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TRANSCENDENTALISM OF ART IN THE CONCEPTIONS OF WILHELM WORRINGER AND THEODOR W. ADORNO

Abstract: In applying the concept of de-coincidence to artistic creation, François Jullien speaks, among other things, of transcending imposed frameworks, established patterns and forms of communication. This evokes the modernist art theories of Wilhelm Worringer and Theodor W. Adorno, in which artistic practice takes on a transcendental character. Worringer, by introducing the distinction between abstraction and empathy, elevated art that is not bound to the imitation of reality, treating it as a manifestation of the creator's inner tension in relation to the world. Adorno, in turn, in his aesthetic theory, emphasized that true art resists reification and dominant cognitive schemes, offering an experience that exceeds the established bounds of discursivity. Worringer's art of abstraction and Adorno's critical art can thus be seen as prefigurations of Jullien's de-coincidence. In the present article, we juxtapose Worringer's theory with that of Adorno in order to highlight the parallels between them – parallels in which art emerges as an act of stepping beyond the horizon of routine experience of the world.

Keywords: Theodor W. Adorno, Wilhelm Worringer, abstraction, art theory, philosophy of art

Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965) and Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) are among the leading representatives of German culture, and their concepts entered the canon of discussions on the theory and philosophy of art. Both enjoy the status of recognized theorists of the avant-garde; in their theoretical inquiries, they both devoted a lot of room to musical, plastic and literary expressionism. They are also the authors of conceptions aspiring to the name of the universal art theory, which (conceptions) permit us not only to interpret each individual work of art but also to generally expound on the whole of artistic work, regardless of the period in which it was created. They used, admittedly, somewhat dissimilar vocabulary and were active in the areas of two different fields of knowledge – one in art history, and the other in philosophy – but in their assumptions, and above all in their conclusions, they appear to be surprisingly close to each other. Obviously, Worringer could not refer to Adorno, especially in his earlier texts, for chronological reasons. However, he himself was ignored by the latter for unknown motives. It is nevertheless difficult to suppose that Adorno did not know at least the famous *Abstraction and Empathy*, which could, after all, boast an unprecedented publishing success: for the consecutive thirteen years from its first edition, it was reissued almost every year. Moreover, as the scholars of Worringer's reception maintain, it was read and discussed mainly by philosophers, theorists of literature and music, as well as by artists. Its influence on Adorno is even directly signaled in various studies¹. However, apart from casual remarks, there is no comparative juxtaposition whatsoever of the two certainly influential theories.

By working on only the most widely known works of the two authors, one could attempt to point out the existing similarities between them. Particularly, Adorno's interpretation of prehistoric art contained in his *Aesthetic Theory*, regarded as a specific summary of all of his theory of art², seems to be close to the spirit of Worringer's texts. This closeness is camouflaged not only by different rhetoric that the two use in their texts but also by the absence of any mutual references.

The abovementioned *Abstraction and Empathy* is a book version of Worringer's doctoral dissertation. The theory presented in its pages is fairly widely known among specialists and discussed in detail in literature on the

¹ N. H. Donahue, *Forms of Disruption: Abstraction in Modern German Prose*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1993, pp. 221-222.

² R. Wilson, *Aesthetics*, in: *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts*, ed. D. Cook, Acumen, Stocksfield 2008, p. 147.

³ See: N. H. Donahue, eds., *Invisible Cathedrals: The Expressionist Art History of Wilhelm Worringer*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 1995 and C. Öhlschläger, *Abstraktionsdrang: Wilhelm Worringer und der Geist der Moderne*, Fink, Paderborn 2005.

subject³. In the present text, it will be referred to only at the moments that appear essential because of presumed similarities to Adorno's philosophy of art. Worringer owes the indisputable position of a classic in his domain to a definitive break with some kind of aesthetic dogmatism that was dominant in the theory and history of art at the time. As late as until the early 20th century, the only and implicit reference point for artistic criticism was classical art while the whole artistic output, including works created in other cultures, was evaluated according to the classical pattern. From this perspective, the history of art was a linear process that amounted to perfecting artistic forms and techniques, which were in turn subordinated to the imitative function. The development of art was supposed to consist in perfecting representation methods: reflecting external reality through the medium of arts, while the task of artists was to provide aesthetically convincing and at the same time satisfying images. In contrast, Worringer positioned the relationship of art to empirical reality in an entirely new dimension.

It should be noted here that his *Abstraction and Empathy* was published with the subtitle *A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, where he presented the arguments that art should be looked at as an aesthetic manifestation of a psychological condition. For Worringer, an artwork is an objectified moment of such a condition representative of the people living in a particular historical period. At the same time, it is an expression of specific aesthetic sensitivity, which differs depending on place and time. This assertion contains a certain hypothesis, innovative for those times. Namely, Worringer maintains that over the centuries people did not create art such as was permitted by their manual predispositions or accessible techniques but such as dictated to them by "artistic volition" (*Kunstwollen*). Worringer adopted this term from Alois Riegl, whose concept he concisely presented in his *Abstraction and Empathy*, thereby revealing him to a wider German audience⁴. Adorno also referred to Riegl in *Aesthetic Theory*, although barely in some places and rather laconically⁵. To Worringer, *Kunstwollen* denoted psychological creative determination, which is a response to reality⁶. Consequently, the driving force behind the historical variability of art is not the efficiency of the artist or his/her tool, but the way s/he senses the world. In Worringer's theories, the sensing of the world assumes two diametrically opposed shapes, between which stretches the whole of artistic forms created in a particular period. This is the art of abstraction and empathy.

⁴ N. H. Donahue, *Forms of Disruption...*, p. 32.

⁵ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. R. Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, New York 2002, pp. 60, 146, 169.

⁶ W. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, transl. M. Bullock, Elephant Paperbacks, Chicago 1997, p. 13.

The term empathy, adopted in turn from Theodor Lipps⁷, was used by Worringer to include any naturalist art, i.e. art whose principle is to copy life. Naturalism as an artistic gesture does not, however, equal a simple imitation of reality⁸. Worringer's art of empathy arises when a person feels a sense of belonging to the consistent order of nature and the universe, when s/he identifies with it. Having a sense of getting settled and empathization, s/he reflects this order in their artistic work. It is then that affirmative art is created as an expression of reconciliation with the world, at the same time showing the recognition of the world as being receptive to human understanding and thus inspiring confidence. It is the art of a person content in the world of nature, where "aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment"⁹.

It is different with Worringer's abstraction-related art: "Just as the urge to empathy as a preassumption of aesthetic experience finds its gratification in the beauty of the organic, so the urge to abstraction finds its beauty in the life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline or, in general terms, in all abstract law and necessity," as Worringer wrote¹⁰. Obviously, it is not a question of twentieth-century abstractionism as a trend in art but of all artistic creativity characterized by a schematic approach and a lack of figurativeness or, if by figurativeness, then it is remodeled and transformed in some essential way. It will be mostly creation that reduces the elements of reality to geometric constructions or produces forms not connected with the order of the living world. In Worringer's art of abstraction, a human's inner anxiety is manifested, caused by the phenomena of external reality. Different psychological determinants emerge at this point. For example, Worringer writes about being crushed by the world, "spiritual dread of space" and also the "instinct for the relativity of all that is"¹¹. These are, after all, different forms of discomfort, which affected the human beings of the Western world along with the entry into the age of modernity. If we therefore accept Worringer's explanation of art of abstraction, then we at the same time gain the answer to the question about the causes of the about-turn that art made in the wake of the avant-garde breakthrough. In his theoretical and critical work, Worringer himself devoted considerable attention, for example, to expressionism, seeing in it an attempt (albeit eventually unsuccessful) to regain authentic feelings and experiences that were to be atrophied in the modern technicized world¹². The motif of disintegration of

⁷ Ibid., pp. 4-6.

⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 16.

¹² W. Worringer, *Art Questions of the Day*, "The Criterion" 1927, vol. 6 (2), pp. 101-117.

the true experience is also clearly present in Adorno's philosophy¹³. Initially, he pinned enthusiastic hopes on overcoming the crisis of experience, which, however, he himself recognized as futile¹⁴.

Avant-garde art is not the only element to be part of this figure of Worringer's abstraction. If an artwork is an objectification of the state of a human's mood in relation to the external world – as Worringer presented it – then the quality of an artwork is determined by the expression of this condition rather than by reference to the empirical world. This presentation of the issue shed new light on the history of art, including prehistoric creative output, also outside European culture. As late as in the early twentieth century, that which was schematic in art and where geometric reductions were applied was assessed from the Western viewpoint as the lack of proficiency and technical knowledge, while the term "primitive art" comprised a conviction about its cultural and civilizational backwardness¹⁵. Meanwhile, those reductions may have been evidence of a human being positioning him/herself in relation to the world differently from the direction instilled by Western rationality. This was the case, for instance, with the art of peoples of the Far East:

"whose more profound world-instinct opposed development in a rationalistic direction and who saw in the world nothing but the shimmering veil of Maya; they alone remained conscious of the unfathomable entanglement of all the phenomena of life, and all the intellectual mastery of the world-picture could not deceive them as to this. Their spiritual dread of space, their instinct for the relativity of all that is, did not stand, as with primitive peoples, *before* cognition, but *above* cognition"¹⁶.

Thus, discomfort, whose source is the experience of the world, appeared in different moments of human history and in different cultural circles. In response to this anxiety, artistic forms are produced whose specificity consists in that they are not images of reality but refer to themselves. Abstraction-related art is, as it were, the construction of a new world, free from individual randomness, whose (world's) construction is fully controlled by its creator. Owing to this, the compensatory function of art is fulfilled, consisting in an

¹³ See: M. Jay, *Lamenting the Crisis of Experience: Benjamin and Adorno*, in: id. *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005, pp. 312-360.

¹⁴ T. W. Adorno, *The Aging of the New Music*, in: *Essays on Music*, ed. R. Leppert, transl. S. H. Gillespie, University of California Press, Berkeley 2002, pp. 181-202.

¹⁵ M. Gluck, *Interpreting Primitivism, Mass Culture, and Modernism: The Making of Wilhelm Worringer's „Abstraction and Empathy“*, "New German Critique" 2000, no. 80, pp. 149-169.

¹⁶ W. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy...*, p. 16.

escape from the empirical world into an artistic one produced in a way unhindered by any determinant of the empirical world. It was precisely in this spirit that Worringer could write that "what appears from our standpoint, the greatest distortion must have been at the time, for its creator, the highest beauty and the fulfillment of his artistic volition"¹⁷.

The foregoing quotation would have certainly been endorsed by Th. W. Adorno. In his *Aesthetic Theory* there is a section titled *Theory of Art Sources*, in which he similarly enhanced the status of primitive art¹⁸. He regarded the very distortions which may, in popular reception, appear as imperfections resulting from the lack of perspective or even from the manual ineptitude of the then creators, as the most essential aspects of prehistoric painting and Paleolithic sculpture. He interpreted geometric reductions and stylistic shortcuts as manifestations of "aesthetic comportment", which he described as follows:

"Aesthetic comportment is the capacity to perceive more in things than they are; it is the gaze under which the given is transformed into an image (...) is the unimpaired corrective of reified consciousness (...) That which in aesthetic comportment propels itself toward the light and seeks to escape the spell manifests itself e contrario in those who do without it, the aesthetically insensible (...) Ultimately, aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image. Consciousness without shudder is reified consciousness. That shudder (...) is the act of being touched by the other"¹⁹.

These diagnoses made about primitive art do not refer to it only – like in Worringer. Overcoming "reified consciousness" or transcending the horizon of popular experience are binding in Adorno's work for all artistic practice regardless of the period in which it took place. He expected art to be free from the binding structures, both perceptual and social. He compared a work of art, for example, to the *apparition* phenomenon or to fireworks, whose sudden flash-up reveals in an artwork something that vanishes equally suddenly and cannot be presented in any conceptual forms:

"The phenomenon of fireworks is prototypical for artworks, though because of its fleetingness and status as empty entertainment it has scarcely been acknowledged by theoretical consideration (...) They appear

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁸ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. R. Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, New York 2002, pp. 325-331.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 330-331.

empirically yet are liberated from the burden of the empirical, which is the obligation of duration; they are a sign from heaven yet artifactual, an ominous warning, a script that flashes up, vanishes, and indeed cannot be read for its meaning. (...) It is not through a higher perfection that artworks separate from the fallibly existent but rather by becoming actual, like fireworks, incandescently in an expressive appearance. They are not only the other of the empirical world: Everything in them becomes other"²⁰.

It should be remembered that aesthetics was not peripheral to Adorno's work but it lay at the core of his philosophy. He also set a significant task for art. It was meant as a criticism of instrumental rationality, which – having dominated Western culture – reduced the world of human life to the relation between means/tools and objectives, which was expressed in the famous Dialectic of Enlightenment. Art was also meant to be a complement to the criticism of identity thinking. This kind of thinking reduces experience to the content of concepts, thereby investing objects of experience with a false identity. "To think is to identify. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend" – he wrote in *Negative Dialectics*²¹. Advocating for the non-identical is one of the leading motifs of Adorno's whole philosophy and is sometimes interpreted as his resolute protest against the existing state of reality [*das Bestehende*]²². The picture of the world of human life – science, morality and culture – contained in the two books is the picture of the "administered world" in which everything has been explicitly defined and instrumentalized. Art also remains dependent on these procedures – by getting into the circulation of the "cultural industry", it becomes an affirmation of the *status quo*. Adorno made this diagnosis the starting point of *Aesthetic Theory*:

"The *clichés* of art's reconciling glow enfolding the world are repugnant not only because they parody the emphatic concept of art with its bourgeois version and class it among those Sunday institutions that provide solace (...) art is condemned to provide the world as it exists with a consolation that (...) strengthens the spell of that from which the autonomy of art wants to free itself"²³.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 81.

²¹ T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Routledge, London and New York 2004, p. 5.

²² H. Brunkhorst, *Adorno and Critical Theory*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff 1999, p. 58.

²³ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory...*, pp. 1-2.

It is only as *apparition* that an artwork can rid itself of this affirmative character. Revelation of something intangible, something that cannot be confined within conceptual structures, should provide support for the non-identical. Thereby, Adorno made the lack of discursive content a condition for the critical function of art:

"The acute reason today for the social inefficacy of artworks – those that do not surrender to crude propaganda – is that in order to resist the all-powerful system of communication they must rid themselves of any communicative means that would perhaps make them accessible to the public. Artworks exercise a practical effect, if they do so at all, not by haranguing but by the scarcely apprehensible transformation of consciousness (...) art itself is objectively praxis as the cultivation of consciousness; but it only becomes this by renouncing persuasion"²⁴.

Art challenges the procedures of instrumental reason by breaking off with the established systems of communication. "The true language of art is mute (*sprachlos*)" – he wrote²⁵. That is why, inter alia, the artistic output of Arnold Schönberg or Samuel Beckett gained Adorno's recognition: in the atonality of Schönberg's compositions he saw a break-up with the communicative language of music, while in Beckett's texts – a break-up with the communicative forms of narration. According to him, this is the only way to present reality "liberated from the burden of the empirical". In art this can happen through modification or suspension of the functioning and the functional in empirical reality. Adorno explains this by using the example of the category of "time", which runs linearly in empirical reality and inexorably defines the order of events, whereas it can be freely modified in art. In the empirical world then, space, time and causality occur as inevitable and irreversible. Subjected to the dominion of the peculiar logic of art, they lose their apodictic character and cease to be what they were in the empirical world:

"Only by virtue of separation from empirical reality, which sanctions art to model the relation of the whole and the part according to the work's own need, does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence. Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience"²⁶.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 242-243.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

Artworks are therefore images of the world but the world that is always aesthetically processed in some way, and in this sense that they are its negative imprint. It is this aesthetic transformation, which Adorno wrote about, as well as Worringer's art of abstraction, that are the moments of their theories in which something appears that could well be called the concept of autonomous art. In the works of both authors, art shows competence for generating spaces free from external determinants and in these spaces the structure of empirical reality is not reproduced. In Worringer, this autonomous space is the one into which a human being escapes from the world as long as s/he does not feel at home in it, and does not feel like being part of it. In Adorno, in turn, this space is the place of transcending the façade of reality and its conceptual representations.

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* provides recommendations for art, which, if it wants to be critical, should compose images "emancipated from the schemata of imposed identification"²⁷. The same can be said about Worringer's abstract art, which after all consists in constructing and arranging forms into constellations that are not found in the empirical world. Everything thus suggests that in Worringer the distinction between the art of empathy and the art of abstraction follows the same line that Adorno marked out between affirmative and critical art. If the artist accepts the existing order, if s/he finds his/her place in it, then there is no reason to use any formal experiments. By copying the structure of reality in art, s/he actually reproduces it, in an affirmative gesture at that. In such art, apart from the declarative layer, there is no room for rebellion and disagreement towards the world. In contrast, art that at least virtually modifies laws and rules functioning in the empirical world can be an opposition to it in this sense and can at the same time be some form of criticism of this reality or reveal the truth about it that is situated somewhere behind the established forms of communication.

It is not the point here that Wilhelm Worringer should be presented as such a committed contender to the existing order, while Theodor W. Adorno certainly was one. However, Worringer is clearly a greater enthusiast of art from the other polar opposite, which for him is art of abstraction, while for Adorno it is critical art. In Worringer's approach, art transcends reality towards that which is hidden by "Maya's veil", while in Adorno's interpretation – towards that which lies beyond discursiveness. Undoubtedly, in the conceptions of the two authors art is understood in absolutely emphatic terms. This means that an artwork is not only a thing among other things, nor is it meant only for aesthetic consumption. Art has a far more significant meaning because

²⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

it is an expression of the position that the human being occupies in the social order of the world, and also an expression of the awareness of this position. The art of the two authors is not a complement or an addition to reality, but it is a response to the existing reality, which makes it become part of the main nerve of social life.

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TRANSCENDENTALIZM SZTUKI W KONCEPCJACH WILHELMA WORRINGERA I THEODORA W. ADORNO

Streszczenie: Odnosząc koncepcję de-koincydencji do twórczości artystycznej François Jullien mówi m.in. o przekraczaniu narzuconych schematów, ustalonych wzorców i form komunikacji. Przywodzi to na myśl modernistyczne teorie sztuki Wilhelma Worringera i Theodora W. Adorna, w których praktyka artystyczna nabiera transcendentalnego charakteru. Worringer, wprowadzając podział na abstrakcję i empatię, dowartościował sztukę niezwiązaną z naśladowaniem rzeczywistości, traktując ją jako manifestację wewnętrznego napięcia twórcy wobec świata. Z kolei Adorno, w swojej teorii estetycznej, podkreślał, że prawdziwa sztuka przeciwstawia się reifikacji i obowiązującym schematom poznawczym, oferując doświadczenie wykraczające poza ustalone ramy dyskursywności. Worringerowska sztuka abstrakcji i Adornowska krytyczna sztuka mogą więc być potraktowane jako prefiguracje Jullienowskiej de-koincydencji. W niniejszym artykule zestawiamy teorię Worringer z Adornowską, aby ukazać zachodzące między nimi podobieństwa, w których sztuka jawi się jako akt wykroczenia poza horyzont rutynowego doświadczenia świata.

Słowa kluczowe: Theodor W. Adorno, Wilhelm Worringer, abstrakcja, teoria sztuki, filozofia sztuki

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