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# Can art become theoretical?

Negative dialectical notes on the critique of art-science

## Towards a critique of art-science

Art-science, as its name suggests, combines art with science. The idea of combining art and science raises the question whether the outcome, art-scientific works, can succeed against a standard properly belonging to them. In other words: can there be such a thing as an art-scientific work, or do such works merely belong to either art or science while superficially seeming to belong to the other sphere as well? The latter option would be an unpromising result for art-science, but the former requires a *critique* in the Kantian sense of the term: an analysis and justification of art-science's conditions of possibility, which allows us to distinguish between successful and unsuccessful works in terms of norms that are inherent to art-scientific practice.

Surprisingly perhaps, these concerns overlap with a chief point of contention as regards Adorno's mature thinking, in particular his *Aesthetic Theory* ([1970] 2002): whether or not it is coherent to believe that knowledge can have an aesthetic form. Usually, this question is put as Rüdiger Bubner did: "Can theory become aesthetic?" (1980). In other words, can we do philosophy in an aesthetic way?

While Bubner's essay is the *locus classicus* of a negative answer to these questions,<sup>1</sup> most commentators have offered more sympathetic interpretations that belong to either of two alternatives helpfully distinguished by Max Pensky (2021, 37–38): those that argue that the truth of art cannot be discursive in any way (Menke [1988] 1998; Richter 2006), and those that argue that modern art retains a "rational core" (Pensky 2021, 37; see also Jameson 1990; Hulatt 2016) that can be meaningfully disclosed and carry out a critical function through this disclosure. It is the latter kind to which Pensky also commits himself.

As mentioned, these interpretations have usually considered whether or not it is possible to do philosophy in an aesthetic way, and they have taken Adorno's own philosophy as the prime example of an attempt at this. No doubt this is helpful for those wishing to understand Adorno's notoriously difficult style of writing. But it has had the side effect of inheriting Adorno's rather myopic focus on high modernist art, likewise notorious. This essay is motivated by the thought that Adorno's reflections are useful for understanding contemporary art as well, and the burgeoning paradigm of art-science represents a welcome occasion to ask the reverse question: can art become the-

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Richter even calls Bubner the "unofficial representative" for readers bothered by Adorno's introduction of aesthetic methods in his philosophy (Richter 2006, 121).

oretical? Can art appropriate the methods of philosophy? The first aim of this essay is, accordingly, to consider how Adorno's negative dialectic of philosophy and art might illuminate the field of art-science, how its works might express *sui generis* truths. In turn, an examination of how the aestheticisation theme in Adorno might be appropriated for the business of art-science critique, might tell us something about the relationship between artistic content and philosophical interpretation, beauty and truth, in Adorno. In this way, indirectly and tentatively, to be sure, I hope to say something on behalf of those interpretations that insist on the ultimate difference of aesthetic and philosophical truth. That is the second aim of this essay.

I pursue these aims in four steps. First, I reiterate Bubner's critique and show how it culminates in a dilemma the horns of which correspond to the two different ways of conceptualising aesthetic truth that Pensky discerns. Either the truth of art remains different in kind from the discursive truth of philosophy, in which case, Bubner argues, the gap between theory and art must first be closed by dogmatically positing their connection. Or the truth of art follows from some kind of rational structure that art itself retains. But in this case, Bubner asks what remains of the aesthetic worth of a work that is not also available in discursive theoretical fashion. Second, since Pensky aligns himself with the second of these options, I consider it next and argue that it cannot deal with Bubner's objection without abandoning the claim that art retains a functional discursive core. Instead, I suggest that Pensky's conceptualisation of aesthetic truth as natural-historical interpretation is best understood as a form of 'essayism', a way of striving to make sense of an artwork according to conditions that are not themselves fully aesthetic.

While this raises difficult questions as regards the truth content of autonomous art, questions I cannot adequately deal with here, it also presents an opportunity for thinking the *sui generis* status of art-science. Adorno's conception of the essay, a hybrid between art and science, becomes an insightful model for thinking about works that strive to combine the two. To illustrate this, I provide an art-critical commentary of an art-scientific work, Patricia Kaersenhout's "Of Palimpsests and Erasure" (2021), to show that it itself qualifies as a critical commentary on a scientific treatise: Maria Sibylla Merian's *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (1705). In assuming for itself the essayistic aim of critical commentary, however, I show that the work's success hinges on foreclosing a purely aesthetic experience of it. Finally, section four concludes my essay by taking on the first horn of Bubner's dilemma: must my account dogmatically posit a connection between a given work's aesthetic aspects and the critical-theoretical interpretation we offer of it? I hope to make the case that this connection can also be drawn non-dogmatically, in accordance with the sceptical way of life of which the essay form was born.

This final point is also intended to shed some light on the connection that these reflections bear to philosophical anthropology. Though none of his works are chiefly concerned with the paradigm, Adorno nevertheless often touched upon a lot of the questions that define the thought of Hans Jonas, Arnold Gehlen, and especially Helmut Plessner (Edinger 2022). Specifically, to conceive of our aesthetic interactions

as something fundamentally different from scientific truth-seeking and social criticism, also means to conceive of human beings' nature as neither fully biological, nor fully social/cultural (see Fischer 2014 on Plessner; and Menke 2012; 2014, on Adorno).

## 1 Bubner's dilemma

Bubner accuses Adorno of concealing a tension that is inevitably generated by the attempt to think together aesthetic content and truth content. Adorno's idea is that art has an aesthetic contribution that fulfils a philosophical promise, something that philosophical theory strives for but cannot provide by means of its own. If that is the case, however, is not the connection that is thereby drawn between art and philosophy one of instrumentalisation? Does not philosophy thereby make use of art as an instrument for its own purposes?

As an instrument is subordinated to an end, by no means may art be instrumentalised in relation to philosophy; for art is only fit to put philosophy's ultimate riddles into words because it is inexchangeably coeval with it.<sup>2</sup> (Bubner 1980, 119)

But how else to conceive of art's function in this regard? Does not the very idea of an artistic function contradict art's dignity as an autonomous sphere? The charge presses particularly hard against Adorno. For the reason why he turned to art, was to conceptualise a way of understanding that precisely does not instrumentalise its object. For Adorno, (modern, Western) art's truth content represents a critique of (modern, Western) reason, of the discursive practices of representing meaning that (harmfully) ennobles subjects as dominators of nature (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 2002). If, however, artworks are capable of such a critique of instrumental reason only when we instrumentalise *them*, then the critique undermines itself.

Now, there are arguments Adorno can and does offer to account for a non-instrumentalising understanding of artworks. Indeed, this is part of the reason why Adorno examines *modern* art in particular; because it is in the modern age that art acquires its autonomy by continuously questioning the conventional standards of meaning by which we impose a sense on artworks. But Bubner argues that whatever shape such non-instrumentalising understanding takes, the point is clearly not that artworks acquire this character as a matter of course. Rather, Adorno's aim is at least partly prescriptive: to find modern art's proper character in order to be capable of distinguishing good, progressive works, from regressive or ideological ones (Bubner 1980, 120). Indeed, this is, after all, the aim of critique: to find standards that are immanent to the object of

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<sup>2</sup> I have tried to seek out English translations of all German texts quoted in this article. Where no such translation seems to exist, as in the case of Bubner's essay, I have translated the relevant passages myself. In rare cases, I have amended the translation that exist, in those cases, I have indicated my amendments as such.

critique, by which one might then judge it properly. And so, artworks require philosophical interpretation and criticism, before their truth content is ‘unlocked’.

The truth content of artworks is the objective solution of the enigma posed by each and everyone. By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection. This alone is the justification of aesthetics. Although no artwork can be reduced to rationalistic determinations, as is the case with what art judges, each artwork through the neediness implicit in its enigmaticalness nevertheless turns toward interpretative reason. (Adorno [1970] 2002, 127–28)

Now, however, Bubner argues that the ineliminable role of the critical interpreter, the necessity of (re-)constructing the work’s social or practical significance, implies that there has to be an intermediating link that is first posited by the critic between society and its discursive practices on the one hand, and the autonomous work on the other:

This restoration of the critical task, even in the face of modernity, shows that actually the law of form of modern art production is merely cited to cover up a postulate that the critical aesthetician has themselves erected. (Bubner 1980, 121)

On the basis of what, however, can the critic close the gap between art and social practices, if a bridge between those two does not follow from artworks themselves or the social practices they critique? It can only be posited as a *theoretical* construct, a discursive norm of critique. And such a theoretical norm would then again turn out to be imposed on artworks to evaluate their use as instruments for a philosophical purpose. In Adorno’s case, this is a norm of negativity; insisting that art should escape the social categories that allow us to assign meaning to a thing, means conceiving of an artwork as understandable only in relation to what it is not. Art, as goes the famous phrase, is “the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it” (Adorno [1970] 2002, 8). However, as Bubner points out and as the quote above (Adorno [1970] 2002, 127–28) makes clear, this status must then first be ascribed to art philosophically.

Philosophy adds what is not contained in the innocent works as such, indeed could not be contained within them: their meaning as a negation of what exists. (Bubner 1980, 122)

According to Bubner, the necessity for interpretation indicates that artworks are “innocent”, or: devoid of social content. This content comes to them only later, as part of the critical interpretation of the philosophical aesthetician. It is the aesthetician’s perspective, a theoretical or discursive one, that has to draw the connection. “Here, without admitting it, pure theory reigns” (Bubner 1980, 123). If that is the case, however, then the truth content we get from art, and which permits us the function of the critique of domination, is there *in virtue of a theoretical supposition alone*, indicating that theory has not become aesthetic after all. Consider this the first horn of what I am calling Bubner’s dilemma.

The obvious response to this is to argue that artworks are not innocent in the way that Bubner seems to suppose. If, rather, artworks somehow retain the rational struc-

tures that characterise the societies out of which artworks also arise, then philosophical interpretation may be construed as showing how they, the artworks themselves, intervene critically in those societal structures of reason. While this critical function is not something that artworks exercise as a matter of course, the kind of philosophical interpretation that is necessary for it to happen, could then be understood as disclosing the truth that is proper to an artwork itself, rather than an instrumentalising imposition of a philosophical function.

I examine this response in more detail in the next section. Here, I end by pointing out that this response incurs another objection from Bubner, the second horn of the dilemma. Since Adorno aims to analyse a *kind* of truth content, i. e. something that artworks have on some level of generality, his analysis cannot ultimately be one of the unique functioning of individual works. If, however, this part falls out of the analysis, then the kind of critique that is possible according to it, does not have anything necessarily to do with the concrete aesthetic experience of an individual artwork.

As the works ultimately stand in the service of theory, to produce those cognitions that the theory demands from them, the result is already decided before the encounter with the concrete work. (Bubner 1980, 129)

According to this objection, even if the aesthetic critique of reason occurs because of a truth found in the works themselves, still what we find is a critique that is already decided upon beforehand, by the account of philosophical interpretation that tells us how to understand a work. Even if, as we shall see, there is a role allocated for individual experiences of works, it is still an open question whether the particular content of a work so experienced can play a decisive role in shaping the truth of a work. Can the response against Bubner be refined to deal with this objection?

## 2 Natural history and philosophical interpretation

According to Pensky, Adorno's conception of philosophical interpretation becomes the key to understanding how an artwork can have a truth content. Pensky derives this conception from an early essay by Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History" ([1932] 1984). The ostensible goal of the essay is a critical intervention in the ontological turn made by some phenomenologists after Husserl in order to understand the human condition. However, as an early work in which Adorno at the same time works through his intellectual inheritance from both Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin, the essay can also be read as programmatic for Adorno's own thinking. This is, in fact, how Pensky proposes to read the essay: as "a promissory note for the kind of philosophical interpretation whose contact with the artwork was meant to release truth content" (2021, 24).

As mentioned, "The Idea of Natural History" opens with a critique of phenomenology after Husserl, or to use Adorno's term: neo-ontology. Specifically, Adorno targets

Max Scheler ([1932] 1984, 112–14) and Martin Heidegger ([1932] 1984, 115–16).<sup>3</sup> While Adorno is sympathetic to the neo-ontology's attempts at moving beyond the dualism presupposed by the idealist philosophies of 19th century Germany, he nevertheless believes that it does not go far enough in trying to conceptualise how these two terms, nature and history, presuppose each other.

In Adorno's view, the idealists<sup>4</sup> worked with an abstract opposition between the natural and the historical that needs to be overcome. According to this abstract opposition, the natural is characterised by repetition, knowing no progress or novelty and so ultimately no meaning. The domain of history is, on the other hand, one of meaningful human actions and reactions that together represent a goal-directed process where successive events build upon one another in a reasonable manner. History, in other words, is a timeline of human progress.

The abstract opposition is unsatisfactory to Adorno, and not merely because the times (the essay was first published in 1932) did not lend themselves any longer to unqualified optimism about the course of history. Beyond that, it is also the conception of nature as a sphere of utter meaningless material, the neutral backdrop for human affairs as it were, that must have provoked Adorno's critical instinct. And more comprehensively, one might say that Adorno protests the abstractness of the opposition between these two terms because it does not admit of a fine-grained perspective on either. Adorno's project, consequently, becomes to show how, on the one hand, the late capitalist era displays a kind of natural repetitiveness that empties human events of their meaning, while on the other, the objective world around us is also subject to historical contingency (Buchholz 1994, 62; Pensky 2021, 28). Another world is possible, in other words.

With this aim of the finer grain in mind, Adorno is actually sympathetic to the neo-ontology's attempt to think "the insuperable interwovenness of natural and historical elements" ([1932] 1984, 117). Yet he is also sharply critical of the way in which neo-ontology has conceptualised this interwovenness, i. e. as arising out of the existential finitude of human knowing:

History itself [...] has become the basic ontological structure. At the same time, historical [thinking] itself appears to have undergone a fundamental reversal. It is reduced to a philosophically based structure of historicity as a fundamental quality of [human *Dasein*]. (Adorno [1932] 1984, 114, translation amended)

The reference to *Dasein* makes clear that Adorno is targeting Heidegger specifically. He faults Heidegger for failing to paint an adequate picture of the interrelatedness of na-

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<sup>3</sup> In addition, Max Pensky mentions that Adorno is also looking to propose an alternative to the positivist (anti-)metaphysics of the Vienna Circle (2021, 28), and while that may be true it does not appear to be an express aim in this specific essay.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor proposes that Adorno has in mind the Neo-Kantians. See the translator's note in the English translation of the essay (Adorno [1932] 1984, 112n2).

ture and history by simply imploding the two terms so that, ultimately, they become useless as analytical tools. History becomes historicity, an ontological baseline, or: the way in which we understand *all* objective being in general. This, however, is not the same as concrete historical consciousness, because such a general framework could be of no help understanding any actual historical event, such as, for instance, the French Revolution (the example used by Adorno [1932] 1984, 114).

While Heidegger could, perhaps, apply the notion of historicity to the French Revolution, whatever he could get from that would not be enough to show how its occurrence shaped the categories we use to understand it, since those categories are presented as arising out of human *Dasein* as such. But if historicity provides no actual understanding of a concrete event like the French Revolution, then the same holds for our understanding of our contemporary situation as a concrete moment in human history (beyond, of course, those same general observations).

Adorno's objection is therefore that Heidegger is unable to make sense of what makes something particular, distinct, or unique. And fittingly, Adorno then moves on to aesthetic philosophy, specifically that of Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin (Adorno [1932] 1984, 117), to find a form of philosophical interpretation that could accomplish this. Such a form of interpretation would be natural-historical for accomplishing the paradoxical feat of applying objective categories (those that are meant to pick out kinds of some degree of generality) in order to make sense of something in its uniqueness and contingency (it not being determined entirely by the categories we apply to it).

From Lukács, Adorno borrows the concept of a reified 'second nature', a "world of convention" or: a structured whole of human relations as represented in (modern) novels (Adorno [1932] 1984, 117–18). Since the novel strips this world of convention from the meaning we attach to it in the course of our participation in it, it appears "without diffraction through the lens of ideology" (Pensky 2021, 30). What remains is a world structured by the commodity form, i.e. where things have meaning merely in terms of their general usage and so are inherently interchangeable, without individual meaning. Hence the term 'second nature': the world of convention turns out to be just as devoid of meaning as the (first-)natural world disclosed by the natural sciences (Adorno [1932] 1984, 118).

Lukács' theory of the novel is helpful in permitting an understanding of our social world as essentially meaningless. But the second part of the task of natural history is to afford an understanding of this meaningless world as a unique historical event, as something that is not entirely determined by the general categories we nevertheless wield in trying to make sense of it. That would, namely, create room for critique: the possibility that things need not be understood in this manner. For this, Adorno turns to Walter Benjamin's analysis of *transience* in the German *Trauerspiel* (Adorno [1932] 1984, 119).

The addition of the aspect of transience to the natural-historical perspective, is important according to Pensky, because it provides Adorno with the key to making sense of how an artwork expresses an aesthetic truth, something knowable that can be gained only aesthetically. According to Lukács' theory of the novel, art communicates

the truth of the commodified world of human affairs. But for all their style, novels do not have the prerogative to expressing this. A Marxian scientific analysis, after all, aspires to do the same. What makes the novelistic presentation of such a truth, then, a “cognitive gain” (Pensky 2021, 31)?

It is because of its concrete, yet ungraspable appearance that an artwork “suspends empirical reality” [Adorno ([1970] 2002), p. 135; see also p. 138]. In other words, as it confronts us in an actual encounter with something real that refuses to be known empirically, artworks allow for a momentary suspension of the categories we ordinarily wield to assign a stable meaning to it. And so it is precisely the concrete instance of having an aesthetic experience of transience that allows us to see, for a brief moment, the inadequacy of those categories. As Pensky argues, this would count as a fleeting moment of enlightenment:

As an object of contemplation, the transient thing is recuperated as meaningful, but only insofar as its meaning is its utter incapacity to acquire and hold meaning. It points beyond itself, but only by vanishing under the melancholy gaze of philosophical interpretation. (Pensky 2021, 31–32)

The transience of artworks is their truth content: a challenge to our cognitive capacities and categories for understanding. The transient object offers itself to our senses as an apparently meaningful object, while at the same time escaping any definitive ascription of a characteristic that would actually allow us to speak of its meaning in reasonable terms. In this way, the meaning of a transient thing is exactly its meaninglessness. And, obviously, a meaning such as this cannot but be experienced through the interpretation of a transient thing. Nothing but the concrete experience of a meaning that slips through our fingers even as we try to grasp it, could help in acquiring a paradoxical understanding of the meaning of meaninglessness.

To conclude this section on the natural-historical interpretation of artistic truth, two questions remain: how does this qualify as a response that incurs the second horn of Bubner’s dilemma? And does it actually dispense with Bubner’s objection? As regards the first question, since the philosophical interpretation of an artwork’s transience, is what anchors artistic truth to an individual experience of a work, Pensky argues (2021, 38) that this provides at least modest support for the idea that artworks themselves can be critical in virtue of retaining a “rational core” (2021, 37). He says:

[Adorno] sees transience as a discursive treatment of material objects that releases them from the ideological appearance of reconciliation and discloses them as they would appear without ideology. That is a cognitive gain, and one still falling under the work of the concept. (Pensky 2021, 33)

We may therefore put the second of Bubner’s objections to Pensky: does natural-historical interpretation actually succeed in making space for the individual experience of a work, or is its truth already decided upon before the actual encounter with the work? I believe the answer is: yes and no.

Yes, the truth content disclosed through natural history could not be disclosed but for an actual encounter with an artwork that challenges the categories for making



sense of the objective world. Meaninglessness cannot be adequately represented simply through the activities of the knowing subject, the latter has to be confronted by an object that while it appears meaningful, nevertheless thwarts the subject's efforts at making sense of it. This, I believe, is what the focus on art's transience is meant to capture.

But also no. If the endpoint of natural-historical interpretation, the meaning of meaninglessness, can already be defined before an actual encounter with the works subject to such interpretation, then the content of a particular work is ultimately immaterial to what its truth content is. As Christoph Menke puts it (affirmingly, and so *pace* Pensky):

[...] it is not the contents but the effects, consequences, or repercussions of art that are the foundations of this critique. (Menke [1988] 1998, xiii)

Indeed, how could it be otherwise: a philosophical analysis of the truth content of art *qua* art will have to confine itself to features that art has as such, and not simply those which only certain works have in virtue of their specific content. But then this is precisely Bubner's point: any philosophical analysis will have to abstract away from the individuality and concreteness of aesthetic experiences of particular works. Philosophical analysis isolates a discursive functioning that, for all that, can also be explicated without recourse to artworks.

Is there a way of dealing with this objection? I believe there is, by emphasising that Adorno's account of philosophical interpretation, as he explicitly makes clear in the introduction to "The Idea of Natural History", is *essayistic*:

[...] what I have to say will remain on the level of an essay; it is no more than an attempt to take up and further develop the problems of the so-called Frankfurt discussion. (Adorno [1932] 1984, 111)

Of course, this remark might simply be Adorno expressing intellectual humility. But the reference to the essay form also seems to precipitate Adorno's seminal "The Essay as Form" (1991), frequently taken as exemplifying Adorno's own approach to philosophy. Because Adorno takes the essay to assume a "hybrid" (1991, 3) form that freely moves between the domains of science and art (1991, 4), the "Essay"-essay is a key to Adorno's own *Aesthetic Theory*. Indeed, if we follow Pensky in reading the idea of natural history as "a promissory note" for Adorno's account of philosophical interpretation, the connection to "The Essay as Form" becomes undeniable.

I stress Adorno's essayism because it becomes especially helpful in making sense of art-science, as I will make clear in the next section. Besides that, however, conceiving of Adorno's remarks on philosophical interpretation as themselves essayistic, allows us to deal with Bubner's objection. Bubner's worry is that Adorno is simply providing a standard of truth independent of the artworks under consideration. But the essayism inherent to Adorno's approach means that its standards of truth are rather arbitrary from the theoretical standpoint (and not from the perspective of the essay's subject matter):

[The essay] starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about; it says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say. Hence it is classified a trivial endeavour. (Adorno 1991, 4)

So when Adorno sets himself the task to analyse the works of high modernism, what he ends up with is a critical commentary on philosophical theorising from the perspective of those works, rather than a philosophical analysis of an aesthetic critique of reason of art *sub specie aeternitatis*. In a way, then, essays set their own standards, and while that may remind us of artworks themselves, they are not to be simply identified with them:

In this, the essay has something like an aesthetic autonomy that is easily accused of being simply derived from art, although it is distinguished from art by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance. (Adorno 1991, 5)

Thus, the truth of an essayistic interpretation goes beyond the transience we find in artworks themselves. In fact, an essayistic interpretation may identify that transience and seek to turn it into something else, something that could fulfil a discursive function:

The essay [...] does not try to seek the eternal in the transient and distill it out; it tries to render the transient eternal. (Adorno 1991, 11)

In other words, the truths uncovered by the essay are not those that we could rediscover in all works throughout history. Instead, they are the generalised truths that follow from a particular subset of those works, which are offered up as a critical commentary on society and its ideologies. At the same time, and as the quote above also makes clear, this critical commentary is not already present within the artwork and consequently unlocked or distilled by philosophical interpretation, it is a function of philosophical interpretation itself to eternalise what is transient within the works, or: to construct a discursive, stable meaning on the basis of the fleeting, transient meaninglessness of a work's aesthetic content. Thus, even while accepting Pensky's proposal for natural-historical interpretation, I nevertheless disagree with his assessment (tentative, to be sure) that natural history lends credence to the idea that art's truth content is present within art itself. After all, "Nothing can be interpreted out of something that is not interpreted into it at the same time" (Adorno 1991, 4; see also Adorno [1970] 2002, 130–31).

### 3 Essayistic interpretation: Patricia Kaersenhout's "Of Palimpsests and Erasure" (2021)

So far I have laid out Bubner's dilemma and examined Pensky's account of artistic truth as unlocked by natural history. Pensky, as we saw, opts for the second horn of

Bubner's dilemma, suggesting that art's truth is present within works themselves as their transience. In so doing, Pensky incurs Bubner's objection that such truth, for being describable while abstracting from the concrete content of individual works, is not an *aesthetic* truth that artworks have *qua* artworks. I have suggested that the most straightforward way of dealing with this objection, the one that seems to me truest to Adorno's own project, is to stress Adorno's essayism. Doing so, however, leads us to opt for the first, rather than the second horn of Bubner's dilemma: philosophical interpretation constructs, rather than distils its truth.

At first blush, however, this just seems to generate more problems for the truth-content of art itself: if such truth is 'interpreted into' the works, then it does not at all seem to answer Bubner's objection that theory here simply imposes its needs on works that are, inherently, free from critical content themselves. Aside from this problem, however, Adorno's essayism also becomes an especially opportune lens for examining art-scientific works. As these works aspire to move beyond the traditional aims of (mono-)disciplinary artworks (or scientific treatises, for that matter), they raise the question with which I started this essay: can such works be appreciated and/or interpreted *qua* art-scientific works, or do they merely reduce to works that belong to one discipline while superficially seeming to belong to the other as well?

While initially, the idea of natural-historical interpretation according to Pensky held promise for aspiring to disclose a discursive, rational core that artworks themselves already have, I have suggested that this account fails to adequately deal with Bubner's second objection. My further suggestion is then to classify art-scientific works as themselves essayistic, that is to say: they would have to be considered as of a hybrid form that freely moves from the artistic to the scientific and back again. In this way art-science would indeed be the same kind of project that Adorno himself also pursued, but then taken up from the other side as it were, not by aestheticising theory, but by turning art into theory. I believe to have found at least one such work, which I examine critically in this section in order to substantiate my take on essayistic, rather than artistic truth. Then, in the final section, I suggest the outlines of a solution to Bubner's first objection.

Kaersenhout's series of illustrations "Of Palimpsest and Erasure" (2021) are a commentary on Maria Sibylla Merian's *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (1705), a historically significant work of entomology that is fascinating in its own right. For this book, Merian travelled to Suriname, where she catalogued and classified the plants and insects indigenous to the region. The work's historical significance derives not only from the fact that it was written by a woman during a time when scientific careers were usually open only to men. Besides this, the high level of attention to detail paid by Merian, ensured that her illustrations were highly accurate, therefore highly useful to experts without direct access to physical specimens. Moreover, the work presented for many in Western Europe a first occasion to learn about plants and creatures from South America.

Finally, Merian is also sometimes remembered as a critic denouncing the cruelties that the Dutch colonisers inflicted upon enslaved people in Suriname. For instance,

when describing the poisonous peacock flower, she notes: “The Indians, who are not treated well by their Dutch masters, use it to abort their children, because they do not want them to become slaves too” (quoted in Burgering 2021). This chilling passage does make clear the grim reality of chattel slavery as practised by the Dutch, imposing such cruelty on the enslaved that the latter are driven to abortion because they cannot bear the thought of passing such a life on to their children. But those who would see an abolitionist in Merian conveniently forget that she participated in this practice herself, by forcing enslaved people to gather plants for her, appropriating their knowledge of plants and insects, as well as by enslaving an indigenous woman and kidnapping her to Amsterdam as her servant, most likely to help with her research. Thus, her participation in the system of slavery is how she was able to gather knowledge of the grim uses of the peacock flower in the first place, making her criticism of the cruelty of the Dutch slave masters also rather out of place.

This is where Kaersenhout’s illustrations intervene. They are digital prints of the *Metamorphosis*, opened up to show an illustration on the left page. Around the illustration, letters printed on a page underneath are very vaguely visible shining through the thin sheet of paper. Kaersenhout, however, has blotted out the illustrations themselves with a bright monochrome colour, blue in the case of the peacock flower.

I ‘disturbed’ the colored images by coloring them predominantly in monochrome to take away their sweetness. And to show that the system that Mary was a part of was a system of inequality, violence, exploitation and oppression. The colors red, yellow, black and white symbolize the colors of the different peoples. Green and blue symbolize the Earth and water, which we all need to be able to live and to which every person is entitled. (Kaersenhout 2021)

The right page shows what would be the back of the left page. Here, it is the illustration that appears to shine through the thin paper. On this page, the illustration is effectively nothing more than a silhouette. Superimposed on this silhouette, there appear other ghostly figures: images of the indigenous and African women enslaved by the Dutch and then shamelessly used by Merian for her own purposes. In the case of the peacock flower, we see a woman carrying a child, her own child it must be. Knowing the use to which the peacock flower was put, we understand that we are witnessing a bond that never was, a mother and child that, in Kaersenhout’s work and there alone, were spared the terrible fate that they suffered in actual fact.

Kaersenhout’s illustrations combine artistic and scientific methods to achieve aesthetic as well as theoretical aims. As regards the methods, there is, first of all, the title styled to resemble an old-fashioned scientific treatise like the *Metamorphosis* itself. There is the fact that Kaersenhout first consulted, and then used the digitised copy of the *Metamorphosis* provided by Göttingen’s university library. This is, incidentally, where Kaersenhout noticed that Merian’s illustrations shone through to back of the page, creating a ghostly presence that becomes a central motif in “Of Palimpsests and Erasure”:

It is this twilight, this vague image that caught my attention and that I saw as a metaphor for the black women and women of color who have been “dissolved” in history, as it were. (Kaersenhout 2021)

And there is the fact that Kaersenhout opted to superimpose the images of the enslaved and/or indigenous women upon the faded illustration, thereby “creating a visual manifestation of a palimpsest” (Kaersenhout 2021). A palimpsest is a document, often a piece of parchment, that has had its original text erased either by scraping or washing off the ink. Such erasing techniques typically left a lot of traces that become more pronounced over time, enabling scholars to decipher the original text by a variety of methods. By representing her subject matter in this way, Kaersenhout seems to give us an important hint regarding the kind of attitude she imagines for the audience: researching, reconstructing, almost, I am tempted to say, scientific.

That quasi-scientific attitude is also encouraged by one of the aims of “Of Palimpsests and Erasure” made explicit by Kaersenhout in her artist’s statement, but already implicitly gestured at by the second part of her title: undoing the erasure of black women from the history of the *Metamorphosis*.

The bodies of the women ‘disrupt’, as it were, a dominant history and thereby at the same time claim a place in a history that has actively wiped them out or *Erased*. When the viewer views the works from a one-sided hierarchical perspective, the work will not unfold. (Kaersenhout 2021)

Clearly then, Kaersenhout does not want to constrain herself merely to the aesthetic realm; she also wants to accomplish the more academic aim of retelling the history of the *Metamorphosis*. Those who were erased from history, are allowed to reappear in Kaersenhout’s palimpsests, if and only if, Kaersenhout adds, the viewer relinquishes a one-sided hierarchical perspective.

That Kaersenhout has such aims and gives her audience such concrete instructions for viewing the work, may be enough to register the fact that her artwork departs decisively from such high modernist works that Adorno himself was partial to. Yet interestingly, “Of Palimpsests and Erasure” is characterised by strikingly natural-historical motifs. The work interweaves nature and history in a way that is grist to the mill of natural-historical interpretation. Quite literally, the juxtaposition of Merian’s plant illustrations with the enslaved women that she exploited, works to historicise Merian’s natural scientific drawings by pointing out the brutal preconditions that allowed Merian to write this book. But also, and more in line with Adorno’s more technical glosses of these terms, there is a sense in which “Of Palimpsests and Erasure” shows, first, the emptying out of a concrete historical meaning; Merian’s place in the history of science as an Enlightened female scientist supposedly denouncing the brutality of slavery. Second, the work also renders this ‘natural’ state of affairs fluid, thematising its historical contingency, or: the fact that these women did not need to suffer the fate that did befall them. This happens quite vividly in the case of the peacock flower illustration, where mother and child appear as if from an alternate history in which the mother never suffered the violence that drove her to abort her child. Moreover, through the symbolism

that Kaersenhout attaches to the colours that blot out Merian's illustrations, the work also hints at a different kind of nature; one of racial equality where people would live, much like the plants from the *Metamorphosis*, in harmony, sharing the Earth and water that they all require for subsistence.

Yet one of Kaersenhout's instructions puzzles me: her insistence, cited above, that we should not view the work from a "one-sided hierarchical perspective". For the study of actual palimpsests, after all, a hierarchical perspective remains indispensable, a fact that can already be understood from the distinction that scholars make between a palimpsest's *scriptio inferior* and its *scriptio superior*; or: the 'lower' text that has been erased to make room for the 'higher' text. Of course, it is the scholar's aim to overcome that hierarchy, as it is Kaersenhout's aim to undo the erasure of the enslaved women. But doing this does not mean abolishing the hierarchical *perspective*, neither in the case of the scholarly study of palimpsests nor in Kaersenhout's illustrations. In a way, that hierarchy is simply reversed, as the superior layer becomes inferior, an obstacle to our attending to the inferior layer that now becomes superior.

Now, there is one way in which perceptual hierarchies can be bracketed, at least momentarily: through aesthetic perceiving. Part of what we do, when we perceive aesthetically, is to suspend the categories of meaning that we use to give what we perceive a stable meaning. Such a suspension remains limited because it is a way of perceiving that cannot be sustained. Indeed, this is why Adorno can claim that art's transience is the aesthetic manifestation of its truth: it is only because an artwork's truth content appears in an instant, disappearing already in the moment of its appearance, that Adorno can claim that such truth is tied to the particular, concrete aesthetic experience of the work.

My own aesthetic experience of the work started by focusing my attention on the scarcely visible bits of printed text that surrounded the ghostly figures of the enslaved women. I was anxious to know what Merian had written about the plants she studied, until I realised that I was doing the exact opposite of what Kaersenhout instructed me to: erasing, if only from my own personal attention, the presence of enslaved women, in order to focus on the abstracted text alone. I was making myself blind to the violent prehistory of that text. In this way, I found myself coming to a realisation that could only happen in the concrete individual confrontation with a work that actually thematised the erasure of black people from white historical consciousness. The vivid awareness of, momentarily, overcoming my blindness would not be available by, for instance, simply reading about the work. Imagining to overcome one's blindness, after all, is not the same as actually yet fleetingly achieving it.

This much seems in complete accord with Pensky's account of natural-historical interpretation: an encounter with the work's transience that is capable of confronting the viewer with the inadequacy of their own framework for making sense of the work. Now, however, I must point out again that Kaersenhout wants to do more than bring about a realisation of my (and others') white ignorance. "Of Palimpsests and Erasure", as said, also aims to establish the rightful place of the women who were erased from history. Kaersenhout's instruction, that this is only accomplished by the viewer

relinquishing a one-sided hierarchical perspective, continues to puzzle me in this respect. For it seems to me that the mere transient moment in which that hierarchy is abolished aesthetically, will not suffice to establish any rightful claim to belong to a history. When, in other words, Kaersenhout appropriates for her art the essayistic goal of itself providing a critical commentary on Merian's *Metamorphosis*, the ability to actually speak critically hinges on a closure of the aesthetic moment in favour of (re-)establishing a hierarchy of attention that allows us to see the wrongness of enslaving another for the goal of reproducing their knowledge scientifically.

## 4 Responding to Bubner's objection

Conceiving of "Of Palimpsests and Erasure" as itself essayistic, a critical commentary on its own subject matter, allows us to reconstruct its truth content. This, however, would be "a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance" (Adorno 1991, 5), setting it apart from the kind of truth aspired to by high modernist works. Art, in other words, can become theoretical only by relinquishing, or at least moderating its claim to a purely aesthetic efficacy. This, I believe, is a promising result for the paradigm of art-science: its works turn out to have a *sui generis* existence as essays that are neither fully artistic, nor fully scientific. On the other hand, however, I take it that this is not at all a satisfying conclusion for at least some commentators on Adorno's aesthetic philosophy, i.e. those who insist on the discursive core of artworks themselves. Like Bubner, they might be inclined to press me on the fact that I am insisting on the difference between artworks and the truth claims made explicit in their interpretation. That, it might be said, may be a happy result for art-science, but only at great cost to the truth claims of more conventional fine arts. Am I here conceding too much to Bubner, having to relinquish any notion of aesthetic truth proper?

A full response will have to be deferred. But I believe I can at least give its outlines on the basis of examining the relation between aesthetic and interpretative aspects of the art-scientific work. Whereas conventional artworks, or at least those thematised by Adorno, "await their interpretation" ([1970] 2002, 128), art-scientific works seek to appropriate at least part of the interpretative task for themselves. In so doing, their full meaning depends on a closure of the aesthetic moment in favour of more theoretical, or even socio-political and/or ethical considerations (incidentally, this would also be a good way of differentiating art-scientific works from conventional artworks). Thus, nothing I have said in this essay stands in the way of a pluralist theory of artworks. This would be a first step of the response.

Secondly, what I have hoped to sketch is a negative-dialectical relationship between aesthetic and interpretative moments. It is not so much, therefore, that art-science presupposes an entirely different conception of the aesthetic, but rather simply that it is not confined to the aesthetic truth that one might experience from it. And this also means that the interpretative task that art-scientific works undertake for themselves can be of the same kind as the interpretation of, say, Marcel Proust's *In*

*search of lost time*. The question is then simply: can we relate interpretation and aesthetic efficacy without dogmatically insisting on the connection?

Here too, I want to suggest in conclusion, the essay form is instructive. After all, the genre's invention at the hands of Michel de Montaigne, was a function of the latter's stern opposition to dogmatising, his scepticism in fact:

I cannot secure [*asseurer*] my subject. It goes cloudy and shaky, as of a natural drunkenness. I take it as it is, in the instant that I consider it. I do not paint its being, I paint its passing: not from one age to another, or as the people say, from seven to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute. It is necessary to adapt my history to the hour. [...] So I may perhaps contradict myself, but the truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict. If my soul could get a foothold, I would not essay, but resolve myself [*je ne m'essaierois pas, je me resoudrois*]. (Montaigne [1588] 1965, 805)

Because Montaigne could not bring himself to posit anything dogmatically, not even the results of introspections that René Descartes was happy to regard as absolutely certain, there is nothing left but 'essaying' oneself. The picture that emerges here, and which I believe Adorno shares, is of our human nature as something that always remains, at least to an extent, resistant to discursive theorising. Between our first-natural biological life and our second-natural socio-cultural existence, there remains "a gap, and this gap will violate the unity of our knowledge of nature" (Adorno [1996] 2000, 101). Even so, it is because of this gap that one can first think what is human, "the place where nature and mind [*Geist*] divide and connect themselves" (Menke 2014, 1091).

For Adorno, humanity is then not defined purely by a particular account of flourishing, whether we understand it in either hard or soft naturalist terms (McDowell 1998), but rather through the way in which mind remains opposed to nature:

Mind develops from nature, not because it is contained within the latter as its possibility and hidden purpose. Rather the other way around: because nature is mind's other. (Menke 2014, 1094)

Thus, and in agreement with Plessner, Adorno can be construed as arguing for a "third way" (Fischer 2014), according to which our nature is not exhausted by either our biology or our social existence; neither nature nor history suffices to make out human existence. Moving from aesthetic anthropology to anthropological aesthetics (to adopt a conceptual pair from Fischer 2020), there is also an important contribution that a negative dialectical aesthetics might make to, in Fischer's reading, the aesthetics of both Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen. The latter two construe the paradigm of modern art as giving us varying "mindful [*geistigen*] possibilities of sense organisation that are principally offered up to eccentrically positioned lifeforms" (Fischer 2020, 85). Because we are aesthetic beings, we have the potential to experiment and thereby understand aesthetically. And while Adorno would agree that the aesthetic opens up a unique space for contemplating the world (and ourselves), he would nevertheless insist that this possibility is predicated on a prior suspension of theoretical and practical modes of understanding the world (Seel 2004, 10–11). The potential of the aesthetic is only there because and to the extent that our ordinary possibilities as practical,



knowing beings are momentarily cut off. This also indicates the dysfunctional status of the aesthetic as an autonomous sphere of knowledge, and any stable meaning we can get out of an artwork would necessarily not do it justice:

The truth of discursive knowledge is unshrouded, and thus discursive knowledge does not have it; the knowledge that is art, has truth, but as something incommensurable with art. (Adorno [1970] 2002, 126)

The only way to approach such truth, then, is to essay and to essay again: unceasingly making necessarily abortive attempts at expressing a truth about one's subject. And the willing to keep on doing this, follows from the understanding that the truths offered up are no absolute certainty, but an uncertain 'going along with appearances' that need not survive even the next hour. The dedication to the truth that is presupposed by essays, is therefore of a sceptical, not dogmatic nature. And though Montaigne wrote the above passage ages ago, it seems to me to have very well survived all those hours. For is this attitude of dedication to fleeting and transient experience not precisely the kind of high modernism that Adorno seems to have in mind?

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