

## CINEMA AND THE ARTS

Reassessing Theodor Adorno's Late Work<sup>1</sup>

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RAQUEL PATRIOTA DA SILVA\*

## ABSTRACT

This paper starts from a revision of Adorno's late work, in particular his remarks on cinema, published in the 1960s. Our hypothesis is that cinema acquires relevance in Adorno's late work not only through a shift in his position regarding that medium itself, but rather due to a broader transformation in his aesthetic position, encompassing a distinct view on the procedures of modern art and the complex relations between the different artistic genres.

**KEYWORDS:** *aesthetics; Critical Theory; cinema; Theodor W. Adorno; modern art*

## O cinema e as artes: reavaliando a obra tardia de Theodor Adorno

## RESUMO

Este artigo parte de um movimento de revisão da obra tardia de Adorno, em especial de suas considerações sobre o cinema, publicadas nos anos 1960. A hipótese é a de que o cinema adquire relevância na obra tardia de Adorno não só pela mudança na posição do autor quanto a esse meio, mas também em virtude de uma transformação em sua posição estética, abrangendo uma visão distinta sobre as práticas da arte moderna e as relações entre os gêneros artísticos.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *estética; Teoria Crítica; cinema; Theodor W. Adorno; arte moderna*

[\*] Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, RN, Brazil. E-mail: [raquel.patriota@gmail.com](mailto:raquel.patriota@gmail.com)

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In the last decades, the reception of Adorno's aesthetics has undergone relevant inflections. Although his writings on art have often been understood as a pessimistic, elitist theory, there are interpretative branches that have already questioned this view. Such a revision has proven to be especially fruitful regarding his late debates on cinema: going against the most common appraisals on Adorno's condemnation of this medium, there is a line of studies that indicates how the philosopher, in his late work, was aligned with the experiences of the European *cinéma d'auteur*.

An important reference in this tendency is undoubtedly the work of Miriam Hansen. In 1992, Hansen published in the *New German Critique* an introduction to Adorno's essay "Filmtransparent" — then translated into English by Thomas Levin. Instead of being a mere introductory commentary, Hansen's article brought about an essential claim: it would be necessary to read Adorno's work "against the grain", insofar as it would not amount to a mere condemnation of cinema and mass culture. The author then joined names like Andreas Huyssen (1983) and Gertrude Koch (1989) in proposing a more thorough analysis of Adorno's writings and the context to which they were responsive, thus trying to undo the stereotypes that surrounded the reception of his work.<sup>2</sup> At that time, the English translation and the dissemination of "Filmtransparent"<sup>3</sup> (a text that remains quite underrated) opened an important path to rethinking the place of cinema in Adorno's aesthetics. For in this essay, first published in 1966, the philosopher revises many of his previous remarks on cinema — made decades before, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and in *Composing for the Films* [*Komposition für den Film*]. In the framework of this late critical revision, Adorno not only conceived the importance of an adequate approach to the avant-garde cinema, but also suggested the possibility of an "emancipated cinema" [*emanzipierte Film*] (Adorno, 2004, v. 10, t. 1, p. 359), no longer uncritically submitted to the demands of the film industry. This assessment is built mainly as a response to the new experiences of *cinéma d'auteur* carried on in Germany in the 1960s — in particular, the New German Cinema and its demands, as I will further examine.<sup>4</sup>

However, besides the fact that Adorno changed his view on cinema, what might this shift suggest as to his work, and especially his aesthetic position? One must also understand how this change would affect his views on the critical potential of art in society and on the possibilities of an "aesthetic theory". Twenty years after her commentary on "Filmtransparent", Miriam Hansen considered this question by dedicating an entire chapter of her book *Cinema and Experience* (2012) to rethink Adorno's aesthetics of cinema. But, in this text, she found herself confronted by several issues that concern the philosopher's late work — such as his assessments on postwar experimental music, readings of Beckett's work, and even the notion of an "entanglement" [*Verfransung*] in the arts. Yet, since her focus was on cinema, all these issues remained somewhat abstract. Therefore, if on the one hand the intention of Hansen's book was to focus on the role of cinema in Adorno's late work, on the other it shows us that there is still much to be discussed about the relationship between cinema and the other arts in Adorno's writings, especially considering how the author's late texts contemplate such a relationship.

as well as the reviewers, for their suggestions and remarks.

[2] According to Hansen, the reception of Adorno's work in the English-speaking world has been marked by narrow criticisms of Adorno's elitism and pessimism, insofar such criticisms "limit themselves to a rather well-trod and narrow basis of texts (narrower even than the amount of writings available in English, whatever problems there may be with the translations)" (Hansen, 1992, p. 43).

[3] There is a particular difficulty in translating the title "Filmtransparent". In German, the term "Transparent" could refer as to banners and movie posters as to notes and remarks (in Portuguese, for example, it is translated as "Notas sobre o filme" ["Notes on Cinema"], by Cohn [Adorno, 1994b]). In this article, I will maintain the title in German to keep the specificity of the term. Furthermore, there is also the matter of translating the German term "Film". With "Film" I understand that Adorno is addressing not only the "movie" in particular, but the institution of cinema.

[4] Regarding Adorno's approach to cinema, there are important considerations published in Portuguese that delve into the specificity of this medium, providing keen insights into this topic, as in Silva (1999), and Della Torre (2019).

Hence, in this paper I intend to address the following hypothesis: Adorno's change of position in relation to cinema cannot be regarded only within discussions about this medium. Rather, it should be understood as an important piece in a much broader transformation of the author's aesthetic coordinates. Above all, I suggest that Adorno's later approach to cinema takes part in a reorientation of his aesthetics in the postwar scenario, considering the new experiences in the fields of music and literature, as well as the diagnosis of an entanglement [*Verfransung*] of the arts. Thus, by discussing how Adorno considered distinct connections between cinema and the "traditional" arts throughout his writings, this article seeks to address the place of cinema in a certain "system of arts" proposed by the philosopher. To that end, this text is divided into two parts: (i) first, I seek to discuss how Adorno's writings up to the 1940s are characterized by a paradigm of "advanced" or progressive art that was closely aligned with the experiences of modern music of the Second Viennese School. Although this paradigm is remarkable for Adorno's first position regarding cinema — especially in the work *Composing for the Films* —, it will nonetheless undergo important modifications throughout the philosopher's late writings, to the point of making room for forms of artistic production that did not necessarily fit into those normative criteria; (ii) in a second moment, I will examine how Adorno's late work presents a distinct image of the role of cinema, precisely due to the transformations undergone by artistic practices in the postwar period and his remarks on the *Verfransung* of the arts.

#### CINEMA AND THE CHANGING PARADIGMS OF ADVANCED ART

As it is well known, Adorno's writings on art were largely directed towards music. In this sense, it would not be an overstatement to say that his relationship with the Second Viennese School — and more specifically with Arnold Schoenberg's work — determined the first guidelines of his aesthetic thought, as well as the framework of what the philosopher considered to be "progressive" art. The extent of this influence can be noticed even in his stance towards cinema made in the 1940s. In *Composing for the Films*, co-written with Hanns Eisler, what is discussed is precisely the role of music in films, which led the authors to an extensive discussion on the aesthetic elements of cinema and its possible place as an art form.

Written in the 1940s in the United States, *Composing for the Films* deals with the structure of commercial films made at that time. Therefore, its theses cannot be unrestrictedly bracketed with the author's later production. Miriam Hansen, in *Cinema and Experience*, already observed this fact while stating that Adorno's earlier views

on cinema were influenced by the paradigm of Schoenberg's music, whereas his later writings on the topic — as "Filmtransparent" — were connected to a different context in the musical production, i.e., that of the unfolding of the integral serialism:

*If the musical paradigm behind Composing for the Films is twelve-tone music in the tradition of Schönberg ("classical" serialism), one might say that "Transparencies on Film" benefited from Adorno's confrontation with the "aging of New Music" and the emergence of new modes of experimental music — including electronic, total (or integral) serial, as well as aserial — in the work of composers such as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Cage, György Ligeti, and others. (Hansen, 2012, p. 219)*

Although essential to understand Adorno's aesthetics, this parallel with music remains quite abstract in Hansen's interpretation. If the changes observed by Adorno in modern music would have affected his repositioning regarding cinema, how does it manifest itself? That is, how would the change of paradigm in the new music have affected Adorno's later aesthetic perspectives and, particularly, the way he considered cinema? To answer those questions, one would have to go beyond the specific discussion on cinema and its techniques and look closely into what Schoenberg's music represented for Adorno's early texts — a step that Hansen did not intend to take there, given the very purposes of her work.

In this sense, it must be considered that at least since the 1920s Adorno's alignment with the Second Viennese School had less to do with a purely technical issue than with an extensive debate on the meaning of the "new" in music. For in that context Adorno was immersed in a strong dispute led mainly by two fronts of the "new music": on the one hand, the consequences of musical expressionism, carried out by the work of Schoenberg and his school; and, on the other hand, the Neoclassicism of Stravinsky and Hindemith. Adorno took side in this dispute in his first texts as a music critic in German periodicals. In an editorial proposal for the journal *Anbruch*, for example, he states that this periodical, "representative of the Modern", should vehemently oppose the "elevated [*gehobene*] and apparently up-to-date reaction as inaugurated by Stravinsky as neoclassicism and represented in Germany today by Hindemith" (Adorno, 2004, v. 19, p. 598, our translation). According to him, to represent the musical modernity in that context meant to oppose neoclassicism and to assume the importance of the representatives of the Second Viennese School for the consolidation of the "new music".

But for Adorno what was at stake was much more than a mere personal preference for an artistic movement. Rather, the matter

was to decide between two paradigms of the true “progress” in art: on the one hand, there was Schoenberg’s music, which developed an immanent critique of the Austro-Germanic, Romantic tradition; on the other hand, there was the Neoclassicism of Stravinsky and Hindemith, which refused a mere continuity with the Romantic tradition and recovered, in a disruptive way, classical, pre-Romantic forms. By criticizing Stravinsky and Hindemith, allying himself with the paradigm of Schoenberg and his school, Adorno pointed out the importance of a specific notion of “advanced” or “progressive” art: that which is capable of immanently questioning a given tradition that precedes it. In so doing, such progressive art would represent the most advanced level of mastery over the material — precisely what would happen in the atonalism of the Second Viennese School. Since Stravinsky circumvented historical continuity, denying the Romanticism that immediately preceded him and recovering classical, pre-Bourgeois forms, his work would fall, according to Adorno, into a musical *restoration*, which is against the very substance of what is “new” in art. As it is known, such defense of musical modernity shapes the famous *Philosophy of New Music* and the polarization between the progressive Schoenberg and the reactionary Stravinsky.

But how exactly does this discussion relate to cinema? Well, *Composing for the Films* is a work that has on its background precisely the concept of new music and the debates that would shape the *Philosophy of New Music*. Thus, when Adorno co-wrote *Composing for the Films* with Hanns Eisler, what he had in mind was an idea of advanced art that was able to address the precedent tradition, bringing out a progressive and rational development of the artistic material. That is, his main paradigm was Schoenberg’s free atonalism. Therefore, the relationship between cinema and music in *Composing for the Films* is not fortuitous: what the book suggests is that cinema, which would be beyond the limits of traditional arts, could not match the standard of the “progressive” art established by new music. For Adorno and Eisler, in the case of cinema, what is observed is precisely the lack of historical development of conventions — that is, a *lack of tradition* —, since cinema is a medium that was born outside the traditional arts, thus outside the boundaries of artistic genres:

*Quite apart from the detrimental influence of commercialism, aesthetic analyses of the motion picture easily become inadequate because it is rooted less in artistic wants than in the fact that in the twentieth century optical and acoustic technique reached a definite stage, which is essentially unrelated, or related only very indirectly, to any possible aesthetic idea. (Adorno; Eisler, 2005, p. 63)*

As for the very nature of cinema, its hybridity would complicate any attempt to attribute an “aesthetic” core to it. Cinema developed itself together with mass culture, by joining narrative forms from literature, elements from music and visual arts, therefore recombining techniques from different artistic genres. In *Composing for the Films*, such combination is seen as an obstacle: according to Adorno and Eisler, it was difficult to characterize cinema as a distinct art precisely because it would be diluted in a wide range of references to other artistic forms without presenting, at that moment, a nucleus of its own. In addition to this, the consolidation of the film industry, ruled by commercial interests, would restrict the expressive freedom of the artists and would further block the aesthetic potentialities of the medium. Thus, in the 1940s Adorno concluded that although cinema was a new medium, tied to the very modernization of the reproduction apparatus, it could not align itself with the most advanced art, nor with a disruptive idea of modern art. The fact that cinema developed alongside the mass culture — thus outside a well-defined and traditional “aesthetic domain” — would preclude the valuation of films as artistic productions. In other words, Adorno questioned the artistic status of cinema because by that time his idea of modern art was essentially connected to a specific paradigm: that of an art that expands within the conventions of an established genre, and through the mastery of artistic material, as seen in his connection with Schoenberg’s works.

However, this perspective could not be maintained in the philosopher’s later writings. When Adorno returned to Germany in the 1950s, the major debates on modern music were no longer concerning the polarization between neoclassicism and serialism. Furthermore, the very idea of modern art was taking on new contours with discussions about the fate and function of art in the postwar scenario. In that context, Adorno became directly involved in the West German public debate, by participating both in the Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt [Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik — Darmstadt] — courses that brought together some of the leading names of the postwar musical avant-garde —, and in a variety of radio debates that addressed the situation of modern art after the war.

In this background, Adorno encountered the work of young musicians that, although linked to serialism, sought to depart from the guidelines of the Second Viennese School. He had to address above all a new proposition of “modern music”, no longer bound to Schoenberg’s school and the idea of a progressive mastery of the material. The rise of integral serialism<sup>5</sup> and aleatoric procedures in music were part of a new urge for experimentation, in which the

[5] “Integral serialism” basically refers to a postwar development of serialism: it transferred the principle of series — which in Schoenberg was applied to the heights of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale — to other properties or “parameters” of the sound phenomenon, such as timbre, intensity and attack. Grant (2001), Borio and Danuser (1997) present in depth both the development of integral serialism in the postwar period and Adorno’s contact with this trend.

*composers moved forward by searching for material that was considered free from unsavory historical associations (such as the tonal forms used by Schoenberg), and this led to a conception of new material as that given by nature (“discovered” and integrated by the composer) rather than passed down by history. (Zagorski, 2009, p. 285)*

Hence, there was an important reconfiguration of the very idea of modern music and the ways in which it could approach the artistic material.

In the polemical essay “The Aging of the New Music” (1955), Adorno begins to consider these new avant-garde music movements. This first approach, however, was deeply controversial: throughout the essay, Adorno expresses severe reservations concerning the new compositions of integral serialism — mostly because they were detached from the “critical impulse” that once shaped the new music of the Second Viennese School. Commenting on the work of the young Boulez, for example, he states:

*He and his disciples aspire to dispose of every “compositional freedom” as pure caprice, along with every vestige of traditional musical idiom: in fact, every subjective impulse is in music at the same time an impulse of musical language. [...] an integral rationalization such as has never before been envisaged in music. (Adorno, 1988, p. 102)*

In this sense, it could be said that the “aging of the new music” would represent the aging of a specific paradigm of modern art. For, as mentioned, the defense of Schoenberg’s work had to do precisely with the defense of a type of new art that is established within the historical conventions of a specific genre, delving into the materials inherited by tradition. However, Adorno observes that what is expressed in the postwar musical avant-garde is the discarding of all “vestige of traditional musical idiom”, that is, an idea of modern music that wants to free itself from the connections with the past, moving towards an open experimentation.

According to Adorno, the “musical situation” could then be described as a “narrow way [*Engpass*], in which one can no longer remain, which cannot be circumvented, and from which nothing comes out unchanged” (Adorno, 2004, v. 18, p. 133, our translation). If the new music no longer necessarily moved along a clear line of historical development, and did not necessarily represent the most advanced material in relation to a specific tradition, what could effectively characterize it? At the center of his concerns is the situation of art that puts into question its very meaning, since it is no longer necessarily linked to a clear set of practices and procedures in an artistic genre.



This is what Adorno indicated in one of his courses on Aesthetics, by considering that the connection of meaning [*Sinnzusammenhang*] “is what has started to become problematic in the advanced works of the present historical phase [...] and this can be applied in the strict sense above all to all art that was created after the Second War [...]” (Adorno, TWAA Vo<sup>6</sup> 6535, our translation). Adorno not only diagnosed the changed situation of artistic production, but also noticed the necessity to better understand such a change.

Thus, despite this seemingly harsh diagnosis on the question of art’s meaning, Adorno did not declare the exhaustion of modern music, nor stopped searching for new ways to understand the changes that were occurring in modern art. By debating with his peers in the Darmstadt conferences, he gradually acknowledged that his own conception of modern art should be rethought. His essay “Vers Une musique informelle”, originally a lecture given at Darmstadt in the 1960s, offered Adorno an opportunity to both reconsider his previous assessments and to present a much more flexible approach on the avant-garde. He begins the text by attesting that in his maturity he faced a specific dilemma: either clinging to his own “youth”, maintaining modernity as a “private monopoly”, or, on the contrary, going “along with the latest trend in order to avoid being thrown on the scrapheap” (Adorno, 1998, pp. 269-70). Here Adorno addresses the gap between his earlier theorization of modernism and the ongoing artistic trends. In a way, he knew that the ongoing transformations in the arts demanded a new theoretical approach. And it is precisely those new demands that made him reconsider and broaden his aesthetic paradigms.

At this point, Adorno was focusing on artistic productions that tried to detach themselves from the conventions of established artistic genres, and that somehow refused to follow the demand of the most advanced development concerning tradition. This is the case of his approach to the literary production of Samuel Beckett. As Tiedemann rightly points out,<sup>7</sup> Adorno’s contact with Beckett’s work represents a turning point in his writings, leading the philosopher to consider the Irish writer’s work as “the pinnacle [*Spitze*]” of “the contemporary anti-art” (Adorno, 2004, v. 7, p. 403, our translation). It was no longer a matter of seeking a rigid form of advanced art, which necessarily develops progressive mastery over the material. On the contrary, Beckett’s work would indicate a form of artistic production that recognizes the very impossibility of fully mastering language and its uses, surrendering instead to the meaninglessness of literary construction. Whether in his plays, like *Waiting for Godot*, or in his novels, as *The Unnameable*, what emerges is the lack, or the impossibility, of a fully coherent and constructed work, leading the form to its own disintegration. Adorno points out this disintegration not

[6] The reference “TWAA Vo” concerns the nomenclature used by the Theodor W. Adorno Archive (TWAA) for the Lectures (*Vorlesungen*). It will be henceforth used to refer to this unpublished material.

[7] Tiedemann says that “when Adorno first encountered Beckett — and this must have been in the early fifties [...] — a reference point would be created in the history of the new aesthetics, comparable to Benjamin’s encounter with Brecht” (Tiedemann *apud* Adorno, 1994a, p. 22).



only as a hallmark of Beckett's work but also as an important tendency in the then current developments of modern art:

*Beckett is strongly inserted in the tradition or movement that I have named the entanglement [Verfransung] of genres [...]. It is linked to the tendency to disintegrate, to destroy the traditional unity of the concept of work of art. The works [...] have something centrifugal, which dissolves them into multiple parameters [...]. (Adorno, 1994a, pp. 95-6, our translation)*

This turn to contingency, to the disintegration of a traditional sense of a work of art, is an essential feature of Adorno's late writings, and is of foremost importance to his re-evaluation of cinema. Instead of insisting on rigid parameters for aesthetic judgments, Adorno noticed the necessity to assess the disintegration of a restricted concept of "art", as well as the expansion of artistic practices. Mirian Hansen somewhat noticed the importance of this problematic, when she stated that Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is written in a particular context, that of "art's negation of meaning in the face of an increasingly meaningless world (exemplified for him by the work of Beckett and Cage)" (Hansen, 2012, p. 222). However, such disintegration of art's meaning is not limited to the topics of *Aesthetic Theory*, but gradually emerged in Adorno's work since the late 1950s. Considering all the changes in the musical avant-garde, the weakening of the Schoenbergian paradigm, and Adorno's approach to Beckett's work, it became increasingly imperative for Adorno to take a renewed stand on the limits and possibilities of modern art. This "imperative" even made him reconsider cultural expressions that he had previously placed at the margins of aesthetics — such as cinema. Next, I will examine how Adorno starts to reconsider the place of cinema, taking into account the whole backdrop of issues that have been addressed so far.

#### **CINEMA IN A NEW KEY: THE VERFRANSUNG IN THE ARTS**

In 1962, during one of his aesthetics lectures, Adorno discussed the changes in the postwar artistic scenario. At the center of this discussion lies a very specific diagnosis: the fact that the boundaries between "art" and "non-art" have become increasingly porous and unstable. To exemplify the culmination of such tendency, Adorno will not address literature or music, but rather cinema:

*I am thinking here above all of an art that is so actual today that it would be foolish to join the verdict "well, that's not art"; namely, I am thinking of the complex of the cinema [Komplex des Films] [...] but from the historical*

point of view of the problem with which we are concerned, perhaps one can say that cinema in general will be more artistically legitimate, that it will come closer to the postulates of a work of art the less it gives itself artistically, i.e., the less it measures itself by a more or less affected distancing from empirical reality and strives after effects of already established art (Adorno, TWAA Vo 7034-7035, emphasis added, our translation)

One can see a clear change in Adorno's position regarding cinema. He not only considers it "foolish" [*törrich*] to exclude cinema from the forms of art, but also emphasizes that the "artistic" legitimacy of cinema lies precisely in its distance from established, traditional arts. Well, such an assertion could not be conceivable in the framework of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* nor in *Composing for the Films*. If in these works Adorno condemned the non-artistic character of cinema and its radical distance from aesthetic concerns, in his later work there is a renewed interest on the place of cinema among the arts, even considering how its distance from the traditional arts could implement its artistic legitimacy.

But before delving into the consequences of this change, it would be necessary to consider two important facts that frame such re-evaluation of cinema: 1962 is the year of the *Oberhausen Manifesto*'s publication, and it is also the year in which Adorno discussed, in a radio debate, the new experiences of the *cinéma d'auteur* made in Germany. In general terms, the *Oberhausen Manifesto* consisted of a document signed by 26 young filmmakers who, at the time, proclaimed the start of a new era for German cinema. In counterpoint to American commercial cinema — which was widely disseminated and consumed in West Germany —, German filmmakers were demanding more state funding to produce national films *d'auteur*, which started to gain strength in European festivals (Cf. Elsaesser, 1988). This movement, which was later called New German Cinema, attracted Adorno's attention not only because it represented an alternative to the commercial films, but also because one of its adepts, Alexander Kluge, had a close connection with the philosopher and shared many of his concerns.

Although the friendship between Adorno and Kluge has already been extensively commented and documented,<sup>8</sup> one must add an element to the discussion: in 1962, Adorno participated in the aforementioned radio debate — on the occasion of the Mannheim film week — whose main theme was the "demands on cinema" [*Forderungen an den Film*]. At that occasion, Kluge and Adorno expressed very similar intentions regarding the German cinema, indicating above all how cinema could undergo a critical reflection. Adorno said:

[8] Not only Hansen (2012) remarks this proximity, but there are also several interviews with Kluge that deal with his contact with Adorno and their interactions regarding the New German Cinema. See the interview by Liebman (1988), and Laudenbach (2003). See also Roldán (2016) for a deeper analysis on the similarities and differences between the conception of cinema in Adorno and Kluge.

*precisely the potential through which film captures the masses — its mass base — would also allow it to configure itself in such a way, that things that concern the masses would manifest themselves in it — whereas up to now [...] it [film] has fundamentally been an event that alienates people from what concerns them.* (Adorno et al., 2012, p. 37, our translation)

This is another moment in which Adorno adopts a different position regarding cinema. As known, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the culture industry is characterized as a “mass deception” [*Massenbetrug*], since, unlike a culture that springs from the wishes of the masses, the culture industry would act in the opposite direction, planning and managing from above the individual interests according to consumption and profit purposes. As much as this criticism is well known in secondary literature, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that it is not *conclusive* in relation to cinema. On the contrary, what is at stake in this discussion is a different position on Adorno’s part: cinema’s mass base, which previously determined its easy administration by the cultural industry, is now seen as potentially directed to critical purposes, so that the masses become aware of “what concerns them”.<sup>9</sup>

In the same radio debate, Adorno goes further and even conceives the possibility of “a revolution [*Umwälzung*] of the cinema as a whole institution” (Adorno et al., 2012, p. 40). It seems that the revolutionary rhetoric of *Oberhausen Manifesto* penetrated his discourse, indicating new paths for cinematographic practice. This would lead to a profound transformation both in the structures of production and in the moment of reception. Throughout the radio debate, Alexander Kluge makes clear the intentions of this new cinema, which were close to Adorno’s:

*We don’t want to produce new individual films that we think are better than the previous ones, but we have in mind the conception of a new cinema that really gives something to the public, and that the public can discover cinema as something different from television or our naturalistic films [...]. We believe in the possibility of emancipation for cinema in completely new forms, in a departure from our cinematic schemes, and we believe that there is potentially a desire in the public [...] to which we can respond.* (Kluge in Adorno et al., 2012, p. 31, our translation)

What was being discussed was not merely a different approach on the cinematic production, but rather a profound transformation of the institution, which permeates both the productive structure of films — encompassing the critical reaction of filmmakers in relation to the big industry —, as well as the moment of reception. In this sense, one can say that Adorno and Kluge had a shared conception on the role of the “new” cinema, insofar it would be capable of eman-

[9] As Jean-Louis Deotté (2004, p. 271) points out, the “referent” in the cinema turns out to be, according to Adorno’s “Filmtransparent”, a collective approach — the emergence of a “we” (“*nous*”). Thus, we could say that, by addressing the “mass base” of cinema and its respective critical core, Adorno is also opening up, albeit indirectly, the political implications of cinema.

cipating itself from old schemes of production and reception. In turn, such an idea of a revolution in cinema is not without a certain utopian charge. And Adorno also addressed this topic:

*Well, that doesn't mean that utopias are portrayed in the film or that utopian things are presented there. That would certainly be something very wrong. It's just the opposite. Art in general, and I'll simply put film as art, has something to do with utopia, with that which is different from the world, essentially and constitutively. And if you cut off the possibility of experiencing that, then you cut off the living experience of art itself. (Adorno et al., 2012, p. 46, our translation)*

He starts not only to consider cinema an art form, but also to indicate the importance of its critical stance. If in earlier texts Adorno criticized the spectator's passivity in cinema, in this late debate he addresses the utopian core of cinema, considering its possibility to render something "different" from the world — one could say, by having a critical core. But, as mentioned, it would not be sufficient just to underline such a change of opinion. What matters is not simply the fact that Adorno included cinema in the aesthetic field. Rather, it is a matter of understanding that the coordinates of his work have been transformed to such an extent that cinema begins to be the main representative of a larger trend of an "entanglement" [*Verfransung*] of different arts, leading to an expansion of the concept of art.

The difficult-to-translate term *Verfransung* was probably first introduced in his courses on aesthetics in 1962, when Adorno referred to a certain "constitutive entanglement [*Verfranstheit*] of works of art" (Adorno, TWAA Vo 7023, our translation) to indicate the current situation of artistic production. What he was trying to point out was the fact that the different genres in the arts were increasingly becoming hybrid and intertwined, thus questioning the boundaries that previously separated them. At that time, Adorno was already considering the links between the spatial and temporal arts, whether in the intertwining of music and painting, literature and music, or even in the incorporation of extra-artistic elements in different artworks. For him, the process of entanglement would concern a moment in which "the boundaries towards the other fields are not firmly sealed, that particularly uncertain and vacillating moment that arises as soon as we distance ourselves from the philosophical concept of art and delve in the works, through which the distanced philosophy of art must necessarily correct itself" (Adorno, TWAA Vo 7023, our translation). Ultimately, the process of *Verfransung* would lead the arts to a deeper questioning of the very meaning of art, insofar as they called into question even their boundaries in relation to the non-artistic.

What is addressed here is another context of artistic practice, different from the one that shaped Adorno's texts from the 1940s. According to him, it was not only a matter of understanding how each form of art would respond to a specific tradition, but rather how the different arts were relinquishing the old divisions between artistic genres and mediums. And it is precisely in this complex of problems that Adorno will begin to reconsider cinema as an art form. If in *Composing for the Films*, as discussed, the hybrid character of this medium — that is, the fact that it refers to different artistic genres without being bound to any dominant form — was seen as a deeply problematic element, in the 1960s this hybrid and uncertain nature of the cinema is seen in a different way, as it could indicate a radically new constructive form in the arts. Without fitting into any genre of the traditional arts and at the same time welcoming different constructive procedures from literature and music through montage, cinema would precisely embody a broader trend of the entanglement of the arts.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, it is important to consider that “Filmtransparent” was written in the same year as “Art and the Arts” [*Die Kunst und die Künste*], an essay in which Adorno discusses the process of *Verfransung* in greater depth. In this text, Adorno maintains that contemporary artistic production, enmeshed in the crisis of meaning, no longer “wants to remain what it was. The way in which its [art's] relation to genres has become dynamic can be seen in its later genre, the cinema” (Adorno, 2004, v. 10, t. 1, p. 451, our translation). Here cinema becomes the greatest representative of the dynamics of *Verfransung* in the arts, as its hybrid nature questions and subverts that which determined the separation of artistic genres. In this discussion, Adorno explicitly recovers and partially adheres to Benjamin's thesis that the essence of cinema lies in the elimination of aura. He claims that by rebelling against a traditional sense of art and its divisions into genres, cinema could bring out this negation as a stylistic principle, since “film remains art in its rebellion and even expands art” (Id., Ibid.).

The expansion of the conception of art through cinema consolidates a very peculiar diagnosis in Adorno's late work: the most advanced art is not that which is limited to the progressive mastery over the material, nor of a type of art that moves only within an established tradition — as the philosopher had indicated in texts from the 1940s. On the contrary, one must now consider the fact that the very sense of tradition and mastery over the material is no longer sufficient to encompass the increasing tendency of the entanglement of the arts. In this regard, Adorno says that “the appearance [of art] tolerates less and less the principle of rational mastery over the material, to which the whole history of art was bound” (Id., p. 452, our translation). And,

[10] In Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, there is an interesting discussion on montage, considering its open possibilities in the new configurations of cinema and photography. As Della Torre (2019, p. 491) also noticed, Adorno was conceiving an expressive potential for montage in cinema. For a further discussion on the role of montage in Adorno's aesthetics, see also Maura (2020).

according to Adorno, such a relinquishment of the rational mastery over material can be grasped in the new currents of cinema.

Throughout the essay “Filmtransparent”, Adorno suggests that what makes these new currents of cinema more interesting does not concern the mastery of techniques in the cinematic composition, but rather a certain “awkward [*Unbeholfene*]” “unprofessional [*nicht Gekonnt-en*]” element in those new films, which represents “the hope that the so-called mass media might eventually become something qualitatively different” (Adorno, 1982, p. 199). In this sense, Adorno is not judging the most advanced art based on the most developed mastery of technique and materials, but rather considering the “liberating” configuration that can be glimpsed in those productions “which have not completely mastered their technique, conveying as a result something consolingly uncontrolled and accidental” (Id., Ibid). Thus, one could say that the authorial and “unprofessional” cinema gains artistic importance in Adorno’s view precisely by virtue of its liberating character and its distance from any rigid claims on the nature of “true” art.

In the light of these discussions, Adorno’s changed position cannot be summarized as a simple adherence to certain movements of the German avant-garde cinema. Rather, this connection with *cinéma d’auteur* reflected a much profounder transformation: the expansion of the very concept of art, a topic that permeates Adorno’s late writings. It should be noted that there is an important relation between the “accidental” in cinema and the discourses on “contingency” and spontaneity in artistic production, which Adorno had already been developing since the early 1960s. In this sense, one could say — in a modification of Adorno’s thesis — that cinema is more artistic the less it follows the imperative of mastery over technique that guided the traditional arts. It should be noted that the “amateur” character in *cinéma d’auteur* seems to reflect the search for an informal art founded on constructive spontaneity, namely when the subject “ceases to mould the material”, thus ceasing “to furnish it with arbitrary intentions” (Adorno, 1998, p. 319).

Considering the hybrid and contingent character of cinema, one can put into perspective the importance of certain moments in the *Aesthetic Theory*, in which Adorno stresses, for example, the “impurity” of modern works: “It is evident that the highest works are not the purest, but tend towards an extra-artistic surplus, especially when they contain an unchanged material at the expense of their immanent composition” (Adorno, 2004, v. 7, p. 271, our translation). Here Adorno sets aside any purist concept of art and strives to understand precisely the extra-artistic elements that are present in an artwork. More precisely, the task here is to delve into the material that is not fully dominated and incorporated into the compositional logic of the artwork. Thus, the

“extra-artistic surplus” in the artwork gains importance in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, representing the moment when art extrapolates the realm of the pure technique and mastery over material.

Such a consideration of the *Verfransung* of the arts, together with the concern with spontaneity and contingency, is of uttermost importance for the writing of the *Aesthetic Theory*. In this posthumously published work, Adorno tries to approach aesthetics by going beyond the questions of technique or the rational mastery over material. Instead of seeking to conceptualize art in a peremptory and schematic way, the *Aesthetic Theory* presents us, above all, a new path for a kind of theory that recognizes its own inconsistency, as well as the need to move away from the traditional theorizations of art. In this sense, it is important to consider how Adorno increasingly turns to the “mimetic behavior” in the aesthetic experience, which would also point us to “the capacity for an intuitive reaction without rational control” (Eichel, 1998, pp. 292-3), a spontaneity that grounds the contact with the artistic object. Both the process of *Verfransung* of the arts and the questioning of the very concept of art are essential motifs to the *Aesthetic Theory* and already appear in his late writings on cinema. In the face of these reflections, the repositioning of cinema indicates a broader intention in Adorno’s late work: the effort to rethink the very nature of an aesthetic theory, considering the concrete transformations in artistic practices and its new ways of intermediality. Thus, far from defending a rigid and elitist concept of art, Adorno’s late work presents us a profound critique of the traditional Aesthetics as a discipline, indicating that there is much more to be said about the ever-changing borders between art and non-art.

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RAQUEL PATRIOTA DA SILVA [<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6801-3065>] is a philosophy professor at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte. She has a doctorate degree in Philosophy from the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), with a research internship at Freie Universität Berlin. She graduated in Philosophy at Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB) (2011) and also holds a master’s degree in Philosophy from that same institution (2014). She has experience in the field of Aesthetics, Critical Theory and Modernism.

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