

Adorno's Insights in the Light of *Exakte Phantasie*

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Abstract: This article aims to provide an elaboration of Theodor Adorno's notion of exact fantasy and its function within his idea of genuine philosophical thought. It is divided into two main parts. In the first one, I explore the features of the notion of fantasy through a comparison of its understanding in Walter Benjamin's and Adorno's bodies of work. I further explicate what features Adorno takes over from Benjamin and where the authors' ideas diverge. I present the role of fantasy in Adorno's thought as a non-transparent and emotional element of thinking that is responsible for the active arrangement of elements into constellations, which his individual essays are the embodiment of. In the second part, I follow Adorno's criticism of the situation of late capitalist society in the light of the feature of lack of fantasy that is according to him caused by the influence of modern mass culture. I put this feature in connection to his examination of the phenomenon of boredom, depicting fantasy as an intellectual faculty which enhances intellectual freedom and resists the "neurotic feelings" inherent in boredom. In the conclusion, I try to defend the possibility of the validity of Adorno's insights despite their unconcealed intellectual elitism.

Theodor Adorno did not comprehensively elaborate the concept of fantasy; at least not in the wholesome manner in which he described other concepts crucial for him, such as freedom or negativity. The notion of fantasy emerges and vanishes – not coincidentally in a sort of Proustian manner – throughout his oeuvre without explicit clarification of its meaning and connection to Adorno's general theory. Nevertheless, we can safely deduce that fantasy, namely exact fantasy, plays a crucial role in his ideas about the liberation of philosophical contemplation.² The

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2 As we will see further, interpretation of Adorno's understanding of fantasy circles around his inspiration and development of ideas of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin nevertheless made a distinction between "fantasy" (*Phantasie*) and the traditional term "imagination" (*Einbildungskraft*). He abandoned the term *Einbildungskraft* as he shift-

scarcity of Adorno's remarks also allows us to take an overall look at this problem and to glimpse the notion of exact fantasy in the various facets that Adorno fragmentary lends it throughout his work. I will focus on highlighting several concrete notions in Adorno's thinking in which fantasy plays a crucial role; namely emotionality of thought, thought's non-transparency to itself, the creation of constellations, boredom as a result of lack of fantasy and intellectual freedom as a resistance to it. It is pertinent to note that the issue of fantasy in Adorno's thought is not exhausted by these aspects, as we also encounter it in his insights about the process of artistic creation.³ I leave these aspects aside here though, focusing mainly on fantasy's role in Adorno's idea of philosophical thought (which is, nevertheless, in the end also occupied with interpretation of art).

This paper's objective is therefore to deal in depth with Adorno's notion of exact fantasy, while occasionally referencing to few details of other discussions. In the first part of this text, I will attempt to explicate what nature and function Adorno ascribes to fantasy. I will shortly talk about Benjamin's idea of fantasy, as Adorno's conception is directly inspired by it in many of its central features. I will point out the areas in which Adorno takes over the insights from Benjamin as well as those where Adorno develops his ideas and eventually takes a different path when it comes to the introduction of the concept of fantasy. Both Benjamin and Adorno polemize with the Kantian understanding of the imaginative faculty of our thinking, nevertheless, each of the thinkers deals with it differently. In the second, slightly shorter, section, I will try to explicate Adorno's remarks on the notion of the lack of deployment of fantasy in thinking

ed from Kant's understanding of it and presented a fairly different concept. This endeavour despite their later differences remains common to Benjamin and Adorno. Therefore, I will use the term "fantasy", used in the English translation of *Actuality of Philosophy*, even though most of the English translations of Adorno's work as well as secondary literature about Adorno's aesthetics translates *exakte Phantasie* as "exact imagination".

3 For thorough elaboration on the problem of fantasy within Adorno's aesthetic insights see S. W. Nichol森, *Exact Imagination, Late Work, on Adorno's Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997).

and its connection to intellectual freedom. I will take into consideration external symptoms of boredom that Adorno marks as a consequence of a lack of fantasy. At the end of this text, I will consider the intellectual elitism of Adorno's conception and try to defend the possibility of seeing his general conception as worthwhile even so.

The notion of fantasy between Benjamin and Adorno

For Benjamin, the idea of fantasy is intertwined with the notion of learning from experience. This learning lies primarily in our ability to work with our experiences and gain the truth from discontinuity that transcends the unity of a medium without disrupting it.⁴ Truth, for Benjamin, does not find its expression in a single medium and is not indifferent to various possible ways of perceiving reality. In such a framework, fantasy then plays a crucial role in our understanding of reality, even though it does not necessarily find its ultimate expression in conceptual language. It rather plays the role of a means that, once applied to the way in which we approach the world, gets us closer to truth through the nature of the perspective it provides. Benjamin describes it as a de-formative capacity that "plays a game of dissolution with its forms. The world of new manifestations that thus comes into being as the result of this dissolution of what has been formed has its own laws, which are those of the fantasy. Its supreme law is that, while the fantasy de-forms, it never destroys."⁵ Benjamin sees the possibility to perceive the truth in glimpsing it in the fissures of reality. De-forming power of fantasy and its deployment in our experiencing of the world then may provide a key to encountering these fissures. In other words, we learn how to experience the fissures in reality by employing the de-formative power of fantasy in our approach to the world. As we will see further, Adorno dispatches from some crucial aspects of this idea, nevertheless, akin to Benjamin he understands

4 Comp. M. Ritter, "What Does the Rainbow Tell?" *Svět literatury*, vol. 54, (2016): 28-35, 28.

5 W. Benjamin, "Imagination." In *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913-1926*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 280. "Imagination" from the original translation has been replaced by "fantasy".

fantasy as something that eludes a purely conceptual and rational approach to the world and appears as something that is felt rather than rationally approached through linguistic means.

According to Benjamin, human beings learn from fantasy in a way that is similar to children's specific perception of colours, namely through gaining a perception that is "single, not as a lifeless thing and a rigid individuality but ... a winged creature that flits from one form to the next one."⁶ In that lies one of the main features that Adorno takes over from Benjamin, praising that "for him, philosophical fantasy is the capacity for ,interpolation in the smallest', and for him, one cell of reality contemplated outweighs ... the rest of the whole world."⁷ Paying attention to detail, instead of attempting to create a philosophical construction that would explain the whole and instead of reducing the insight gained from the observation of a particular object to a principle, later becomes one of the fundamental elements of Adorno's essayistic form.⁸ Focus on the detail is a necessary implication of another main feature of the essay, namely its focus on what is transient and ephemeral that is to be sought precisely in individual details, not in a whole. This second feature also comes from Benjamin's understanding of fantasy, as according to him, fantasy mediates what is transient and ephemeral. Fantasy's "de-formation shows further ... the world caught up in the process of unending dissolution; and this means eternal ephemerality."⁹

Both Benjamin's and Adorno's ideas of fantasy arise, apart from an undoubted portion of philosophical intuition, from delineation from Kant's idea of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*). Neither of them advocates any of the classifications of fantasy or imagination coming from the philosophical tradition, especially when it comes to how it has been considered by

6 W. Benjamin, "A Child's View of Color." In *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913-1926*, 50.

7 T. W. Adorno, "Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*." In *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*. (Columbia University Press, 1992), 222-223.

8 Comp. T. W. Adorno, "Essay as a Form." In *Notes to Literature, Volume 1*. (Columbia University Press, 1991), 22.

9 W. Benjamin, "Imagination." In *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913-1926*, 281. Comp. Adorno, "Essay as Form", 10.

the philosophical psychology of medieval and enlightenment philosophers. Benjamin builds his understanding of fantasy through a rejection of Kant's idea of learning.¹⁰ Adorno, however, does not find Benjamin's approach dialectical enough and provides his own criticism of Kantian understanding of the imaginative faculty of our thinking.

"In the most profound concept of transcendental epistemology, the concept of productive imagination, the trace of the will invades the pure intellectual function. Once that has happened, spontaneity is curiously skipped in the will. (...) This explains the distortion as well as its [idealism's] proximity to the true facts."¹¹

Spontaneity is here understood as an impulsive element of fantasy which we could even understand as a sort of instinctive momentum. Idealism tries to avoid admitting fantasy unpredictability, unreliability, and irrationality which, according to Adorno, is inseparable from it. Thinking that is too afraid of aspects that prevent it from the desired self-transparency then results in a reason that is "reduced to an instrument and assimilated to its functionaries, whose power of thought serves only the purpose of preventing the thought. Once the last trace of emotion has been eradicated, nothing remains of thought but absolute tautology."¹²

Adorno ascribes to the fantasy, as he understands it, an element that he believes to have been denied to it by traditional philosophy: emotionality. Emotionality is a physical impulse contained in fantasy.¹³ Claiming that "faculties, having developed through interaction, atrophy, once they are severed from each other" Adorno, points out that traditional thinking has dismissed the emotional element of fantasy and through that, it created the "resulting intellectual asthma."¹⁴ According to Adorno "each

10 I will not widely describe this issue here, as it has been already well described. See E. Friedlander, "Learning from the Colors of Fantasy." *boundary 2*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2018): 111-137, 115-116.

11 T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 230.

12 T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. (London: Verso, 2005), 123.

13 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 241.

14 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 123.

stirring of fantasy” is “engendered by desire which, in displacing the elements of what exists, transcends it without betrayal.”¹⁵ Philosophical thinking should use this genuine fantasy and include its dismissed emotional element in itself. Philosophical contemplation can never remain untouched by emotionality.

This is not a mere theoretical critical construct of Adorno’s thinking. His own philosophical motivations can be scarcely read as not carrying any emotional charge. After all, any philosophy contemplating about the possibility of philosophy after Auschwitz can hardly lack emotional momentum. One of Adorno’s most quoted passages talks about “philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair”¹⁶ and his texts are interspersed with mentions of philosophical longing for reconciliation and redemption. Nevertheless, it is not only Adorno’s philosophical motivation that is emotional. Adorno claims that thinking has to include its own impulses that have been both “preserved and surpassed”.¹⁷ Also, Adorno’s texts are based on the methodology he himself sets out for textual composition and therefore they can serve as examples of the application of thinking that operates with fantasy’s impulses.

In summary, both Adorno and Benjamin reject attempts to situate fantasy within the hierarchical framework of philosophical psychology, as we know them from Aristotle, Hume, or Kant. According to Adorno and Benjamin, such constructions do not describe or define fantasy in a meaningful way that would approach its complex functions and boundaries that eludes any exhausting explanation. Instead of these attempts to create a system describing individual potencies of the human mind and schematically explaining how their cooperation results with insight, Adorno points out that not only can we not completely understand how our mind works, but we should not even attempt. Complete transparency of thinking itself is not only impossible, but it is also not desirable. His reaction to the tradition is that instead of further clarifying or settling the

15 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 122.

16 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

17 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 122.

notion of fantasy, he re-problematizes and blurs it, claiming that this is precisely the position that fantasy should occupy within our thought if it is to be anyhow useful within philosophical contemplation; at least when it comes to the task he imposes on it.

The role of fantasy for Adorno nevertheless extends beyond the fact that he uses it to present the negative dialectical turn that would justify the non-transparency of thinking to itself. Fantasy plays a crucial role in the basis of his philosophical programme.

“Fantasy ... can establish that relation between objects which is irrevocable source of all judgement: should fantasy be driven out, judgement too, the real act of knowledge, is exorcised. But the castration of perception by a court of control that denies it any anticipatory desire, forces it thereby into a pattern of helplessly reiterating what is already known.”¹⁸

To understand this peculiar mention from *Minima Moralia*, we will have to shortly return to the crucial passages of one of his earlier methodological texts, namely his inaugural lecture at the Frankfurt university in 1931.

“One may see here an attempt to re-establish that old concept of philosophy ... that of the *ars inveniendi*. ... the *organon* of this *ars inveniendi* is fantasy. An exact fantasy [*exakte Phantasie*]; fantasy which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement: aspects, granted, which fantasy itself must originally generate.”¹⁹

Exakte Phantasie is here presented as a crucial element of our thinking which enables the creation of constellations: configurations of concepts in whose texture we can glimpse important moments of the object, maybe even intellectual non-conceptual experience hidden in it. Here we get to the main role that fantasy plays in Adorno's thinking. That is how the aforementioned “relations between objects” declared in *Minima Moralia* are established. Exact fantasy's function is to take an active part in the creation of constellations as an organon of our thinking “which re-

18 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 122-3.

19 T. W. Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy.” *Telos*, vol. 31 (1977): 122-133, 131.

arranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements.”²⁰ That is then the main role of exact fantasy: it is a non-transparent emotionally charged element of our thinking that allows us to compose constellations in order to reveal the non-conceptual experiential content of the object under study, which are in Adorno’s case mostly literary and musical works of art.

Essays are the constellations of concepts that Adorno seeks. In his later work, namely in his *Essay as Form*, the basic methodological building blocks of the essay are directly laid. The role of fantasy remains central. Nevertheless, we learn nothing more elaborate directly about fantasy itself. As Susan Buck-Morss points out, Adorno’s entire concept of constellation is not formal and its principles are impossible to be schematically explicated.²¹ I believe that the same then applies to the crucial element of composing constellations, fantasy itself. In his well-known *Essay as Form* Adorno repeats in different words his previous idea, noting that “the objective wealth of meanings encapsulated in every intellectual phenomenon demands of the recipient the same spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is castigated in the name of objective discipline”,²² however, he does not directly reveal more about how fantasy concretely works with the given material and selects and rearranges its elements into a constellation that would express the desired insights; such explication in the light of the essayistic method does not even seem to be possible or desired. This is where Adorno leaves us when it comes to the function of fantasy within philosophical contemplation aiming at the representation (*Darstellung*) of intellectual experience. It is impossible to proceed further in clarifying the precise function of *exakte Phantasie* because, as was mentioned, transparency of our thinking is not desirable according to Adorno.

20 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, 131.

21 S. Buck-Morss, *Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 96.

22 Adorno, “Essay as Form”, 4-5.

Adorno's idea of constellations is again directly inspired by Benjamin; it is an extension of his concept of the idea as a configuration from the introduction to the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. His essays are the articulations of Benjamin's "ideas" as constellations of elements in whose texture the truth, ephemeral and timely, is to become visible. The general features of their conceptions are almost identical. The role of fantasy within it is not, however. When it comes to the function and power of fantasy, a major difference arises between Adorno's and Benjamin's understandings. For Benjamin, genuine fantasy is not an active element of our thinking that would actively take part in the creation of constellations. Fantasy is a purely receptive, uncreative faculty for him.²³ According to Benjamin, fantasy is a de-forming passive power that is a genuine feature of our relating to reality while for Adorno it is rather an active feature of our thought *about* the reality that takes part in the creation of its representation within a constellation. Adorno's understanding of fantasy as an "anticipatory desire" suggests that fantasy cannot remain passive while confronted with an object of thinking. His introduction of *exakte Phantasie* as an organon of philosophical thinking attributes to it an active role in the generation of the constellations. As he states in his lecture *Actuality of Philosophy*, fantasy *originally generates* constellation's individual aspects. Hence, although Adorno purposely uses Benjamin's terminology, as far as the problem of fantasy is concerned, he significantly develops it and goes beyond Benjamin's original intention and his final idea differs from Benjamin's.

The problem of lack of fantasy

The notion of fantasy emerges briefly also in Adorno's insights into life in a late capitalist society. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer note that the enlightenment thinking's goal is to "dispel the myth, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge."²⁴ Some pages later the au-

23 W. Benjamin, "Aphorisms on Imagination and Color." In *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913-1926*, 48.

24 T.W. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, California: Stanford

thors add that “the technical facilitation of existence, the continuance of domination demands the fixation of instincts by greater repression” and that the fantasy then “withers”.²⁵ These remarks lay the basis for another feature of fantasy we can observe in Adorno’s texts, namely the issue of consequences of its ousting from thinking.

Adorno marks the lack of fantasy as a symptom of intellectually undesired practices of modern society in his essays about mass culture. Fantasy as an organon of gathering together “the discrete elements of the real into its truth” gets in the modern situation “repudiated as an improper presumption.”²⁶ Products of mass culture do not require deployment of fantasy or any intellectually strenuous performance from its consumers and through their ubiquity, they even actively choke these faculties of the individuals. We encounter this for example in filmmaking:

“Far more strongly than the theatre of illusion, film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in fantasy ... without losing the thread; thus it trains those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality. The withering of fantasy and spontaneity in the consumer of culture today need not be traced back to psychological mechanisms. The products themselves, especially the most characteristic, the sound film, cripple those faculties through their objective makeup.”²⁷

In short, Adorno complains: “Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse.”²⁸ He also marks the lack of fantasy as a source of the “neurotic feeling of powerlessness” that is “intimately bound up with boredom”.²⁹ The problem is the following:

“Fantasy is suspected of being only sexual curiosity and long-

University Press, 2002), 1.

25 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 27-28.

26 T. W. Adorno, “Scheme of Mass Culture.” In *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 64-65.

27 Adorno, Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 99-100. “Imagination” from the original translation has been replaced by “fantasy”.

28 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 25.

29 T. W. Adorno, “Free Time.” In *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 192.

ing for forbidden by the spirit of a science which is no longer spirit. Those who want to adapt must learn increasingly to curb their fantasy. ... The lack of fantasy which is cultivated and inculcated by society renders people helpless in their free time. The impertinent question of what people should do with the vast amount of free time now at their disposal ... is based upon this very lack of fantasy."³⁰

Adorno's criticism here aims at the fact that the modern way of life of western society, despite being filled with prosperity, carries within itself this germ of regression, or rather allows it to come into existence. He even marks it as the "reason why people have remained chained to their work, and to system which trains them for work, long after that system has ceased to require their labour."³¹

We can put these passages in direct connection with one of Adorno's observations in his *Minima Moralia*.

"Few things separate more profoundly the mode of life befitting an intellectual from that of the bourgeois than the fact that the former acknowledges no alternative between work and recreation. ... Its freedom is the same as that which bourgeois society reserves exclusively for relaxation and, by this regimentation, at once revokes. Conversely, anyone who knows freedom finds all the amusements tolerated by this society unbearable, and apart from his work, which admittedly includes what the bourgeois relegate to non-working hours as 'culture', has no taste for substitute pleasures."³²

This point together with the former passages from the essays on mass culture implies that genuine intellectual life should, according to Adorno, resist the "neurotic feeling of powerlessness" concealed in boredom. Genuine intellectuals according to Adorno do not succumb to the way of life that leads to this masked feeling of desperation and we can assume that according to Adorno they simply should not experience a sense of boredom. They exercise the freedom understood as "that of a man pur-

30 Adorno, "Free Time", 192. The translation has been modified.

31 Adorno, "Free Time", 192.

32 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 130.

suing his own ends, ends that are not directly and totally exhausted by social ends."³³ This freedom Adorno observes both as an external feature of the way of leading one's life and his way of thinking and dealing with experiential material. Adorno claims that "the will without physical impulses, impulses that survive weakened, in fantasy, would not be a will"³⁴ and thereby stresses fantasy's importance for the exercising of intellectual freedom.

Adorno illustrates these reflections by claiming that one could hardly imagine "Nietzsche in an office, with a secretary minding the telephone in the anteroom, at his desk until 5 o'clock" and later "playing golf after the day's work was done."³⁵ He also complains in one of his lectures about freedom that he has to "perform too many administrative duties and these keep me from what I regard as my most important tasks, tasks I can find time for only by stealing time from unavoidable chores" marking it as "the concrete form in which we experience the question of freedom and unfreedom today."³⁶ Both of these images present examples of external unfreedom that according to Adorno genuine intellectuals should be able to resist better than others.

Concluding remarks

Adorno generally marks the ability to use fantasy as "bound up with educational privilege and leisure" belonging in its "pure form" rather to the "philosophical concept of art."³⁷ The picture Adorno sketches in this regard is undoubtedly one of the reasons why he is often accused of being a strong intellectual elitist. His idea of intellectual freedom that exercises genuine fantasy openly implies that it shall be a privilege of only a small group of individuals who possess certain intellectual background

33 Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, 261.

34 Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, 241. "Imagination" from the original translation has been replaced by "fantasy".

35 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 130.

36 Adorno, *History and Freedom Lectures 1964-1965* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 205.

37 Adorno, "Scheme of Mass Culture", 65.

and education as well as means to exercise them. The environment in which Adorno lived as well as the lives of intellectuals he admired – such as Kafka or Benjamin – probably explain the picture that Adorno sketches as well as the impressions from which it emerged.

It is uncertain whether Adorno would be willing to admit that his idea of fantasy and the account of freedom it helps to enact is achievable also for others than for such specific intellectuals. We can only hope for this on the basis that it explicitly pits intellectuals and bourgeoisie against each other, not intellectuals and all other people but this cannot be taken as any definitive proof. Casting Adorno a bit aside, it can be certainly argued that exercising this element of thinking may be rather bound with the existence of rich inner life, which depends rather on emotional maturity and ability of self-reflection than on intellectual background and education. Whether or not, Adorno's vision and analysis of the elements of modern western society can be extended in such a direction without significant withering of the original thesis. In other words, even though the elitism of the conception is undeniable, it is not its essential element.

Apart from this problem, Adorno's presentation of the issue of fantasy is generally ephemeral and at some moments problematic. He does not unravel its meaning within a clearer disquisition as he does with other concepts such as freedom. Adorno's reason for this course of action, as mentioned, is the idea of the undesirability of complete transparency of thought to itself. In this case, it is based on the idea of an alternative philosophical method whose essence does not lie in following cartesian rules of analysis, but instead, intuitively letting itself be led by its object, wherever the object takes it. His presentation of exact fantasy corresponds with the opaque nature he ascribes to it and therefore it eliminates the inner contradiction that would rise in the case of its comprehensive and schematic introduction. Fantasy cannot be schematically explained in depth once it is understood as an emotional and not fully classifiable feature of thought; we are to glance at its gist in the different facets it takes in various contexts in which we encounter it. This idea of Adorno's, as many others, carries one of the main qualities of his, and undeniably

also Benjamin's, thinking: constant notice that there is not necessarily one central correct way of philosophical thinking, which is a matter that in his view becomes even more vital under conditions of formal freedom.

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