

**The Neo-
Enlightenment
Aesthetics
of Jürgen
Habermas**

**Otília e
Paulo Arantes**

ARTICLE IN THE JOURNAL

Cultural Critique

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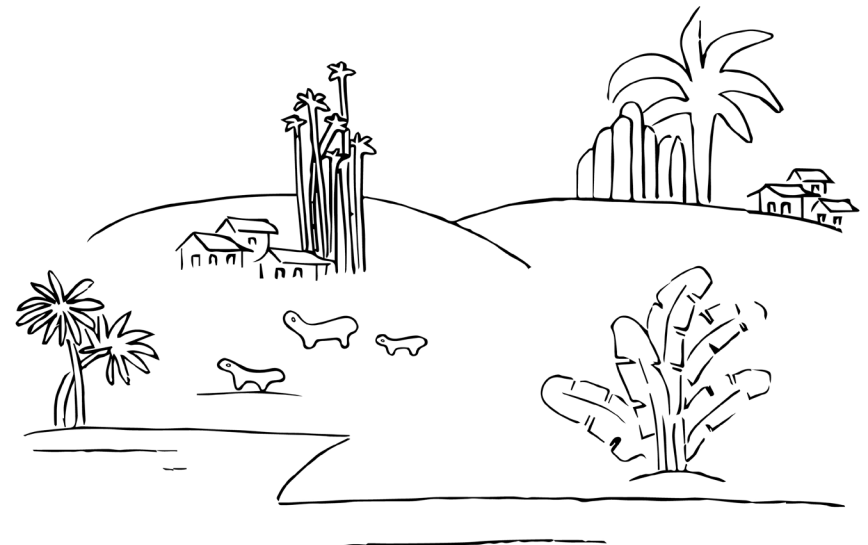
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Sentimento da Dialética

A SPACE OF ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORKS OF OTÍLIA AND PAULO ARANTES



TARSILA



Tarsila do Amaral. Paisagem antropofágica – I, 1929 c –pencil on paper, 18,0 X 22,9 cm.
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The new time of the world demands that intellectuals assume responsibility for using the force of ideas to understand and transform the world. Philosophers Otilia Beatriz Fiori Arantes and Paulo Eduardo Arantes have engaged in criticism as active public intellectuals for more than 50 years, moving between different areas of the humanities and cultural studies, with different audiences, in different places. Reaffirming a sense of collective intellectual production, the Sentimento da Dialética Collection is a space of encounter with the works of Otilia and Paulo Arantes, made available in free e-books. Over time, these works have found an increasingly broad and plural audience, made up of Brazilian students, new intellectuals, and activists. And they have contributed to the contemporary movement against the commodification of knowledge, in favour of the commons, in favour of another world.

Introduction

Silvia López¹

In the judgement of Roberto Schwarz, Paulo and Otilia Arantes' book *Um ponto cego no projeto moderno de Jürgen Habermas* (1992) introduces Brazil to a new level of critical philosophical prose, a prose of sobriety and intellectual intensity seldom seen there.² The essay "The Neo-Enlightenment Aesthetics of Jürgen Habermas" was prepared especially for the issue 49 of *Cultural Critique* (2001) as an extract of the argument presented in their book (which remain untranslated into English). While Habermas has seldom addressed the question of aesthetic directly, here the authors reconstruct why architecture becomes the aesthetic site of predilection for him. What the authors call a "neo-Enlightenment aesthetics" in Habermas involves a reconfiguration of the judgement of taste, as conceived in the Enlightenment, but now projected through the lens of communicative action where the rules of engagement have left the spectacle behind. A Kantian aesthetic with airs of Benjamin and Brecht, they

¹ Professor at Carlton College. Guest editor of *Cultural Critique* 49, "Critical Theory in Latin America", University of Minnesota Press, 2001. (The present text is an extract of the editor's Introduction).

² For Schwarz's critical assessment of this book, see his "Pelo prisma da arquitetura", in *Sequências brasileiras: Ensaios* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999).

contend, became the ingredients which Habermas tried to get beyond the impasse that Pere Bürger had already pointed out with regard to idealist aesthetics, namely how the process of the autonomization of art is simultaneously a process both of its consolidation and its eventual demise. How then to talk about aesthetics after Avant-Garde? For Habermas, architecture becomes a place of encounter for his own ideas about the public sphere, rational engagement, and aesthetic judgement.

In their analysis of the Brazilian architectural Avant-Garde, the authors identify the utopian impulse that led the Brazilian intellectual to be revolutionary in the arts as well in politics. This perspective led to the realization that the dearest projects of the Avant-Garde could be nothing more than the indication of a parallel, equally liberating, dimension in the social realm. The Arantes argue that this was an ideology that did not allow people like Niemeyer and Lucio Costa, the great urban designers of Brasilia, to recognize the relationship between their own activity and the predatory and authoritarian character of Brazilian modernization. In other words, the most sensational accomplishment of the historical program of the Avant-Garde in Brazil served as an alibi for a project of modernization that would only reinforce the conditions of *ordem e progresso* of the military regime that came to power later in the 1960s. In the history of the Brazilian Avant-Garde, Brasilia comes to symbolize the absolute failure of Avant-Garde abstraction and its deployment in a peripheral context.

How does one think Modern Architecture as mass culture in a place like Brazil? Where would one locate the social and productive base necessary for the architectural rationality desired by the moderns? The Arantes develop the idea

that the excesses of Modern Architecture are only possible in the authoritarian conditions of the Third World where rampant experimentation signals the experience of a deluded elite who desired a modernity that was not otherwise to be had. The utopian impulse of architecture and its objectives of social redemption through the new arrangement of inhabited spaces in fact yielded its opposite. In Brasilia the monstrous modernist edifices juxtaposed with misery of the shantytowns that surrounded them are both part of the logic of modernization.

The Arantes argue that the strategic place reserved for architecture by Habermas, who in the 1980s made two powerful interventions in defense of Modern Movement,³ issues from a neo-Enlightenment aesthetic disposition, turned preferentially toward public genres. It is difficult to deny the force of Habermas' claim that the logic of the demonstrative privilege suitable to a mass art such as Modern Architecture, precisely because it demands collective reception, brings the most advanced aesthetic experience into the center of social life and transforms the user into a specialist. For him a reasoning bourgeois public derives from a nascent socialization of the judgement of taste, a process that deprives specialists of their expertise. In fact, the decomposition of the public space under the pressure of the administered world effects the metamorphosis of a public that once reasoned about culture into a public that merely consumes it. Thus, Habermas' investment in architecture as the ideal aesthetic site follows rather obviously from such convictions.

The Arantes, however, contest Habermas' abstract defense of Modern Architecture by showing how, in Brazil,

³ In speeches delivered at the Venice Biennial and upon receiving the Adorno Prize.

each phase of its development is intimately tied to specific moments in capitalism development. They follow in Adorno's footsteps in arguing that the site of Modern Architecture in Brazil is a cipher of glass and concrete that evinces the silence of the spellbound rather than the emergence of a public genre with enlightenment functions.

The Neo-Enlightenment Aesthetics of Jürgen Habermas¹

Unlike the founding fathers of the intellectual family from which he descends, for whom aesthetic theory and social criticism always went together, Habermas, while in principle never rejecting such a convergence, nevertheless rarely spoke about issues involving the future of contemporary art, much less in a systematic fashion. Seemingly the time has passed, at least from the perspective of the conceptual strategy outlined by our author, in which the deciphering of the modern aesthetic experience could present itself as a privileged vantage point for the critical perusal of advanced capitalism.²

1. Translated by Greg Horvath and Marcos César de Paula Soares. Published in *Cultural Critique* n. 49, Fall 2001, University of Minnesota Press.

2. This was the case to such a degree that, even in a remote study of 1960, meant, on the one hand, to renovate the marxist concept of Criticism, and, on the other hand, to disarm the positivist disjunction between theory and practice, Habermas observes at one point that Marx himself would never have agreed to widen the recently-elaborated notion of Ideologiekritik (whose origin was the Criticism of Political Economy) to the point of including modern art among the sources of knowledge, legitimate though different from the scientific one (to speak in a young-Hegelian manner, together with the other figures of the Spirit - religion and speculative philosophy - art would continue hitched to false consciousness of a false world). And he interpreted in the following way the lesson of Adorno: if it is true that modern art bases its cause in the reconstitution of existent contradictions - to coin a phrase, a presentation of contemporary alienation by turning its back on the world - then a bit of the current consciousness, unlike what the unidimensional

The aesthetic dimension would no longer be a problematizing and normative focus in the current reconstitution of the Western process of modernization. Habermas no longer believed – if not in an exclusive, at least in a prominent way – in the cognitive competence that Adorno attributed in *extremis* to art. Since Adornian criticism, condemned to paraphrase due to its obsession with protecting the non-identical, is always threatened by abstraction, at once real and discursive, which it nonetheless cannot renounce, it can at best demonstrate why truth found a refuge in the most radical works of modern art (rebellious against the aesthetic appearance without, however, letting go of the autonomy that it alone can guarantee), but cannot extract that truth from such a ciphered system without transgressing the metaphorical or conceptual prohibition of the image of reconciliation. In these circumstances, the thought that was formerly oriented by the immanent reflection of artistic form, believing that by doing so it was breaking away from the horizon-less path of the *Aufklärung*, intentionally recedes to the condition of a gesture.³

However, in these last years the ebb and flow of the ideological tide ended up pushing Habermas toward current artistic complications. Thus, the unexpected took place, in the form of a long digression around the main intersection of the aesthetic sensibility of today. As he was dragged by those winds, Habermas crossed paths twice with contemporary architecture – and, even more disconcertingly,

criticism of ideology seeks (whether it be positivist or orthodox marxist), escapes the camera obscura of ideology by equalling the emancipating power of the enlightenment of critical theory.

3. J. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*. Th. McCarthy trans., Boston: Beacon Press, vol.1, 1984, cap.IV,2.4.

– has become something of an untimely ideologue of the Modern Movement.

The first of these encounters was in 1980, at the Venice Biennial, which ushered in the decade by admitting architects standing next to filmmakers and fine artists. An unequivocal sign of the times: it was no longer possible to evaluate what was at stake in the force field into which culture had been transformed without bringing architectonic thought back to the center of the debate. The second intervention came a year later, in the Munich exhibition, “The Other Tradition”, the organizers of which entrusted him with the opening talk. The Venetian exhibition, entitled “Presence of the Past”, is known for the polemical tone that predominated: architects in tune with the *Zeitgeist* (as some of them like to insist, invoking, one does not know whether intentionally, a key term of the historicist tradition) provocatively summoned the past to better confirm the certainty, now grown old in the passing of some decades, that the Modern Movement was really a thing of the past. Habermas did not address the worth of that manifesto in the form of lined up facades on a doubly artificial street. He limited himself to condemning the reversed avant-garde being represented there precisely in the shape of a new historicism, going on to defend cultural modernity, which in his view was threatened.

Months later he would express his thanks for the Adorno Prize given to him by the municipality of Frankfurt with this very counter-manifesto in favor of the continuation of the so-called modern project, *despite all possible objections*. In the talk that was to follow, he would finally get to the heart of the debate. It was with a recapitulation that he responded to the malaise which for a long time insisted on deepening and spreading itself as

architectural modernism became entrenched. He reminded its most recent detractors that this was not the first time that Modern Architecture had been pronounced dead – “and yet it lives on.” Qualifying all the alternative tendencies as neoconservative and granting at most modernist inspiration (but in a defensive version) to some of the allegedly contextualist variants, Habermas in fact sought to redraft the very basis of the Modern Movement. But in such a way that, striving for the “critical continuation of an irreplaceable tradition,” he was able to retie old threads of a story until today poorly told.⁴

Nevertheless, since the aesthetic perspective had been fading, no small number of large difficulties would stem from that forced restoration. We know that the previous ideological decade (the 1980s) took place amongst the countless figures of a new Struggle of the Moderns, which ended up involving French poststructuralism (as well as its North American ramifications) and the New German Critical Theory, affiliated to a mitigated, yet incomplete *Aufklärung*.

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Despite Habermas’ oblique and sporadic treatment of the problems of contemporary aesthetics, it would be wrong

4. See the two J. Habermas’ lectures: “Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt” (1980), in *Kleine Politische Schriften (I-IV)*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981. First published in English: *New German Critique*, n.22, winter 1981, “Modernity versus Postmodernity”. Seyla Ben-Habib trans. Also the same author’s: “Moderne und Postmoderne Architektur”, in *Die Neue Unübersichtlichkeit*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985. English translation: *The New Conservatism*. Cambridge: Mass. University, 1989.

to imagine that he came upon those problems fortuitously, especially since the “interdisciplinary materialism” that marked the formation of Critical Social Theory would not be such if it did not give aesthetic issues a crucial place in the conceptualization of modern experience.

The expectations and fears of German inter-war Marxist aesthetics focused on a single great problem, brought to the fore by the collapse of bourgeois culture: the apparently implacable dissolution of autonomous art, made impracticable by the very historical conditions that had made it possible during the rise of market society together with the threatening errors (fascist aestheticization of politics and the cultural industry) that surrounded this dissolution of aesthetic transcendence as an isolated domain of the material production of life. In other words, what was contemplated was, in a variation of the well-known materialist theorem, the end of art through its full realization. Such an *Aufhebung* represented a promise of emancipation coextensive with the utopian hope placed on the suppression of alienated labor, an “absolutely modern” convergence between artistic avant-garde, technical reproduction of the work of art (which therefore was transformed in nature and function) and subversion of social barriers; a convergence which the first moments of the Russian Revolution seemed to confirm. Re-examined in its beginnings, even in its exposed fractures, what was being considered was the aesthetic utopia of the society of Labor before it became a disposable paradigm.

In the bygone days of the 1960s, however ephemeral, this constellation had come to shine again. It is under these circumstances that Habermas takes stock of the classics in a long essay in 1972, with the pretext of conferring

the contemporaneity of Benjamin.⁵ He emphasizes the belief that the controversy of the 1930s remained timely, as evidenced by the widespread feeling of the apparently irremediable ambivalence of the aforementioned process of *Entkünstung* of art (to employ Adorno's provocative term for the broader process of deaestheticization). In short, this was to do with a still-undecided historical tendency: both the degree zero of alienation in the cultural industry as well as the collective reappropriation of the objective spirit could be seen on the horizon. Ambivalence also on the part of the most demanding aesthetic form: refusing to become a thing among things, radical modernism resists the apocryphal liquidation of autonomous art, but at the price of wasting away far from those who could breathe into it the oxygen of real-life experience.

One could say that throughout the 1970s, following the blast of the great firestorm of 1968, Habermas would waver at the mercy of a paradox, the formulation of which we can borrow from Peter Bürger – he himself tackling contemporary changes in the way one deals with art: if the avant-garde demand (the most ostensible one at least) to abolish the distance between art and life is fulfilled, that will mean the end of art; if that demand is abandoned, that will also mean the end of art.⁶

5. See J. Habermas: “Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik. Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamin's”, in *Kultur und Kritik*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973. English translation: “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique” in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, translated by Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge, MA. & London: MIT Press, pp. 129–163.

6. See Peter Bürger, “Das Altern der Moderne”, in Ludwig von Friedeburg and J. Habermas (orgs.), *Adorno-Konferenz*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M., 1983. English translation: Telos n.62, winter 1984-1985.

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Nevertheless, in the moment of reviving the Modern Movement, Habermas will be categorical: “the aesthetic experience revealed by the avant-gardes of the 20th Century failed to gain access to a unilaterally rationalized everyday practice, no matter how hard they tried [...] de-sublimated art does not interfere in a transformative, enlightening and liberating way in the ways of life reified by capitalism, deformed and distorted by consumerism and bureaucracy, but rather, it stimulates those tendencies.”⁷

Having excluded the (false) alternative of hibernation, in its turn limited to the radical work of art, whose enigmatic incommunicability resists the ambiguous pressure of that permanent dislocation of boundaries after the dissolution of the aura – what to do? More precisely, how to do justice to the program of the avant-gardes, which strayed from the path that they had been following, but not from their diagnosis of alienation?

The recapitulation of an old argument will help explain why Habermas not only associates modernity, whose matrix of origin is artistic, to the project of Enlightenment (formerly the Dialectic of *Aufklärung*), but also seeks a way out of the impasse in which those irreversible processes of functional differentiation became involved (solidified, meanwhile, by the same bourgeois order that sustained them) on the grounds of the *reception of art*, which was modified by the avant-garde desublimation and technology of aesthetic distance, as well as by

7. See J. Habermas, “La colonisation du Quotidien”, in *Esprit*. Paris, décembre 1979.

the failure of the radical programs that bet all their chips on the progressive outcome of that historical tendency. Let us say that this was a first alternative formulation of a utopian aesthetics, in this case, a bourgeois historical model freed from its vein of origin.

Further developments appear in Habermas' 1961 book on the *Public Sphere*.⁸ At the dawn of the bourgeois era, the Critique carried out by private individuals gathered in public (mingling the two meanings of the latter term, one of them hitherto unknown) turned first of all to the manifestations of the profane culture that gradually strayed from its traditional interests, before it could move to the center of the stage and censure, morally and then politically, the authority of Absolutism, irrational by definition. In other words, the first impulse in the agglutination of a reasoning bourgeois public derives from a nascent socialization of the judgment of taste. (*If we were to dig, that is what we would probably find in the subsoil of ideal speech situations*). Just as the bourgeois public formed its capacity to judge by buying books and paying to enter plays, concerts and galleries, art gained autonomy entering also in the heteronomous realm of the commodity: it liberated itself by subjecting itself to the market. Doubtless a paradoxical commodity. The same process by which the work of art is caught in the webs of the commodity form opens itself to the discussion of a public of admirers, to which all have access, provided they are educated and property-owning. It is understandable

8. Translator's note: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. English translation: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.

that in these circumstances the impression that the discussion progressed among equals found strong support in the raw social appearance, with taste showing itself in the judgment of the non-specialist, since in public communication, which joins individuals around the artwork-commodity assailed by criticism, all justly claim the same judgmental competence. The public sphere of autonomous art not only anticipated but prefigured the bourgeois political mirage. The future citizens of a Republic of Ends that used to be one of Letters are equals both in aesthetic judgment – the presupposed, yet indeterminate, and tacitly apportioned universality of which suppressed the bourgeois in the common Man – as well as in the abstract realm of politics: both domains, evolving in the realm of Appearance, turned their backs on the lowly world of social reproduction, hoping to escape the material cycle of production and consumption.

Even though all of this is more or less known, there is no harm in remembering that the transcendence of art comes from exactly the same liberal age as the bourgeois public sphere. They are the historical coordinates of the modernist aporias of autonomous art, but above all they are the points of reference of our author – *the golden age of communicative utopia, once the bourgeois debris is removed*. The future of autonomous art being in this way harnessed to the vicissitudes of the public nexus of social communication that it helped to constitute, we can understand that, in studying its degradation in mass society, Habermas traced between the lines, so to speak, a similar evolution of aesthetic Appearance. This is so much the case that, at a certain point, he will be able to present the decomposition of public space under the pressure of the administered world as the metamorphosis of a pu-

blic that reasoned about culture (out loud) into a public that merely consumed culture. Such a transformation of collective judgment into isolated consumption certainly germinated in the restrictions of the property owner, upon whom was placed the fiction of the banned material production. Be that as it may, the later step consolidated the retrospective view that bourgeois autonomous culture was not pure ideology, at least when it was compared to the subsequent regression: insofar as culture, as the post-liberal era progresses, becomes a commodity – not only in form, but even on the level of content – where once there was intensity and apprenticeship, now there is only fetishism; where once there was accumulation and exchange, even *in vitro*, now there is degeneration; where once there were dilettantes with special knowledge, now there is only amorphous consumption counterposed to the nullity of lifeless specialists. Ten years later, the conclusion was still drastic: “[t]he advance of the process to which art owes its autonomy leads to its liquidation as well.”⁹

The dialectic (of autonomous art) is nevertheless remediable, as can be clearly deduced from the enlightened re-commencement of the supposedly unfinished modern project, re-introduced by Habermas two decades after his first meditations on the emancipatory potentialities of the bourgeois public sphere, centered on the socialization of critical judgement: discarding from autonomous art its state of being a bourgeois institution, marketable cultural good and compensatory refuge, what remains but what truly matters – a focal point, to be re-nourished, of

specialized culture in a position to transform alienation into enlightenment, if put into circulation in the realm of “rationalized” everyday life? Here we have a strategy of re-appropriation of confiscated contents, in the middle of which Habermas preserved the initial protagonist, a personality which is both a discriminating consumer and a publicly certified specialist. One can thus retell from another perspective, with the intention of redirecting it, the origin of the barrier that triggered the avant-garde rebellion. Without speaking of the loss of substance of cultural tradition, dismembered in the name of progress that runs on separate rails, the split was worsened between the culture of specialists and the lifeworld encouraged by lay communication – a reciprocal impoverishment (the *tabula rasa* of a new poverty to which the moderns looked for their last chance for a new start) which seemed to cut short the enlightened utopia based on the impregnation of everyday life with the cognitive potential accumulated in the respective domains into which social life, rationally organized by function, had been divided. The avant-garde’s platform denying the culture of the expert will arise from this generalized immobility. A doomed program when taken literally, from an angle that will always remain abstract: as Habermas never tires of repeating, one does not overcome the sluggishness of a fragmented social process by forcing open the door of one of its compartments; we would merely be adding another element of alienation to the reification of the whole. Throwing out the error represented by the indeterminate and immediate negation – ultimately a remainderless liquidation – there remains, apparently, the enlightened free play of faculties (formerly centered on the synthetic force of the imagination and the communicative power of art), rein-

9. Translator’s note: the English translation is taken from page 139, in J. Habermas, “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique”.

terpreted by Habermas as an interaction (different from the forced reconciliation of the vanguards) of cognitive with moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive elements. An interaction on material foundations, we should assume, but still disguised, whether by mistake or misfortune, in the only example offered for that alternative course.

Inverting the neoconservative argument, Habermas wagers on the antagonistic effects of the artistic culture that simply escapes from the museums to the ideological sphere of everyday life. Would that constitute a mitigated futurism (since there is no longer any point in throwing out the tradition warehoused in those sanctuaries)? Or merely the diffusion of enlightenment in the reception geared toward real-life experience? Let's see. Guided by a situation imagined by Peter Weiss, Habermas has in view a re-appropriation of confined culture, but focused this time on the breaking of the hegemony of the *connaisseur* and its class basis. In the example, he refers to workers who are brought by the turn of events of an evening course to awkwardly ponder the history of European art catalogued in the museums they begin to visit. Setting aside the fabulistic atmosphere, let us focus on the moral, a live *montage* of class customs, removed from their environment of origin, which "illuminate" one another, forming a new, quotable result in relation to which points of view and conducts are redefined. It is undeniable that our author is re-imagining the enlightened utopia of the judgment of taste, in the vanishing point of which there converge, as we have seen, the lay person who acquires culture by silencing his particular inclinations and the competent admirer, who can make the common horizon half-opened by aesthetic reflection flow back on lived experience – the separate development (a condition of ferti-

lity) of the internal logic of the distinct cultural domains ended up burying that utopia, which depended precisely on the abolition of the "specialist." Without saying very well how, at least with regards to its material support (except for the demand for decolonized lived experiences), Habermas believes it possible to exhume that utopia through the contact of individual life-histories with aesthetic experience – which, in irrigating daily life in turn, finds itself dislocated by questions of truth, justice, etc., until then excluded from that field, strictly watched over by specialists.

Once again, the suggestion comes from Wellmer. Through Habermas' summary, illustrated afterwards by the narrative of Peter Weiss, one sees that the crux of the issue lies in the considerable transformation in the meaning of aesthetic experience when judgment of taste is no longer the characteristic of the expert: in the conditions summarily stated above, where we would expect to find ineptitude and derailment, we observe a process of fusion (in a register now acceptable) and "illumination" such that aesthetic judgment thus socialized "renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world. It permeates as well our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all these moments refer to one another."¹⁰ A compromise solution that supports the avant-garde differentiation without needing to suppress (or would this be the true *Aufhebung*?) the constitutive ramifications of the modern project. At this point Wellmer can then reintroduce as a duly rectified utopian horizon the specific

10. Translator's note: the English translation is taken from page 12, in J. Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity".

“rationality” of the Adornian aesthetic synthesis, which went from being a *model* of decolonized social integration to being a *medium*, among others, for communicative action: it suffices to remember, from this new angle, that Adorno also derived the utopic potential of art from its linguistic-expressive character, as if it alone could say what we do not know or cannot say. If it is thus, Wellmer considered, the artistic configuration of the elements in a work of art, without concessions as to their truth content, embodies the presence of a utopian perspective in that it “illuminates our life praxis and our self-understanding, by pushing back inaccessible boundaries and articulating impenetrable silences.”¹¹ In the meantime, this perspective is dislocated as we have seen: by its nature, the mimetic moment of the practices of daily life demand another *Aufklärung* provided less by aesthetic experience concentrated on the work of art, which is modern due to its undisguised “imitation” of alienation, than by an about-face in its reception, which also is modern, above all in demanding a new thinking public.

Discerning the universalizing and normative moment entailed (and thus specified) in a previously identified historical tendency, Habermas simply reasoned in the classical Marxist way (in the inter-war German sense). That is, ideology does not reside in the forethought of a world made new by enlightened aesthetic judgement at the reach of everyone – a communicative utopia based on the capacity to put oneself in the place of others, in which individual reflection comes to be an art of thinking

11. See: A. Wellmer, “Reason, Utopia and Enlightenment”, in Richard Bernstein (org.) *Habermas and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986, p.65.

with someone else’s mind – but in the presumption that it already exists in the consolidating bourgeois order. On the contrary, it is the disintegration of this bourgeois order, a process along which auratic culture vanishes, that would bring to the fore the old Enlightenment proposition of modifying practical life situations, by changing their customary bases of knowledge and action through the revelatory power of aesthetic practice. But wasn’t this in part the system of communicating vessels imagined by the avant-gardes? The difference is that now, the reappropriation of the culture of the ‘expert’ would not result in a pointless scattering of contents, in fact collectively accumulated, but would take place before a *re-functionalization* of artistic forms and institutions - to speak like Brecht, since this seems to be one of the inspirations close to the neo-enlightenment aesthetics of our author. It never occurred to Brecht to definitively abolish the productive apparatus of the Theater. On the contrary, he wanted to reinforce the wooden boards of the stage – which still represent the world – elevating them to the technical-productive level of radio and cinema, and, by doing so, think of the enlivened audience that would awaken with the rehabilitation of the smoky theater, an evening entertainment capable of incorporating the cabaret and the variety theater (incidentally, the birthplace of the Dadaists). Above all, a theatre which, thus “refunctionalized” by the *epic montage*, would be replete with weekend specialists (the best), just like a sports stadium: here all “understand,” as a presupposition for the reflexive “competence” of traditional aesthetic judgment.

A case of “generalized profane illumination,” as Benjamin hoped – another clear point of support for the neo-enlightenment aesthetics of Habermas. We will better

understand a proposition of this sort if we remember one of Adorno's objections, who on this topic never ceded to Benjamin's hopes. As should be remembered, the latter was involved in a type of materialist rehabilitation of the diversion that the masses seek in the work of art. To the circumspect contemplation of the *connaisseur*, he opposes the lack of composure of an audience that distractedly mixes judgment of taste and moral instruction, practical teaching and a call for accommodation of verifiable truths. Precisely the situations of practical life, "enlightened" by aesthetic experience, imagined by Habermas. A naive enlightenment?

It is worth stressing, in the meantime, that such a counterpoint between aesthetic contemplation, in which ecstasy became a specialization as well, and the distraction of a relaxed public of *ad hoc* specialists, does not happen in general, but has a correct time in the history of culture. Benjamin knew very well that distraction was also a sign of alienation, the mark of a debilitated subject led astray from itself. But neither would he exalt a backwards Enlightenment, a regression of the maturity that the nascent bourgeois order had promised to the infantilism of the tutored masses. He also highlighted an anti-mythical tendency present in the "religious" mold of the aesthetic experience of the moderns: the consciousness of being alone with the divinity itself, from which the specialized concentration of the aesthete is derived, strengthening rather than dissolving the self. This emancipatory, solitary impulse would remain, in the meantime, behind. An imperialist World War, Fascism and Revolution left no doubts regarding the downfall of bourgeois civilization and, at a time like that – Benjamin noted – undermined by an inverse tendency, that solitary consciousness

of the past weakened with the deprivation of the collectivity of the forces previously mobilized by the pretext of a personal relation with the Absolute. Nowadays, the kind of meditation which a Fauvist painting, or a poem of Rilke invite (to take the examples of Benjamin himself) has become a school of anti-social behavior, whereas in the boldness of a public that is "inattentive," even though it collectively controls its reactions, there is a depiction of behavior equal to the era of historical reconstruction that then seemed to emerge. One may easily recognize the lesson of Brecht in this reasoning, which, inverting the negative into positive, transforms "distraction" into an interested point of view, and vice-versa, inverting the highest attention of aesthetic consciousness into stupor, like the trance of the hypnotized Wagnerian.

The terms in which Adorno called Benjamin to order, in a letter of March 1936, are well known. Not ceding as to what has to-do it vanguardist deaestheticization and persisting on "the royal road of bourgeois individualization"¹² (to employ Habermas' own terms), he asserted, in the meantime, that the very subversion of the aesthetic productive forces exploited by Benjamin would occur in the closed realm of aesthetics itself, and, much more radically, on the level of formal configuration demanded by the historical tendency of the materials. It is important to add that at that point Adorno believed much more in the enlightened notions of politically organized intellectuals – and the "notions" also reached in those works of art that Benjamin was disposed to consign to hell – than in the infused, yet specialized, knowledge of the popular aficionado.

12. Translator's note: p.142 in Habermas essay, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique".

dos of film, sports or detective stories, which awakened the enthusiasm of a Brecht. In a word, the Benjaminian theory of enlightened “distraction” had gone wrong in its spontaneity: to transform the common masses into a collective subject of cinema, for example, is to dangerously forget how much they are bearers of all the traces of the very mutilation of personality that characterizes capitalist progress. It is clear that Benjamin knew very well that the laughter of moviegoers might not be cordial, much less revolutionary. Even so, he believed that the last word still had not been spoken. Without even needing to conjecture about the nature of “diversion” in a non-antagonistic society, he believed that the generalization, in a common sense, of the modes of collective reception reproduced by the emerging technical apparatus, was well worth a Party, and could even dispense with it. In short: the aesthetic “distraction” of the specialized amateur, at the same time fluctuating attention and routinized knowledge, *made up the materialist embryo of a new Enlightenment*, or, more precisely, the expectation that the cognitive potential until then imprisoned in the restricted domains of affirmative culture would finally lead to the formation of a higher social order.

Habermas seems to waver between the lessons of Benjamin and Adorno. Excepting certain short-circuits of the epoch such as the convergence between Vanguard and Revolution, one cannot deny the extent to which the “unfinished modernity” of Habermas still feeds on the Benjaminian hope for a “generalized profane enlightenment”. In the words of our author, works of art which have lost their aura can still be received with an illuminating impact – even in the sense which the enlightenment tradition would attribute to this last expression, in which

there is also encapsulated the shock, now weakened and “didactic,” of the vanguards locked away in the museum, their moment having passed. As a matter of fact, as Habermas likes to point out, Benjamin himself, above all after encountering Brecht, would take it upon himself to indicate the ambivalence of the surrealist provocations.

In that account from the beginning of the 1970s, we saw Habermas align himself with the materialism of the Benjaminian criticism, according to which it would be necessary to recognize in the current dissolution of autonomous art the material result of a revolution in the techniques of reproduction, against Marcuse, who made the transformation in the function of art depend on a revolutionary transformation in the conditions of life, only anticipated as possible by a criticism that derived its force from the contradiction between the real and the ideal.

Now, what is the basis for the renewed Habermasian hopes for a generalized profane enlightenment *after the vanguards*? Anti-auratic decompartmentalization and the subversion of aesthetic distance had been derived from an explosive historical conjunction between technical procedures and the political presence of the masses. At least this was the direction in which the revolutionary bet went. Broadly speaking, Habermas does not reject such a program; as we saw, he even seeks to adjust it to the current fluidification of the societies said to be post-conventional. Since, *meanwhile*, the social bases of that program disappeared, there is a strong impression (to say the least) of an enlightenment project without contradiction and without a propelling force. A resuscitated enlightened mirage? A naïve pedagogy of communicative action? Something, ultimately, as innocuous as the unilateral abstraction of the old ruptures

of the *vanguard*? However, it may be, there remains in the air a sensation of absurdity: how to associate, without incurring in historical blundering, the collective reception imagined by Benjamin and Brecht in service of an art desublimated by technical reproduction – an entirely new art, therefore – to its exact opposite, the art of the museums, a species of terminal genre to which nothing escapes thanks to the restorative force of the museum-form.

This having been stated, let us recognize that, undoubtedly, the strategic place reserved for architecture by Habermasian argumentation will largely come from this neo-enlightenment aesthetic habit, turned preferentially toward public genres. It will be necessary to remember in addition that Habermas, while keeping a distance from avant-garde dedifferentiation, does not recede in a defensive stance – a position he criticizes in Adorno – in which private contemplation would supposedly prevail, even when placed between brackets by the anti-auratic construction of the modern work of art. On the contrary, one cannot deny the logic of the demonstrative privilege suitable to a mass art such as Modern Architecture, which demands collective reception, brings the most advanced aesthetic experience to the center of social life and transforms the user into a specialist. At least this is how it was thought when the tabula rasa of the Modern Movement promised a radical recommencement, up to date with the materialist “notions” of the time. It is worth recalling: there was an analogy in the air, comparing the “enlightened” program of functional architecture (nothing would remain impenetrable) to the directions of Brechtian epic theater – like the latter, Leonardo Benevolo once recalled, “the new architecture involves people’s practical behavior; addressing itself to

their reason, it seeks to communicate neither enthusiasm nor ecstasy, since the functional advantages can be rationally demonstrated.”¹³ The very reform of behavior was also in the vanguards’ aims, submitting, as a consequence, the esoteric behavior of the *connaisseur* to the infrared of a new Enlightenment. The right expectations for a threshold, as had been said. The mass *Aufklärung* which was then considered, supported by incontestable social evidence, still had not been transformed ostensibly into its opposite.

As he transformed the exhausted Modern Architecture movement, above all after the avant-gardes – whose season has also come to an end in Brazil – into the final token of Progress and Reason (an old or a new modernity?), Habermas, without doubt, came to place the enormous audience enjoyed by the New German Critical Theory in the service of another kind of neoconservatism...

13. Leonardo Benevolo, *Storia dell’Architettura Moderna*. Bari: Laterza, 1960. Brazilian translation by A. M. Goldberger, *História da Arquitetura moderna*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1976, p. 470.