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Art Between Affect and Indifference in Hegel, Adorno, and Rancière[1]

When Hegel asserts fine art in its autonomy as the proper object of aesthetics, he takes great care to unbind the understanding of art's self-determination from any kind of affective heteronomy. The introduction to his *Lectures on Aesthetics* makes it clear that the philosophy of art should not be interested in the way art stimulates, expresses, or represents feelings or affects. Art should rather be discussed in terms of "its free independence," which allows it to convey "the most comprehensive truths of the spirit."[2] Even though these truths are indeed meant to be felt (art presents them primarily "to feeling," *die Empfindung*[3]), they are independent of what the contingencies of subjective feelings might make of them. Hegel's point, however, is not that our experiences of artworks should thus be characterised by Kantian disinterestedness. It is rather the artwork that is indifferent in itself, with indifference being the crucial characteristic of its free, independent form of appearance. Artistic autonomy thus radiates the indifference of a self-sufficient divinity: "The ideal work of art confronts us like a blessed god."[4]

Since Hegel, the autonomy of art has been contested from a variety of positions that have uncovered different kinds of hidden economies – affective or otherwise – beneath the indifferent surface of aesthetic appearance or challenged art to step down from its ivory tower to tackle the social realities it is entangled with. What we will be interested in, however, are the ways in which such concerns have been addressed by two thinkers who have – in the context of aesthetic theory of the last 50 years – perhaps most strongly *reaffirmed* the autonomy

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2 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol. I*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988, p. 7.

3 *Ibid*., pp. 8, 101.

4 *Ibid*., p. 157.

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of art along with the indifference of its form of appearance, namely Theodor W. Adorno and, more recently, Jacques Rancière. Both have, in their own ways, reaffirmed artistic autonomy precisely by acknowledging its immanent moment of heteronomy. I will focus on what this entails in terms of the affectivity related to the artistic form of appearance. For Adorno, as we will see, aesthetics should still focus on the truths conveyed by artworks, although the truths in question can no longer be defined by their free independence. Any truth should now be understood historically as an expression of suffering caused by social antagonisms. Yet the only means art has of expressing this suffering is the autonomous aesthetic form, which is ultimately indifferent to (and even complicit in) suffering. This presents us with a fundamental antinomy of art. Rancière, on the other hand, fully reaffirms the indifference of artistic appearance. He does not, however, set this indifference in opposition to social suffering, but presents it precisely as the displacing power of art to intervene in the politically charged field of sensible experience (in what he calls "the distribution of the sensible"). In this way, the indifference of appearance can be seen precisely as the properly artistic power to affect.

These considerations allow us to recalibrate the terms of the discussion. Instead of thinking art as placed between affective heteronomies and indifferent autonomy, we can now observe not only how a moment of affective heteronomy is a crucial part of the dialectics of artistic autonomy, but also how the indifference of artistic appearance is itself affective. Returning to Hegel, we can now notice that the divine indifference of the artwork is not to be understood as the absence of any affect, but precisely as a specific affected state: the ideal artwork exists as "sensuously blessed in itself, enjoying and delighting in its own self."[5] This raises the question of whether beyond the affects involved in the creation, reception, and content of artworks there is an affectivity related to art itself, to the very form of its indifferent appearance.

Below, I will first discuss the ambiguous role Hegel assigns to indifference in his *Lectures*. What is the difference between the divine bliss of indifference that he so vehemently affirms and the indifference of subjective feeling he initially denounces? I will then discuss the dialectics of artistic autonomy in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* through the antinomy of expression (of suffering) and the (in-

5 *Ibid*.

different) form it takes. We will see how despite his belief that form neutralises suffering, he nevertheless identifies two affective states immanent to form itself: its melancholy and its promise of happiness. Finally, I will discuss Rancière's reaffirmation of indifference (which is partly derived from his reading of Hegel) and the way he describes its affectivity and effectivity in what he calls "the aesthetic regime of art."

The bliss of indifference

On the very first page of his *Lectures* we find Hegel expressing his doubts regarding the way the relatively new philosophical discipline of aesthetics has been established. As a science of sensation and feeling, aesthetics was invented "at the period in Germany when works of art were treated with regard to the feelings they were supposed to produce, as, for instance, the feeling of pleasure, admiration, fear, pity, and so on."[6] If we are to properly establish aesthetics as the philosophy of art, as Hegel intends to, the way art affects us should not be considered essential – art should rather be thought of as independent in its end and means. Neither should we consider the proper content of art to be "the whole gamut of feelings which the human heart in its inmost and secret recesses can bear," for this only gives us an "empty form" for any kind of content.[7] Even as the origin of the creative act, feelings are denied their importance since artistic expression originates in man as "a *thinking* consciousness."[8]

Why is it that feeling in terms of creation, reception, or content cannot be considered important by the philosophy of art? Hegel describes feeling as "the indefinite dull region of the spirit."[9] As such, feeling is no guarantee of concreteness or authenticity. On the contrary, it is an affair of subjectivity in its most abstract, empty form. Feelings depend on the specificities of each individual subject and have nothing to do with the thing itself – in this case, art: "Feeling remains a purely subjective emotional state of mind in which the concrete thing vanishes, contracted into a circle of the greatest abstraction."[10] In short, feeling is all subjectivity and no substance.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
7 *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47.
8 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
9 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Philosophy is rather concerned with art in its freedom and the truth it immanently conveys. As such, art belongs to the highest region of the spirit and touches upon substance itself. Having "the absolute Idea" as its content, art is the "sensuous presentation of the Absolute itself."[11] In contrast to religion and philosophy, the other two forms of presenting the Absolute, artistic presentation nevertheless still operates in the realm of appearance and remains aimed at our capacity to sense and to feel.[12] Art presents the Idea as appearance, but this is "a special kind of appearance," of *Schein*, which goes beyond the immediacy of the external world of the senses and the internal world of feelings.[13] This is a form of appearance that is "itself essential to essence," since it shows how essential it is for the truth to appear.[14] Art thus has the task of delivering adequate sensuous presentations of the absolute Idea – presentations in which the Idea and its appearance are one. Artistic beauty or "the Ideal" will thus be defined by "the immediate unity and correspondence" between "the Idea and its configuration as a concrete reality."[15]

The story of the conceptual and historical development of art that Hegel presents in his *Lectures* is the story of the establishment and dissolution of the Ideal through different forms of art: in the symbolic form of art, the relation between the Idea and its appearance is still external; in the classical form, the correspondence between the two is then fully achieved; finally, in the romantic form, their unity disintegrates, which signals the infamous "end of art." How, then, does the fully achieved Ideal appear? Following Schiller, who in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* modelled the aesthetic form of free appearance on an ancient statue of the Roman goddess Juno, the serenity of ancient gods carved in stone also serves Hegel as the perfect embodiment of the Ideal, i.e. the aesthetic appearance adequate to the absolute Idea. After having banished feelings from aesthetics, Hegel nevertheless describes the artistic Ideal in terms of the affective state radiated by ancient statues of Olympic gods. What characterises their ideality is first and foremost a certain kind of affective indifference: "In this respect, amongst the fundamental characteristics of the Ideal we may put at the top this serene peace and bliss, this self-enjoyment in its own achiev-

11 *Ibid*., p. 79.
12 See *ibid*., p. 101.
13 *Ibid*., p. 8.
14 *Ibid*.
15 *Ibid*., p. 73.

edness and satisfaction."[16] The gods are withdrawn into themselves, indifferent to the interests and concerns related to the particularities of the finite world. This allows them their tranquillity, which, however, is not defined as the absence of affect. On the contrary, it is their indifference itself that they enjoy. The affect proper to art itself, objectively inscribed in the artistic form of appearance, would therefore be this bliss of indifference.

With the disintegration of the classical form of art, however, "the serenity of the Ideal is lost," meaning that in the romantic form that succeeds it "the distraction and dissonance of the heart" prevail.[17] The subjective feeling in its dull indefiniteness returns as part and parcel of art itself and thus has to be accounted for by aesthetics. In the early forms of romantic art, the portrayed "suffering and grief" could still be transformed into a kind of "delight in agony," which came close to the Ideal.[18] As romantic art developed further, however, the feelings became unrestrained and intensified towards romantic irony, in which empty subjectivity reigns supreme. For the ironic ego, "nothing *is treated in and for itself*"; everything is drawn into the sphere of subjective moods, where it "proves to be inherently dissoluble."[19] As an artistic principle, irony brings the "annihilation [of] everything inherently excellent and solid," which means that the basic requirement for the Ideal, the "inherently substantive content," is now lost to complete indifference.[20]

At this point, the question of the difference between the blissful indifference of the Ideal and the dissonant indifference of irony arises. It turns out that the ironic ego, "for which all bonds are snapped," can – just like a Greek god – "live only in the bliss of self-enjoyment."[21] Hegel himself notices the uncanny proximity of this ironic subjective annihilation of the outside world to the Ideal's own self-enjoyment and indifference towards anything external. Just as "irony implies the absolute negativity in which the subject is related to himself in the annihilation of everything specific and one-sided," it is also true for the Ideal

16 *Ibid*., p. 157.
17 *Ibid*., p. 158.
18 *Ibid*.
19 *Ibid*., pp. 64, 595.
20 *Ibid*., p. 160.
21 *Ibid*., p. 66.

that "everything *purely* external in it is extinguished and annihilated."[22] Of course, Hegel's dialectical arsenal has the means to resolve this difficulty: the Ideal is based on "inherently substantive content," while irony dissolves any substantiality; it can achieve its outer determinacy, while irony wallows in the indeterminate; and it only negates the pure externality of the particular in order to manifest its own substantiality, while the ironic ego becomes "hollow and empty."[23] For the Ideal, negativity is only a moment in the dialectical process, while for irony it is confused with the whole.[24]

It is therefore the substantiality of content that provides legitimate grounds for indifference, and gods, indeed, provide plenty of it. The affectivity of the artistic form of appearance is thus put in relation to its subject matter. The ironic dissolution of substantiality also entails the downfall of the Ideal as the romantic form of art brings about the "complete contingency and externality of the material which artistic activity grasps and shapes."[25] The romantic artist is absolved of any substantiality of content, which means that "every material may be indifferent to him."[26]

Indifference, however, again turns out to be involved on both sides of the fence. The indifference toward the subject matter not only brings about the dissolution of the substantive content required by the Ideal, but it also proves to be the Ideal's condition of possibility. Hegel claims, astonishingly, that the special kind of appearance that allows art to present the Absolute – the spiritually produced appearance as distinguished from the immediate appearance of natural materiality – is best observed where art takes as its subject matter the most irrelevant things:

> In contrast to the prosaic reality confronting us, this pure appearance, produced by the spirit, is therefore the marvel of ideality, a mockery, if you like, and an *ironical* attitude to what exist in nature and externally. [...] Now, consequently,

22 *Ibid*., p. 160.
23 *Ibid*., p. 66.
24 See *ibid*., p. 69.
25 *Ibid*., p. 594.
26 *Ibid*., p. 605.

> through this ideality, art at the same time exalts these otherwise worthless objects which, despite their insignificant content, it fixes and makes ends in themselves.[27]

To illustrate his point, Hegel refers to 17th century genre painting in which such insignificant objects are on marvellous display. The indifferent appearance that is coupled in the classical form of art with the substantiality of the content to constitute the aesthetic Ideal thus seems dialectically subverted from two sides. On the one hand, as it turns out, the precondition for the Ideal is the emergence of the ironic appearance essentially unchained from any substantiality of content. On the other, the purity of appearance can best be shown on an example taken deep from the romantic form of art: the style of painting that fully embraced precisely "the complete contingency and externality of the material," in which Hegel in other sections sees an indication of the end of art.

Furthermore, it is among the otherwise worthless things portrayed by genre painting that Hegel rediscovers precisely the gods of Olympus. The indifference of the subject matter takes us back to what is most substantial: appearance affected by the bliss of its own indifference. In a passage brought into the spotlight by Rancière,[28] Hegel expresses his enthusiasm for a couple of paintings by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo that he saw at the Central Gallery in Munich. These genre paintings portray beggar boys, who, despite being "ragged and poor," are "almost like the gods of Olympus":

> But in this poverty and semi-nakedness what precisely shines forth within and without is nothing but complete absence of care and concern – a Dervish could not have less – in the full feeling of their well-being and delight in life. This freedom from care for external things and the inner freedom made visible outwardly is what the Concept of the Ideal requires."[29]

Against the grain of his own grand scheme, Hegel rediscovers the bliss of indifference far from the ancient statues of Olympic gods, deep in the romantic form of art, just when it gives up all substantiality of content in favour of the complete contingency of the subject matter. This entails a major doubt in "the substanti-

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27 *Ibid*., p. 163. (My emphasis.)

28 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul, Verso, London and New York 2013, pp. 21–37.

29 *Ibid*., p. 170.

ality of content," which was supposed to separate the divine indifference from the ironic one. It seems that the bliss of indifference as the affect objectively inscribed in aesthetic appearance can thus be evoked by any represented subject matter whatsoever and can as well become compatible with a variety of moods opened up by the romantic "dissonance of the heart."

The silencing echo

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* remains an heir of the Hegelian philosophical conception of aesthetics by focusing on the "truth-content" (*der Wahrheitsgehalt*) of art in its autonomy. On the other hand, his aesthetics also has to be understood within the wider frame of his reconsideration of the further possibility of philosophical speculation after the political events of the mid 20th century – the project of "negative dialectics" that Adorno sets up in contrast to "the overly positive Hegelian one."[30] Without entering into the complicated matter of Adorno's reading of Hegel, I would like to draw attention to what this implies in terms of the relation between affect and truth. For Adorno, there is an affectivity that does not pertain to the empty form of subjectivity, but rather gives subjectivity its substance, something objective: the suffering that the subject faces in an antagonistic society. In the introduction to *Negative Dialectics* we thus read: "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed."[31] If art is to be considered capable of conveying truth, the expression of (social, historical) suffering should be recognised as the condition of this truth.

It is not, however, its only condition. For what makes art art is not just any kind of expression, but the specific form this expression takes – the specific form of *Schein*, of appearance or semblance.[32] The form of appearance that defines art is autonomous – it is art's very separation from empirical immediacy.[33] Contrary

30 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton, Routledge, London and New York 1973, pp. 15–16.

31 *Ibid*., pp. 17–18.

32 While T. M. Knox translates "*der Schein*" in Hegel's *Lectures* as "pure appearance," R. Hullot-Kentor uses "semblance" in his translation of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.

33 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London and New York 1997, p. 103.

to what some commentators have claimed, Adorno's point is not to subvert autonomous aesthetic form in the name of affective heteronomy.[34] The aim of aesthetics for Adorno – and "the legitimation of [art's] truth depends on this" – is rather "the redemption of semblance," of the autonomous form of appearance.[35] If we want to preserve art's capacity for truth, therefore, the reaffirmation of aesthetic appearance is just as necessary as expressing suffering.

The Hegelian autonomy of artistic appearance is at once materialistically subverted and idealistically reaffirmed by Adorno. The materialist subversion of art's autonomy starts by identifying its emergence and complicity in an antagonistic society. It should be understood as historically produced in the context of the rise of capitalism and the domination of the bourgeoisie: "The artwork's autonomy is, indeed, not a priori but the sedimentation of a historical process that constitutes its concept. [...] The idea of freedom, akin to aesthetic autonomy, was shaped by domination, which it universalized."[36] Its idealist reaffirmation, on the other hand, starts by acknowledging how the illusory aspect of artistic appearance has the capacity to subvert its real origins and provide the expression of what domination represses: "Without the synthesis, which confronts reality as the autonomous artwork, there would be nothing external to reality's spell."[37] If we let its autonomy vanish, art surrenders to the immediate social reality it is supposed to protest against, succumbing to its demands of total identity and communicability. Art's capacity for truth, its ability to express suffering, should therefore not be sought by challenging art's autonomy, infusing it with social content, or making it serve political purposes. It is only made possible by the further development of what in art is its autonomous element,

34 I specifically have in mind here the view of Alain Badiou, who claims that Adorno's aesthetics is all about renouncing form in the name of affect. (See Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. S. Spitzer, Verso, London and New York 2010, pp. 27–54.) Badiou, however, misses the crucial role form has for Adorno in establishing the truth-content of art. For a comparative reading of Badiou's and Adorno's accounts of artistic form, see my chapter "Form and Affect: Artistic Truth in Adorno and Badiou", in: J. Völker (ed.), *Badiou and the German Tradition of Philosophy*, Bloomsbury, London 2019, pp. 197–216.

35 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 107.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 234–235.

namely its form: "Only in the crystallization of its own formal law and not in a passive acceptance of objects does art converge with what is real."[38]

In order to distil its form of appearance, however, the autonomy of art needs to be understood dialectically, acknowledging social and affective heteronomy as its immanent moment. As *expression*, affect becomes immanent to art – and "expression is scarcely to be conceived except as the expression of suffering."[39] As such, expression is art's own "rebellion against semblance, art's dissatisfaction with itself."[40] In line with the "negative" character of Adornian dialectics, the opposed terms do not find reconciliation in a final synthesis, but remain caught up in an antinomy. The two conditions of art's capacity for truth should thus be understood as irreconcilable: "Expression and semblance are fundamentally antithetical. [...] [E]xpression is the element immanent to art through which, as one of its constituents, art defends itself against the immanence that it develops by its law of form."[41] The expression of suffering thus functions as the immanent transcendence of art: it is the heteronomous element within its autonomy. The question is not simply how to find an adequate aesthetic appearance for the expression of suffering – it is the very form of artistic appearance that is fundamentally indifferent to suffering:

> [A]esthetic autonomy remains external to suffering, of which the work is an image and from which the work draws its seriousness. The artwork is not only the echo of suffering, it diminishes it; form, the organon of its seriousness, is at the same time the organon of the neutralization of suffering. Art thereby falls into an unsolvable aporia.[42]

Being indifferent to the very thing it is supposed to give expression to, the artistic form of appearance is the silencing echo of suffering.

From this perspective, it might almost seem as if autonomous appearance is the only and therefore the unavoidable – if undesirable and completely unfitting –

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38 Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Vol. 1*, trans. S. Weber Nicholsen, Columbia University Press, New York 1991, p. 224.

39 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 110.

40 *Ibid*.

41 *Ibid*.

42 *Ibid*., p. 39.

form of the artistic expression of suffering. Yet this would go against the "redemption of semblance" that Adorno states as the goal of his aesthetic theory. The autonomous appearance is also *the* form of expression that suffering deserves. It is a way to "break the spell" of identity and domination that society imposes. The artistic form of identity actually "seeks to aid the nonidentical, which in reality is repressed by reality's compulsion to identity."[43] But how can it do that if it is completely indifferent? How can it be completely external to any affectivity if it is an "image" of an affect and "the organon" for transmitting its seriousness? It seems that just as in Hegel, affectivity returns in Adorno from within the very indifference of the artistic form of appearance. In Adorno, however, this affectivity proves to be deeply ambivalent, since the relation of artistic form to its material is a relation to something lost or non-existent. On the one hand, form is endowed with melancholy, while on the other, it becomes the carrier of a Stendhalian *promesse de bonheur*.[44]

According to Adorno, form should be understood as a process of formalisation, of form-making. Not only does he place the invention of autonomous aesthetic form within the social antagonisms of a certain historical moment, Adorno also understands form itself, in its ideality, as a process that proceeds in a dissonant relation to what it forms. This is where what he calls "the melancholy of form" comes into the picture:

> Form inevitably limits what is formed, for otherwise its concept would lose its specific difference to what is formed. This is confirmed by the artistic labor of forming, which is always a process of selecting, trimming, renouncing. Without rejection there is no form, and this prolongs guilty domination in artworks, of which they would like to be free.[45]

The Hegelian process of establishing the aesthetic Ideal required the annihilation of everything purely external. The same goes for form in Adorno, although this process is now seen as full of irresolvable mourning and guilt. Since form is guilty of enforcing identity on the heterogeneous material, the desired freedom is never fully achieved. Nevertheless, as we have already seen, form is also

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43 *Ibid*., p. 4.

44 I analyse this aspect in more detail in my chapter mentioned in footnote no. 34.

45 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 144.

the only means art has of striving for freedom, of aiding the nonidentical. Form should thus not be denounced despite the suffering it reproduces: "Spirit does not identify the nonidentical: It identifies with it. By pursuing its own identity with itself, art assimilates itself with the nonidentical."[46] Even though the production of aesthetic form is itself an act of identification, it does not merely produce the loss of everything that does not fit within an identity, but manages to *identify directly with what is lost – with the nonidentical itself*.

Even though Adorno makes no reference to it, "the melancholy of form" thus brings us close to Freud's famous definition of melancholia as identification with a lost object. What distinguishes melancholia from mourning, according to Freud, is the unconscious character of the loss and thereby the unidentifiable nature of the lost object.[47] It can never be made clear what it was that was actually lost and therefore there is no closure to the work of mourning. The lost object of the melancholic is, strictly speaking, something nonidentical. Going back to Adorno, the loss form produced in the act of forming – "the process of selecting, trimming, renouncing" – could still be considered as the identifiable loss acknowledged by the work of mourning. Its identification *with* the nonidentical, on the other hand, gives a properly melancholic aspect to artistic form – the unsurpassable identification with a lost but unidentified object. It also reveals the truly immanent aspect of such affectivity. The melancholy of form is no longer a question of the relation between form and the material that it forms, but rather concerns form's identity to the nonidentical – its other that the process of formalisation itself produces.

With this in mind, we can understand how form is not only a violator, but also a protector. By assimilating itself with the nonidentical, artistic form provides the appearance of the latter – of something that cannot exist in a world ruled by identity and domination. And with appearance, Adorno claims, also comes a promise of realisation: "By its form alone art promises what is not; it registers objectively, however refractedly, the claim that because the nonexistent appears it must indeed be possible."[48] By making what cannot exist appear, art's prom-

46 *Ibid*., p. 134.

47 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV*, trans. James Strachey, Hogarth Press, London 1957, p. 245.

48 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 82.

ise is "bound up with the sensual" and "fused with an element of sensuous happiness."[49] Adorno thus expands Stendhal's definition of beauty as the promise of happiness to artistic appearance as such. The promise does not, however, delay happiness – art as promise is itself an "image of bliss" and therefore immediately affective.[50]

Adorno's introduction of affective heteronomy thus goes hand in hand with a reaffirmation of artistic autonomy. The antinomy of expression and semblance ends up drawn into the dialectics of autonomy itself. Even though Adorno first sets the need to lend a voice to suffering in opposition to the indifference of the autonomous form of artistic appearance, it turns out not only that it is precisely such form that has the ability to lend the voice, but also that this ability of form stems from it being immanently affected. It is finally its very indifference, its very separation, that immanently affects form and thereby makes indifferent semblance the organon of affective expression.

From indignation to curiosity

Compared to Adorno, Rancière's work provides a different view of the formation and destiny of aesthetic autonomy. Even though he would agree that autonomy cannot be properly understood if we miss the element of heteronomy that cuts through it, for Rancière the issue is not confronting autonomy with heteronomy. Rather it is artistic autonomy itself that is established precisely as the heteronomisation of art. Instead of developing a dialectics of their intertwinement, Rancière thus posits their relation as a direct unity of opposites: "In sum, the aesthetic autonomy of art is only another name for its heteronomy. The aesthetic identification of art is the principle of a generalized disidentification."[51] Art became autonomous in a moment when it could no longer be clearly defined by the specificity of its practice and its objects, when the dividing line between fine and applied arts became blurred, and when the distinction between substantial

[49] *Ibid*., p. 277.

[50] *Ibid*. Such bliss can, however, no longer really be enjoyed since the culture industry started to exploit it. An element of falseness clings to all images of happiness in an antagonistic society, which is why art must avoid producing them and therefore "break its promise in order to stay true to it" (*Ibid*., p. 311).

[51] Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Polity, Cambridge and Malden 2009, p. 67.

and insignificant subject matter collapsed. The paradox of autonomous art is that it is only "recognisable by its lack of any distinguishing characteristics – by its indistinction."[52] It is no longer clear how it is supposed to be produced and who or what may or may not take part in it.

The establishment of the autonomy of art was a part of the "aesthetic revolution" that from the end of the 18th century onwards introduced new ways of identifying, perceiving, understanding, and making art, i.e. what Rancière calls "the aesthetic regime of art."[53] The revolution subverted the principles of the previously dominant "representational regime," which defined various representational forms of producing certain kinds of objects specific to individual arts. This regime also presupposed a range of distinctions and hierarchies between noble and base subject matter and the adequate forms of their artistic representation. In contrast to this, the aesthetic regime identifies artistic objects and practices in terms of a specific form of sensible experience they give rise and belong to – the kind of free, autonomous appearance acknowledged and theorised by the likes of Kant, Schiller, and Hegel. On the one hand, this autonomous "sensorium," personified by Schiller's and Hegel's accounts of the idleness and indifference of the gods, is "foreign to the ordinary forms of sensory experience."[54] On the other hand, art only exists "as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it," affirming the intrusion of "the prose of the world" and its indifference rather than distinguishing something substantial as its proper content.[55] While the representational regime relied on the correspondences between various subject matters and adequate forms of their artistic representation, with the aesthetic regime anything can, in principle, be the subject matter of art, with the manner of representation becoming a matter of invention rather than a matter of adequacy. The aesthetic indifference is thus also defined by Rancière as "the rupture of all specific relations between a sensible form and the expression of an exact meaning."[56] What for Hegel was a sign of art's demise – the indifference of the subject matter no longer in unity with its form of representation – is actually the emergence of a new regime of art according to Rancière. And yet Rancière

52 *Ibid*., p. 66.

53 *Ibid*., p. 10. See also Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution", *Maska* 32 (185–186/2017), pp. 24–31.

54 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p. 27.

55 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis*, p. x.

56 *Ibid*., p. 18.

assigns to Hegel an important place in the genealogy of the aesthetic regime. In *Aisthesis*, he dedicates a chapter to Hegel's rediscovery of the aesthetic Ideal in Murillo's paintings: the beggar boys appear as "little gods of the street" calling for a future in the midst of what is, for Hegel, art as a thing of the past.[57]

According to Rancière's view, it is a misunderstanding to set the indifference of the artistic form of appearance in opposition to the substantiality of the content it is supposed to present or express – be it the Hegelian Absolute or the Adornian objective suffering. The aesthetic appearance is free precisely because it "suspends the ordinary connections not only between appearance and reality, but also between form and matter, activity and passivity, understanding and sensibility."[58] Rather than the imposition of form upon matter, it is the suspension of this very imposition. It is a form of experience that opens up to the prose of the world – again, just as Hegel feared.

Far from making art apolitical, however, it is precisely "as an autonomous form of experience that art concerns and infringes on the political division of the sensible."[59] It is therefore in its separation and indifference and not in its content or commitment that the politics of art resides. Rancière explains how Schiller, long before Adorno, recognised how the aesthetic "power of 'form' over 'matter' is the power of the class of intelligence over the class of sensation, of men of culture over men of nature."[60] Its suspension therefore implies for Schiller a revolution of experience that could go further in the direction of abolishing domination than the French revolution could. In its separation as an autonomous sphere, the aesthetic sensorium thus threatens to revolutionise what it separated itself from.

There is thus a (meta)politics of indifference inscribed in the artistic form of appearance via its very separation from the social world. This explains why the work of an author such as Gustave Flaubert, by no means a revolutionary, whose ideal was to write a book about nothing, a book made of absolute style from the standpoint of which the subject matter becomes a matter of indifference, could

57 *Ibid*., pp. 21–37.
58 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p. 30.
59 *Ibid*., p. 32.
60 *Ibid*., p. 31.

be accused by his contemporaries of being overly democratic. Rancière explains how, due to their indifference, his novels achieve a democratisation of sensory experience: "The work that desires nothing, the work without any point of view, which conveys no message and has no care either for democracy or for anti-democracy, this work is 'egalitarian' by dint of its very indifference, by which it suspends all preference, all hierarchy."[61] For Rancière, this implies that the autonomous artwork is political, but not in the same way as it was for Adorno, since there is no social disharmony to express and no promises to keep. What the artwork achieves politically, it achieves in the immediacy of its displacement of the relations that permeate the established forms of sensory experience. Does this mean that the only true political art is the apolitical one – the position taken by Adorno? Just as Rancière does not simply repoliticise art, but acknowledges a politics of its indifference, so too he does not dismiss political art. If there is a politics of the indifferent, we may ask ourselves what its implications are for art that actually touches on the political, that gives explicit expression to social suffering, and that aims to affect its spectators or readers. According to Rancière, the problem of political art – i.e. art that evokes its capacity to affect the audience politically – is that it cannot do away with the indifference of the artistic form of appearance. The question is rather how it engages with it. The classical strategy of political art is based on "a straight line between perception, affection, comprehension and action," the assumption that the expression of suffering will affect spectators in a way that will make them aware of the situation and motivate them to change it.[62] But over time, a weakened belief in this causal chain led to a reversal of the critical discourses surrounding art: expressions of suffering were now understood in the context of the spectacle of images imposed on us by society. According to this new understanding, perception still leads to affection, but actually diverts us from comprehending and acting. What we should thus be aware of is finally that extreme suffering cannot and should not be represented and that it is this shock of unrepresentability that art should ultimately try to evoke.[63]

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61 *Ibid*., p. 40.

62 Rancière Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Verso, London and New York 2009, p. 103.

63 In this context, it is interesting to have a look at Rancière's intervention in the debates on the unrepresentability of suffering, related specifically to concentration camps and Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*. According to Rancière, it was the old, representational regime that defined the limits of what is representable and what kind of representation

For Rancière, the problem of such forms of artistic politics is that they try to "sidestep the incalculable tension between political dissensuality and aesthetic indifference."[64] While the classical form of artistic politics calls for art to step down from its ivory tower to a make a difference, its critical reversal draws its strength from shattering art's indifferent form of appearance against the unrepresentable. Yet the aesthetic regime of art offers another way of understanding the political capacity of art, one that passes through the aesthetic indifference itself: "the aesthetic rupture arranges a paradoxical form of efficacy, one that relates to a disconnection."[65] The line is neither straight nor broken; it is simply disconnected or interrupted. Rancière thus draws our attention to artworks and artistic practices that make use precisely of the irreducible tension between dissensus and indifference.

One such work Rancière presents is a photograph by the French artist Sophie Ristelhueber. The photograph from her 2005 *WB* series shows a figureless rocky landscape crossed by a straight country road. What draws our attention, however, is not the road itself and the abstract composition it instils, but a pile of rocks that blocks it and suggests, at the same time, the continuity with the surrounding landscape and the discontinuity of the road that crosses it. On the one hand, the pile is thus "harmoniously integrated into an idyllic landscape"[66] and thereby into the artistic form of appearance in all its indifference. On the other hand, the indication of a disturbance within this harmony that the rocks present is enhanced by the meaning they gain in the context of Ristelhueber's series of photographs. *WB* stands for West Bank, which is also the location where the photograph was taken: the pile of rocks on the road turns out to be an Israeli

is adequate to a specific subject matter. In the aesthetic regime, however, there are "no longer any inherent limits to representation" and therefore nothing is inherently unrepresentable. (Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Verso, London and New York 2007, p. 137.) Artistic representations of the Shoah, Rancière shows, actually rely on the fictional means invented within the aesthetic regime (*ibid*., pp. 123–130). The problem is not whether such events can be represented by images and fictions, but how such images and fictions configure or reconfigure the "relations between the visible and the invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the unsaid," etc. (Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 102.)

64 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran, Continuum, London and New York 2010, p. 151.

65 *Ibid*., p. 139.

66 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 103.

roadblock on Palestinian territory. Instead of representing suffering or relying on the recognisable emblems of the Middle East conflict, the artist focused on the traces the conflict leaves on the landscapes. The result is an image fully inscribed in the indifferent aesthetic form of appearance, which entails that its "meaning or effect is not anticipated" by the image itself.[67] Even the object that draws our attention by indicating a difference – the interruption of the straight line of the road – does not introduce political heteronomy to the image, but itself takes place within the same aesthetic apparatus of appearance.

What Ristelheuber thus achieves, according to Rancière, is "a displacement of the exhausted affect of indignation to a more discreet affect, an affect of indeterminate effect – curiosity, the desire to see closer up."[68] Instead of relying on the affect provoked by inscribing suffering in the image, the photograph makes use of the indeterminacy of aesthetic appearance, which makes us confused but curious as to what exactly it is that we are looking at and how to understand it. Moving from suffering to indifference does not neutralise the politics inscribed in the image, but rather suggests another kind of politics, one "based on the variation of distance, the resistance of the visible and the uncertainty of effects."[69] The indifference of artistic appearance thus also constitutes its specific form of efficacy.

While both Hegel and Adorno affirmed the autonomy of the artistic form of appearance in its indifference, they also attempted to ground it in some kind of substantiality. In Hegel, the appearance of the Absolute manifests its substantiality by enjoying its own indifference. In Adorno, indifferent form earns its truth-content in a dialectical confrontation with objective suffering. We have seen, however, that the self-enjoyment of the Absolute can flourish just as well among child beggars as it does among Olympic gods. We have also seen how, in the final instance, it is its immanent affectivity that enables indifferent form to accommodate suffering in the medium of its neutralisation. What these findings entail – and we have found some of these consequences already laid out in Rancière's work – is that instead of looking for something that would redeem the aesthetic form of appearance from its frivolity, we should rather take seriously its very indifference. It is there that the affective capacity of aesthetic appearance ultimately resides.

67 *Ibid*.
68 *Ibid*., p. 104.
69 *Ibid*., p. 105.