On Complexity (Rennes, 2 Dec 16)

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On Complexity

Exploring the Enigmatic in Art

Summary:
In modernity, the word "hermetic" is generally used to designate certain poetic works (those of Hopkins, Mallarmé or Celan, for example), while the question of the complexity, obscurity or unintelligibility of art is only raised in relation to literature. In truth, however, the problem of the hermetic in art is equally present in music, in painting, in cinema, and so on. Taking as its point of departure select pages of Adorno's Aesthetic Theory that highlight this paradoxical situation in art criticism, this one-day conference aims to explore the question of meaning in art from a theoretical standpoint, but also and especially in the analysis of specific artworks - and in particular those artworks that reveal their meaning in aesthetic experience only with great difficulty, or seem to refuse to reveal their meaning altogether. Such artworks force us to renounce the hermeneutic ease with which we determine meaning in art, and ask us instead, starting from the true conditions of our aesthetic experience of them, to seek a philosophical interpretation of their truth content.

Announcement :
This conference will take place at the University of Rennes 2 in the month of December 2016. It is organized by Christophe David (Lecturer, History and Criticism of the Arts, EA 1279, University of Rennes 2) and Frédéric Monvoisin (Research Institute on Cinema and the Audio-Visual Arts, EA 185, University of Paris 3). It will take place as part of "The Ambiguity of Images" program initiated by Bruno Boerner (University of Rennes 2) and Christophe David.

Argument :
The most widely spread conception of meaning in art sees "spirit" or meaning in art as embodied in its "letter," and thus the path of interpretation would be indicated to the critic by this unity. For the hermeneutics of artworks each work has as many meanings as it has interpreters. In his Aesthetic Theory, Adorno argued against the hermeneutics of art that would "satisfy an infinite number of proposed interpretations, none of which it can satisfy without violating others." This generous infinity would support what Adorno called, not without irony, an "objective ambiguity" of artworks. This position, of which Adorno was highly critical, corresponds to the one the late Odo Marquard defended as "pluralizing hermeneutics." According to his theory, the meaning of the artwork is the reason in the series of meanings produced by each of its interpreters. The aesthetics of

reception of Hans Robert Jauss- who takes Gadamer's hermeneutics over for himself in order the better to challenge Adorno - perfectly embodies this position.

Our first goal, therefore, is to examine the twenty or so pages of Adorno's Aesthetic Theory that conceptualizes the "meaning/spirit" of art against the hermeneutical standpoint. What, for example, is aesthetic experience when it refuses to trace meaning back from the spirit to the letter? What is aesthetic experience that breaks with the idea of art that makes it a symbol of some kind, and instead acknowledges the unbridgeable gulf between the letter and the spirit? Aesthetic experience, Adorno contends, is based on separation because the indelible tension between the letter and the spirit is internal to artworks as such: "Each sentence is literal, and each signifies. The two moment are not merged, as the symbol would have it, but yawn apart, and out of the abyss between them blinds the glaring ray of fascination." Or again: "The spirit of artworks ignites on what is opposed to it, on materiality." Adorno's aesthetics play the letter against meaning/spirit and understands this quality as that of an "enigma," of an ongoing "question mark."

Of course, not all works which present themselves as art can be rightly understood by this enigmatic literality. For Adorno, there are ridiculous works that have no meaning whatsoever, "rational" works whose meanings are too obvious, and, finally, there are works that, indeed, "speak like elves in fairy tales: 'If you want the absolute, you shall have it, but you will not recognize it when you see it.'" The temptation of giving normative primacy to this extreme form is certainly present in Adorno, who appears to suggest sometimes that this is not an exceptional occurrence, and that, on the contrary, all art, qua art, is enigmatic in this way.

Thus we arrive at the key thesis to which this daylong conference in devoted: "the much touted complexity of art is the falsely positive name for its enigmatic quality." Art would in itself protest against the hermeneutic goal of revealed meaning. "Hermeneutics, let us be!" the enigmatic quality of artworks would seem to say.

In this way, the task of art criticism is redefined by being redirected: the point is not to resolve what is enigmatic in art, but on the contrary, to pay attention to the structure of what is enigmatic: "As in enigmas, the answer is both hidden and demanded by the structure." Adorno in fact appears to return to the question of "truth content" as Benjamin had formulated it in his thesis on The Concept of Aesthetic Criticism in German Romanticism, only to push it forward polemically, in the whole field of modern aesthetics.

Far from considering enigmatic works as elitist, or as reserved for pretentious and complacent audiences, Adorno entirely reversed matters, and saw the most enigmatic artworks as demonstrating the true power of critique: "The hermeneutic works bring more criticism to bear on the existing state of affairs than do those that, in the interest of intelligible social criticism, devote themselves to conciliatory fans and silently acknowledge the flourishing culture industry."

We may even examine unsuspected alliances in aesthetic experience from this standpoint, that is, in art that fights against reification: "Today, hermetic and committed art converge in the refusal of the status quo. Interference is prohibited by reified consciousness because it reifies the already reified artwork."

In these pages of his Aesthetic Theory, Adorno evokes Goethe and Beckett's refusal of any

attempt to interpret the meaning of their art - a refusal that Klee's drawings, as approximate scrawled writing, would illustrate in its own way.

This is not to suggest that the sensible critic of enigmatic works would ultimately be condemned to a respectful silence before what is enigmatic in art. The enigmatic quality of these works suggests instead that their critical appreciation requires the kind of speculative imagination that is characteristic of true philosophy. The speculative critic of enigmatic art, however, must make a clean break with the perspective that submits the enigmatic quality of art to the supposition of hermeneutically revealed meaning. Only on the basis of this rupture can art criticism strive toward "truth content" and examine the structure of enigma in art. In this way we may rediscover the meaning of art as the meaning of our own aesthetic experience of it and how that meaning is attained: "aesthetic experience is not genuine experience unless it becomes philosophy." For only philosophy seeks to ponder in art, as in everything essential and enigmatic, the ambiguous relation of the determinate and the indeterminate [die Zweischlächtigkeit des Bestimmten une Unbestimmten].

Indicative bibliography :
Adorno, Ästhetische Theorie, Suhrkamp, 2012, pp. 179-205; Théorie esthétique, French translation by Marc Jimenez, Klincksieck, pp. 170-193; Aesthetic Theory, English translation by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London/New York, 1997, pp. 118-136.
Peter Szondi, "Reading "Engführung", An Essay on the Poetry of Paul Celan", Boundary 2, Vol. 11, n°3, 1983.
Walter Benjamin, "Two poems on Hölderlin", in Selected Writings, Volume 1 : 1913-1926, Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 18-36.
Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities", in Selected Writings, Volume 1 : 1913-1926, op. cit., pp. 297-356.
Walter Benjamin, The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism, in Selected Writings, Volume 1 : 1913-1926, op. cit., pp. 116-185.

Modalities of submission :
This call for papers is addressed to scholars working in aesthetics, in philosophy of art, sociology of art, history of art, musicology, literary criticism, literary theory, cinematographic studies, etc.

The theoretical questions we would like to explore in this one-day conference are as follows:

The possibility of the complexity, the obscurity or even the unintelligibility of certain works; the importance (even hypothetical) of the linguistic paradigm (spirit/letter) in the recognition of this possibility (as Adorno writes, Sprache sind Kunstwerke nur als Schrift [Artworks are language only as writing]); the necessity to think another relation to the work than that of hermeneutics for which the work has always, on principle, a meaning (preferably unambiguous) to deliver, and so on. But what we hope, above all, is to examine literary, musical, and graphic works directly in order to test Adorno’s thesis on art in our own criticism of art, as opposed to rehearsing an academic analysis of Adorno’s own views of art, however important this may still be.

The propositions of talks in French, German, English or Spanish (include a title and a summary of 15-20 lines) should be sent by October 1st 2016 to Christophe David (Christophe.t.david@wanadoo.fr <mailto:Christophe.t.david@wanadoo.fr>) and Frédéric Monvoisin (Frederic.monvoisin@g-

mail.com <mailto:Frederic.monvoisin@gmail.com>). Please add a 5 to 6-line notice with your full name, your academic affiliation if any, and your main articles or books. Your talk should not exceed 25 minutes and should be delivered in French or English.

Reference:

CFP: On Complexity (Rennes, 2 Dec 16). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 19, 2016 (accessed Nov 9, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/13728>.