significant repercussions on our way of perceiving social reality. When horror silences us there are ways other than identifying thought, which can help us to approach the unthinkable. The term "approach" here can mean simply creating "mosaics", "fragments", "configurations" that draw close to the edge or reflect in spiral motions. This is how we have understood the aesthetic approach to Buchenwald sketched herein.

After Auschwitz and Buchenwald, the path is thus open for art, art that shows suffering, and thus becomes a societal theory of the forms of disrespect, stemming from the most extreme expression of suffering in history. Or, in other words: after Auschwitz it is only possible to create art about suffering, it is only possible to undertake a sociology of disrespect. This sociology of disrespect must be aware of its constructive nature, even that of observation in itself, and to advocate the conscious principle of assembly which Benjamin previously called for. This principle means "assembling large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment, the crystal of the total event." (705s). A polyhedric crystal without doubt.

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